



## L.A. Artist Kelly Akashi Uses Glass to Create Primordial, Emotive Sculpture

● Alexa Gotthardt Dec 31, 2019 8:00am



Kelly Akashi, *Be Me (Cultivator)*, 2019. Photo by Paul Salveson. Courtesy of the Artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles.

“Getting breasts even is a challenge,” said artist Kelly Akashi as she scrutinized a bulbous, blazingly hot glass form that resembled a prehistoric Venus figurine crossed with a swelling Murano-forged vase. For the past hour, the piece had been growing with bursts of Akashi’s breath, piped through a metal tube. Periodically, she plunged it into a glory hole where flames licked and softened its surface, rendering it sculptable.

We were in the West Adams, Los Angeles, glass studio where Akashi makes a significant amount of her work. She and her team of glassblowers had just received a delivery of coffee-laced iced chais to power the six hours of work ahead. It was hot outside and broiling in the studio, filled with furnaces and ovens that melt, heat, and bake glass at temperatures as high as 2,250 degrees Fahrenheit. “Glassmakers, they don’t like going to saunas,” Akashi joked.



Kelly Akashi and assistants working on November 23, 2019 at KT Glassworks, Los Angeles, CA.

When I visited in mid-November, Akashi was preparing for a February 2020 solo show at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York. She had just returned to L.A.—where she was born and now lives and works—after a month-long residency at Headlands, in Marin County. Recently, she'd also shown work at Frieze London with Bonakdar, and at FIAC, in Paris, with François Ghebaly. In one sculpture, called *Be Me (Cultivator)* (2019), thin strands of glass curl around a textured steel cast of Akashi's own hand and erupt into fiery, semi-transparent petals. *In Peeking* (2019), two long-nailed fingers (again cast from Akashi's, as for all hands in her work) crawl from a glass shell, which resembles a dollop of deep, celestial space. These pieces, like all of Akashi's, seem to harbor something alive—even primordial.

Since 2014, glass has been an integral component of Akashi's work. Though her practice encompasses sculpture and photography, it feels more like a series of alchemical experiments invoking the historical and emotional significance of objects. Glassmaking is one of several processes—including assembling photograms, casting her own hand, and making and burning candles—that Akashi persistently engages to embody the passage of time. "I think I was always trying to find a way to create work that could hold evidence of a lot of time and change," she explained, "and also point towards future time and change."



Kelly Akashi, *Peeking*, 2019. Photo by Paul Salvesson. Courtesy of the Artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles.



Kelly Akashi, *Submersion*, 2019. Photo by Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy of the Artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles.

Akashi thinks a lot about the history of her materials and how they've been used by generations of humans before her. Glassmaking stretches back around 4,000 years to Mesopotamia, when someone discovered that sand could be heated, liquified, and manipulated into a scintillating, malleable substance. Early instructions, etched into a cuneiform tablet from the library of King Assurbanipal (reigned 668–627 B.C.E.), point to the process's ritualistic beginnings: "On the day when you plan to place the glass in the kiln, you make a sheep sacrifice...you place juniper incense on the censer, you pour out a libation of honey and liquid butter, and then only [do] you place the glass in the kiln." Later, starting around the 12th century C.E., deft Venetian artisans honed and perfected glass techniques on the island of Murano, churning out elaborate vases and chandeliers dripping with ornate, iridescent accretions.

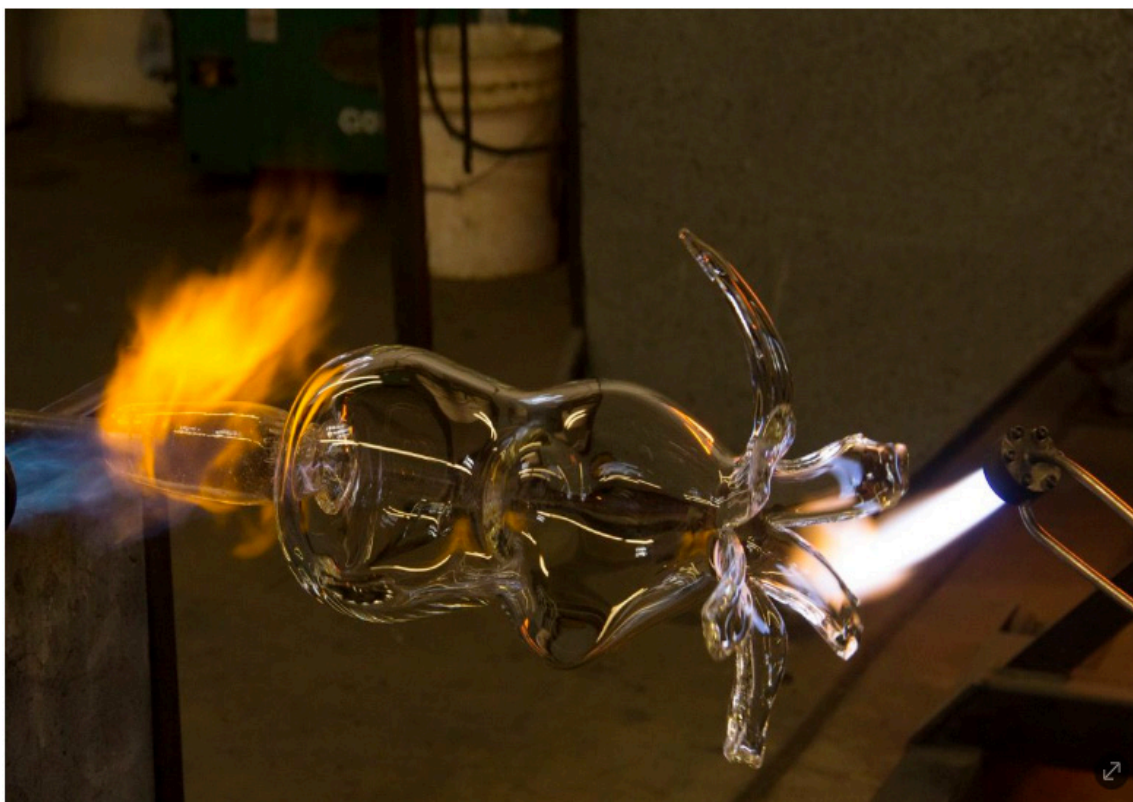
Akashi, who has traveled to Murano, regularly visits museums to mine their age-old glass for inspiration; she's particularly drawn to pieces where the human hand is visible in marks and slippages. "I get very excited about feeling humanity [in objects]," she explained, "to touch on humanity and the history of object-making throughout thousands of years."



Kelly Akashi, *Tunnel Complex*, 2019. Photo by Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy of the Artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles.

For her solo show in L.A. at François Ghebaly earlier this year, Akashi used glass to resuscitate the forms of extinct organisms. Fossils of ancient shells from the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles became blueprints for reverse crystal casts. Suspended in clear blocks, the spiraling cavities that resulted give shape to the interior space of each shell, where the soft, fleshy creatures once took refuge. “I loved this idea that there was a creature that built it, made it, lived inside of it, and had its own timeline to it,” she explained. For Akashi, works like these elicit a “conversation or connection with some kind of consciousness that existed before me.”

The show also featured casts of Akashi’s hands and sharp nails pressed deep into ballooning glass orbs. She thinks of her fingernails—protein deposits which lengthen and build much like shells—as “mini geological features,” she laughed. These sculptures express a different facet of time: “a mortal timeline,” she continued. Paired together, the shells (representing the long dead) and the hands (the living) form an expansive, heady chronology reaching from the prehistoric past to the tenuous present, suggesting “that humanity might even have its own extinction date,” she mused.



Kelly Akashi and assistants working on November 23, 2019 at KT Glassworks, Los Angeles, CA.

The day I visited, Akashi was making some of her first overtly figurative glass pieces: curvaceous vessels loosely inspired by pre-Columbian urns and expressive of the female form. While much of her past work has suggested body parts—labial folds, turgid appendages, creased skin—Akashi had never connected such disparate elements to form a whole. I watched as a glob of molten glass transformed through the tender, sweaty handling of four glassmakers (Akashi with assistants Kazuki Takizawa, David Gutierrez, and Deshon Tyau). It expanded and swelled with breasts, teased out by Akashi’s breath and encouragement from a hunk of wet newspaper. “If the glass is hot enough and the newspaper is thin enough, you can really feel your fingers shape it,” she explained. “It’s the closest you can get to touching it.”



Kelly Akashi, *Feel Me (Aquamarine)*, 2019. Photo by Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy of the Artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles.

Akashi endowed the form with a vulva and a collar of radiant, rippling petals. She made eight figures in all. In the upcoming exhibition at Tanya Bonakdar, Akashi is planning for them to stand on a single table under a quartz glass bell that resonates at a frequency so low “you almost feel the sound as much as you hear it,” she explained. I imagine the transparent figures filling up with deep, primal vibrations. Elsewhere in the show—and amongst many other works still in progress—a sphere will leak water from hundreds of tiny orifices, as if weeping.

These sculptures express time and transformation, but they also harness something closer to feeling. They’re investigations into an object’s ability to “contain and transmit emotion,” Akashi explained, smiling, as the glass furnace bubbled behind her. “Objects that emote.”

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