



Nature, by Judith Schaechter, 2010, courtesy Claire Oliver Gallery

Stained Glass is DEAD! Long Live Stained Glass!

An Interview with Judith Schaechter

Despite knowing her work for many years, I only first met Judith Schaechter when I was asked to be on a panel, with Ginger Ferrell and Joseph Cavalieri, that Judith was moderating at the 2008 American Glass Guild Conference in Philadelphia. The Topic was "Stained Glass: State of the Art" and the discussion was lively and thought provoking, though the conclusions were none too encouraging. It's two years later and I figured it would be time for an update.

Despite a crunch of last minute work preparing for her upcoming exhibition at The Claire Oliver Gallery, Judith agreed to answer some questions via email. Thanks, Judith! - Tom Krepcio, May 2010

Hi Judith, How are you?

Very well, thank you and you?

Very well. What's it like preparing for a new gallery show?

Ordinarily, it's no different than anything else. Because I am a gallery artist, I am always working towards a show that will happen at some point. There's about two years between each "new work" exhibition which is time for me to make between 14-16 windows. But in this case, I got involved with a lot of extra-curricular things like teaching a whole bunch of workshops in addition to my regular teaching gigs. I traveled a lot. I got a divorce...

So about a year ago Claire (Oliver, my gallerist) called to say the date was set for this May and I had ZERO works I could count towards it. She'd sold a couple new ones since the last show, but she needed work she can sell. So I went into serious lockdown. I didn't socialize hardly at all--even over the holidays. It was crazy! I am quite the loner hermit, but even I got to feeling quite isolated.

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Nature (detail), by Judith Schaechter, 2010, courtesy Claire Oliver Gallery

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I also changed my working method from being very linear--making a piece from start to finish before moving on--to working on all the pieces at once. This was fantastic! Very refreshing! All the ideas had a chance to simmer because I could move to another when one got tricky. Plus they all started to cross pollinate--ideas for one piece ended up in another, figures got moved to entirely new contexts and soon I had quite a momentum of inspiration going.

How many pieces will be in the show?

That's up to Claire, but there are 6 or 7 major ones, and two studies.

How long have you been working on them?

About 12 months. Some of the germinating ideas have been around much longer, though.

So - standard hopefully-not-too-boring question. - do the different pieces have any kind of connecting theme?

I plead the fifth. And no, its not a boring question - I just won't answer!

I know this is like asking who is your favorite child, but I'll risk it - Are there any pieces that stand out in your mind? At this moment, for whatever reason?

"The Cold Genius" stands out in my mind for a few reasons. I made it four times--it was total agony. But the final piece? In person, the figure has a totally preternatural freakish quality--she seems to

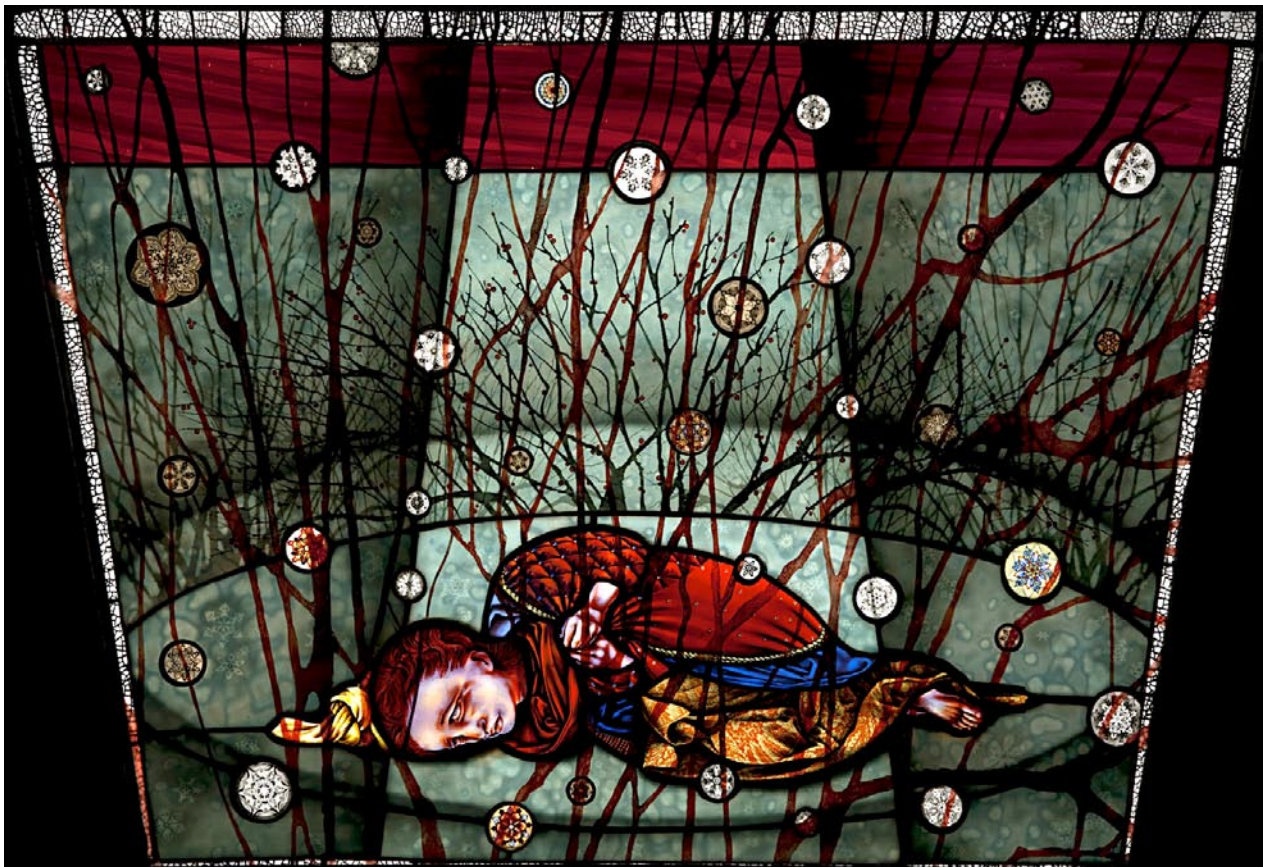
be actually ALIVE. Its very weird. So it was worth all the struggle! And in no way does that come across in the photo.

"The Sin Eater" is another--besides the subject matter, that piece is an attempt at (at least in my mind) "heroic craftsmanship". I don't mean technique--my technique is quite average. But by "craftsmanship" I mean a sensitivity to process and materials that can only be manifest by a cradle-to-grave hands-on approach *by the conceiver* (!!!!) of the initial idea with the intention that the original idea is just a seed and should evolve along with the process into something new and possibly unexpected.

I want to prove its not "art=concept versus craft=technique". I want to prove that the concept changes for the better if one has a real and PHYSICAL relationship with it via the interaction with the materials and techniques. Does that make sense? I want to prove that some art CANNOT be farmed out to a skilled laborer because then you just get a flat interpretation of a concept rather than a concept that grew in concert with its constituent components.

Chaining an idea to its finished outcome at the outset (when one might contract the hired hands) often just kills it dead, as an infant no less. (This is why I find much conceptual art to be flat-lining on the gurney in the Emergency Room hallway. CALL A CODE STAT!!! The patient's crashing!.....awwwwww ..too late!)

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The Cold Genius, by Judith Schaechter, 2010, courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery

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I wanted to prove, in this art world where "craft" is confused with technique and totally disparaged as the brainless labor, where craft is considered an unfortunate necessity in order to execute an idea, that, indeed, art and craft are as inseparable as our mind is from our body.

Regarding your panel "The Cold Song" - It seems, in looking at your blog, that you struggled with this design more than most of your recent work. How did that play out and why do you think that happened?

(You mean "The Cold Genius" FYI)

Well, I started this one before the 12 month early distant warning from Claire...so I was experiencing the luxury of tweaking it in the dog whistle range without freaking out about my deadline! This, I think, happens to a lot of artists. Its not always bad to be fussy and perfectionistic, but one must but a limit on it! I loved the song so much--it was so moving...I couldn't live up to it... That one piece threatened to bring down the whole show. But I got it....FINALLY!

You seem especially open, even eager, to share your techniques with other artists. This is unusual in stained glass, where many portray stained glass as a lost art, with forgotten techniques and secret formulas. What's your take on it??

Well, since the form is really suffering from being completely anachronistic and more or less culturally irrelevant-- I think people should lighten up a bit! These aren't state secrets. Or they shouldn't be. All that will happen is people will take their information to the grave and that's that. What do they care about more, themselves or perpetuating this amazing medium which struggles so in our culture?

Well, since the form is really suffering from being completely anachronistic and more or less culturally irrelevant-- I think people should lighten up a bit!

You've posted some really useful demos on your blog that are basically teaching tools. How has your teaching affected your new work?

Thanks!

Hmm.....one of the reasons I like to teach is because my students have so many fewer preconceptions about what the material can do than I do. So they are more daring. I learn from them, in other words!

How do you react to people who appear to be imitating your style?

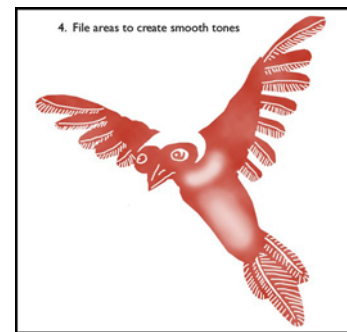
Well--it hasn't happened much, or at all. Perhaps because I am so close to my work in some kind of nano-level of specificity, I only see the differences.

As far as I can tell, my students have no interest in imitating me! They have their own visions to pursue, as well they should! Imitating my technique, however is free game. Which is why I share it. I just hope people build upon it, and make it in their own voice.

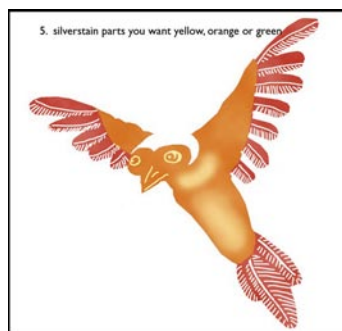
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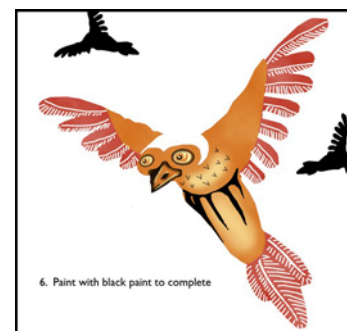
"3. Flex shaft engrave major lines"



"4. File areas to create smooth tones"



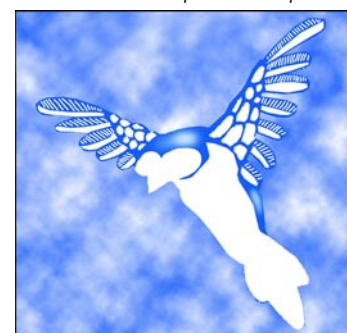
"5. Silverstain parts..."



"6. Paint with black paint to complete"



"3. Flex shaft engrave major lines"



"4. File areas to create smooth tones"



Pieces plated together

Selected images from a recent blog post of Judith's called "Color Demo -- for UArts" demonstrating how to get different colors using two layers--one red on clear and one blue on clear.

Images from Judith Schaechter's blog, Late Breaking Noose

www.judithschaechterglass.blogspot.com/

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You often describe yourself as a 'Militant Ornamentalist'. How would you define that? And why do you feel drawn to it?

I had art teachers who would use the words "decorative" or "ornamental" as weapons. Decoration was the offensive waste applied onto structures in a way that was deceptive and detracted from the PURITY and utility of the thing. It was a frivolity of the ostentatiously wealthy who had perverted, huge appetites and wanted to show off their wealth and status. When one of my teachers called your work "decorative" it was a cue for you to start crying in a critique! (Illustrative was also very, very bad) Its also very Protestant to see it as distracting--so much glitz and glamour when you should be focusing a little more, suffering a little more, like everyone else in church!

But I defy anyone to prove to me that decorativeness and ornamentation is anything less than the holiest of holy pursuits. To ornament something is to make it extra special. Its plus ultra. I believe that people are inspired to make things special in order to please their god/s, however they do or don't define them (but never to please solely themselves or others--which is why sometimes beauty seems so UGLY!).

I am not religious, per se, but I can promise you that nothing is worthy of our use, our attention; nothing will *save your soul* if it isn't made with care, with LOVE!, actually and made to be special and

made according to someone's idea of the "beautiful" (whatever that may be--something achingly desirable and transitory yet totally life affirming....) This is true whether we are talking about a toilet bowl or a stained glass window in Chartres. Now, I am NOT saying they are equivalent, of course they aren't. Its just that everything has its own level of specialness that it can aspire to, and much of life is bereft and dismal owing to crappy mass production.

If the maker is inspired, they can pass forward their inspiration to the user or receiver of the object, to some degree. It completes a circuit, jumps a synapse. Its the purest form of human communication I can imagine as it transcends time, space, even death. Seeing a beautiful object made well, made intelligently and with care, made to be SPECIAL-- centuries ago by some person collapses all barriers, dissolves loneliness and for a second, you know how the person felt, what they dreamed, what was real for them and even though they may be long gone, its clear they get what you feel too. This to me, makes ornamentation something worth fighting for.

Name anything you would like to see stained glass artists do in the future that they are not doing now? Especially things they are not doing now.

Can I answer this in the form of a wish list with semi-related things?
I would like someone to make acid etching safe!

I would like stained glass to become part of the curriculum in art school glass programs!

I would like more stained glass people to stop being prejudiced against copper foil, cold paint and other so-called crimes against nature which have amazing artistic potential.

You (We, I guess, since I was on the panel with you) painted a pretty bleak picture of the state of the art of stained glass in 2008. Do you see any positive signs since then?

Hell no! Stained glass is DEAD! Long live stained glass!

PS--it's so lucky its dead! Have you seen OIL painters squirm on panel discussions? HA! They're next on the guillotine! We are FREE! We ought to take advantage.

"Beauty and the Beef", an exhibition of new works by Judith Schaechter, will be on display at Claire Oliver Gallery, 513 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10001, from May 22nd to June 26th, 2010. The opening is on Saturday, May 22nd.

Judith Schaechter will also be appearing on a panel assessing the impact of Photoshop on contemporary stained glass design, at the 2010 American Glass Guild Conference, Detroit MI, Sunday July 25th.

Judith's website is www.judithschaechter.com



The Minotaur (detail), 2010, Judith Schaechter
Photo courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery