

Glass Half-Full

Robin Rice on Visual Art

by Robin Rice

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Upstairs
?
Downstairs? It's
impossible to say
which world at
Wexler
Gallery
was
more
fascinating.



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Upstairs, the **Tim Edwards** glass exhibit, which closed last week, was sublime. It's not immediately obvious that the flattened panels are hollow vessels. But then, this fact seems trivial — even misleading — suggesting how far from function the craft disciplines have traveled. Looking at Edwards' work, I found myself meditating on a different, distinctly 21st-century question: Is it closer to sculpture or painting?

The freestanding pedestal-based pieces explore color and atmosphere and change as the viewer moves. Edwards' process is laborious. He makes a multilayered colored cup into which he inserts a clear glass bubble. Then he blows and shapes the united layers.

Once the now tablet-like form has cooled, the truly painstaking work begins as Edwards grinds the top edges smooth and, more importantly, removes parts of the surface layers, sparing predetermined shapes. The subtractive grinding modulates the hue, often thinning it to a tinted veil at the edge of a field. Finally, Edwards covers the surface with subtle facets, like tiny licks of the brush in paint. This texture softens the sense of solidity, subordinating the glint of reflections to a color-suffused depth.

Boundary No. 4 (pictured) is a luminous, persimmony orange hovering within a rounded almost-square, drenching our vision in layer upon layer of exquisite color. The artist's approach and the viewer's experience in works like these interestingly parallel 20th-century color-field abstractionists like Mark Rothko and Morris Lewis, who both stained or painted on unprimed canvas as a way of merging color with a surface. Rothko, in particular, is an apt comparison because his process was similarly painstaking. He consciously sought a mythic, spiritual expression that seems echoed in Edwards' work.

Sometimes combined into diptych-like pairs, individual tablet elements (in this show, generally about 14 inches high) are typically shallow (less than 3 inches deep), soft-cornered rectangles. However, one of the earliest works in the group, *Last Light* (2007), consists of an upward, billowing, inverted blip that echoes and overshadows a neighboring hillock, both a bit like stage scenery flats. Light moves through exposed areas of clear glass and glances off object contours. It defines the narrow curving away of edges and fills the angled shape between the two forms.

There's a landscape reference here, and something about the shapes in Edwards' more recent, more rigid diptychs is reminiscent of Franz Kline, who was at one time inspired by Pennsylvania mining landscape. Kline worked mainly in black, white and gray. Edwards also favors strong, stark monochromatic shapes and causes them to move between panels. In *Channel No. 6*, the vertical space between panels presents a contrast with the horizontally arching clear-glass space between sections of plummy brown.

Downstairs: Isn't an art gallery the ideal place to consider that the pleasures of material things are fleeting, but oh so nice? Gallery associate director Sienna Freeman relates "**(In)Between**" (through June 28) to 16th-century vanitas painting. The Dutch still lifes were intended to remind people of Ecclesiastes' "All is vanity," while paradoxically giving them a sumptuous record of all the good stuff they owned or ate (fruit, cheese, fish and game) in this earthly life.

Among the seven artists in the show, German-born painter **Anne Siems** addresses the topic most directly with fruit, flowers, bibelots (including clocks, a typical vanitas element) and ghostly figures. Often a vanitas work contains a memento mori (reminder of death) such as British media darling **Damien Hirst's** cast-silver skull, *The Fate of Man*. Likewise directly referencing death are **Tim Tate's** reliquaries in video, glass and other materials. Other works in the show — including Philadelphia resident **Joe Boruchow's** cutouts in black paper on white satin and **Adelaide Paul's** disturbingly alive and dead, disturbingly anthropomorphic animals — are more surreal.

Vanitas art was supposed to make people think. The fact that the links between the artists in the show are more intuitive than explicit is unexpectedly effective. Recommended.

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