

WONDROUS STRANGE: WOMEN REDEFINING SCANDINAVIAN GLASS

by Jennifer Detlefsen

Scandinavian design has long been prized for its sleek aesthetic, bold primary colors, and no-nonsense utilitarianism. The glassmaking traditions in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark have strong connections to their centralized craft schools such as the Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design in Sweden and the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art Design School in Bornholm. Their long-established histories of producing makers whose legendary precision is a testament to the rigors of their technical training. As the dominance of the 1950s modernist movement waned, this region experienced the birth of a studio movement that decentralized glassmaking. New expressions in glass were able to emerge—but were still in large part fettered by a common, almost morally-based aversion to embellishment. It is only relatively recently that Scandinavian glassmakers have begun to step away from the canonical purity of design that so characterizes their region and embrace the intentional eccentricity of mixed media, kitsch, and performance-based work in their product offerings. The Scandinavian women profiled here are finding ways to synthesize their hard-won technical skills with unique methods of personal expression. The results are smashing stereotypes and redefining the very idea of "product" in our changing world.

Karen Nyholm lives and works in the picturesque seaside town of Ebeltoft, Denmark. The studio she shares with her husband, Ned Cantrell, is walking distance from the Glasmuseet Ebeltoft as well as the studios of Steffen Dam and Micha Karlslund, both of whom influenced her path as an artist. Nyholm started blowing glass in 1998, at first focusing chiefly on tableware and functional items like the ones she was trained to make during her education at Bornholm. "Functional products are how glass started for me," she notes—at the



beginning of her career, even pieces that were not strictly functional were based on the idea of a bowl or vessel.

Her experience interning for Dam and Karlslund provided her first glimpse of artmaking outside of the structure of school. Dam, an autodidact, had a wildly different process from anyone else she'd seen blow glass. "He was a toolmaker—self-taught, just fascinated by glass. Already that early on in my glass career, I had rules that you use the tools in a certain way, you put them on the bench in a certain way—but Steffen does things his own way, and that worked for him!" Karlslund came from a more formal glass background. Still, it was her intuitive art-making process and her layered use of imagery that most stuck with the young artist—along with the couple's inspiring way of living and working together.



Above: Carafes in jewel-toned colors are a staple of Karen Nyholm's product line. She delights in getting lost in the process of making these familiar objects in between more sculptural projects.
Photo Credit: Karen Nyholm

Left: Karen Nyholm's sculptural work abounds with imagery of hearts, skulls and brains – reminders that death is a part of life, and not something to be feared.
Photo Credit: Karen Nyholm

In 2003, Nyholm attended what she describes as the "super-session" at Pilchuck Glass School that followed the GAS Conference in Seattle. A class with Kiki Smith and Dante Marioni was her first experience seeing sculptural glass. "In Denmark, no one was working with glass like that at that time, and it opened up this whole new world of what the material could do."

With a strong framework in technical glassmaking, Nyholm was able to take this fresh inspiration back home and start innovating in her own practice. Bornholm had provided her with an introduction to a lot of different techniques: stained glass, sand casting, blowing, paté de verre. She began building and layering those techniques to make distinctive, more personal works. "Because hot glass is such



Frida Fjellman's oversized geometric gems in luscious colors are immensely popular and fit as well in high-fashion boutiques as they do in her ominous installation artworks. Photo Credit: Nathan Gallagher

a difficult material, you have to have rules to be able to make anything in glass. But for me, the better I am at making glass, the more I can break the rules."

She relied on that structure in the hectic years of starting a family and credits days of making her jewel-toned decanters with preserving her sanity during the demands of early motherhood. The ability to turn off her brain, keep her skilled hands active, and end the day with a kiln full of beautiful objects was a reward unto itself. She emphasizes that what kept her motivated was her love for making, a passion for shape and color, and being creative. "I still like the products—I especially like making the products—but when I make them, I'm a craftsperson, and when I'm making my sculptural work, that's when I'm an artist."

Now that her children are more independent, Nyholm has had time to return to making more personal work. A recent exhibition at the Glassmuseet by the arch-weirdos of the glass world, the De La Torre brothers, was fresh inspiration to push the boundaries in her practice. "Their work—it's not pretty, it's not glassy, it's

all over the place, and I love it. In Danish glass, everything is supposed to be nice—nice shapes, nice colors—so there's such freedom in their way of making." Nyholm's studio has an attached gallery boutique where she gets immediate feedback on new ideas, and she considers that immediacy a double-edged sword. Some of her favorite works explore the importance of death as part of life. It is inspired by Day of the Dead imagery and the connections within our bodies. Skulls, brains, and anatomically correct hearts in vivid colors provoke extreme reactions, both negative and positive, in her audiences. "It varies—some people are disgusted, but others...get it. They see the beauty in the contrast."

Frida Fjellman's work straddles a glorious line between traditional fine glass craft and Lynchian absurdity. Fjellman is best known for her works involving light and was featured in 2019's New Glass Now exhibition. Raised surrounded by Scandinavian values of sparse design and dogmatic rejection of decoration, Fjellman actively seeks subversion in her attention to adornment. Her iconic design takes the

archetypal decoration of a chandelier, the crystal, and enlarges it to the point of absurdity. Her clusters of oversized gems in luscious candy-colors evoke a range of emotions and styles. "I find the chandelier fascinating because depending on how it's presented, how you use the colors, it can be vulgar, or cute, or pop art; really beautiful or completely tasteless."

She likens this design process to painting and delights in tweaking her display choices in her Stockholm studio, where she has the freedom to experiment. This solitary arrangement suits her much better than the school environment that she chafed against at Konstfack, which she describes as having been excessively competitive. She still relies on some of the technical knowledge she gained there; specifically, the mold-making skills she uses for her blown glass components were developed while in school. Fjellman's education at Konstfack has been supplemented over the years by courses at Pilchuck Glass School and the Studio at the Corning Museum of Glass. At Pilchuck, she studied plasma and neon, both electrifying components in a

mixed media arsenal that translates as well to public art as it does in her solo exhibition spaces.

In all of her works, Fjellman pulls from a long list of macabre and surreal references, starting with the hypnotic visual psychology of David Lynch. Fjellman credits her time abroad as a fellow at Wheaton Village and a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Tiffany Collection with her discovery of ornamental Victorian glass. The reverence for décor, color, and intricacy overwhelmed her visual palette. Fjellman describes, "We don't have any of these things in Sweden—you just wouldn't see it. So, when I came across this style, I went crazy for it." Other detectable notes in her ominous installation artworks are the original versions of fairy tales which she read in her youth—stories she revisited with her own children, only to be shocked at their violence and misogyny. She is also fascinated by the constructed environments of old museums, specifically natural history museums and the taxidermy creatures that haunt their halls.

Despite such unnerving references lurking in her reservoir, Fjellman is regularly awarded public art projects to round out her practice and is currently waiting on travel restrictions to subside so she can complete a project for a school in Norway. A large-scale cast-aluminum tree branch suspended from the ceiling, intertwined with her twinkling emblematic mega-gems, will hover above a "pond" of polished black stone in this installation. Fjellman considers public art projects like this one to be a way for artists to stay relevant in our disposable culture. She is categorically uninterested in competing with mass-market produced wares; instead, she hopes the stakeholders in public art derive a feeling of ownership when they see her artwork in their place of business, in their park, or on their commute. "That is a different kind of product," she explains, "one that builds community through a sense of shared experience."

For Stockholm-based BOOM! Glass Group, their product is quite literally empowerment. BOOM! describes itself as a "female separatist group exclusively for artists working with glass, whose aim is



Fjellman's fascination with light has led her to explore the possibilities of neon in her artworks and injects a sense of the uncanny into her created environments. Photo Credit: Patrick Miller



BOOM! Glass Group's collaborative installations are an extension of their passion for teamwork and maker pride. Photo Credit: BOOM!

to create new opportunities for a feminist platform in their chosen craft." With live glass demonstrations, collaborative installations, performances, and publications, BOOM! uses glass as a tool for shaking up the status quo in their field. The five Swedish glass artists that comprise BOOM! are Ammy Olofsson, Nina Westman, Erika Kristofferson-Bredberg, Matilda Kastel, and Sara Lundkvist. Swedish glass pioneer Ulla Forsell is also an honorary member of BOOM!, and is one of many influences that the artists credit. All five women attended Konstfack for their craft education, though not concurrently, and were brought together

by a mutual need to find connection and reflection in the male-dominated world of craft. Their love for togetherness began as casual Thursday-evening meetings arranged by Erika to be a time where glassy women could come together and share their experiences. They used this time to talk about the female role models that were largely missing from the glass curriculum in their courses and to share resources that fill this gap.

In their earliest group exhibition in 2016, dynamite crates served as pedestals to tie their disparate works together. An early BOOM! residency at The Glass Factory Boda