

X—TRA

04.15.20 / EXHIBITIONS Kelly Akashi and David Muenzer

Reach Inside

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Kelly Akashi's latest outing, Mood Organ, February 27–April 18, 2020, occupies both floors of Tanya Bonakdar's New York gallery. Weep (2020), a cast bronze orb trickling with water, holds the center of the first room, the pitter-patter of its drips echoing in the white cube. Flanking the fountain are a series of turned-wood pedestals, whose undulating spindles take their shape from the artist's echocardiogram patterns. These support casts of Akashi's hands which variously caress, hold, and penetrate a complex array of organic glass forms—bubbles, spirals, and webs. Upstairs, branching glass sculptures are suspended from the ceiling with knotted rope, and a table displays a family of Murano-inflected ersatz Venuses below a hanging bell. Walking through the exhibition, Akashi spoke with artist David Muenzer about collectivity in the craft tradition, emotion in form, and what to hold on to.



Kelly Akashi, *Mood Organ*, installation view, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, February 27–April 18, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo: Pierre Le Hors.

DAVID MUENZER: Your sculptural hands, accentuated by these elaborate pedestals and each making contact with a glass object—they dramatize both the gesture of the touch and the specifics of what is being touched. What were you thinking about with that spiral shape in *Wielded Whorl* (2020)?

KELLY AKASHI: I've been making various spiral forms for a long time, and I think that comes from the candles, making very erect candles in the beginning and then making them more flaccid. Recently, I've thought about different kinds of support. The spiral is something that's porous, that allows for movement, that meanders. But it also has a lot of structure. And then, separately, thinking about models or illustrations of time. In school I used to draw this little figure—instead of the person moving, the time was moving through the person. Now I've been thinking about a way to structure time where it's self-reflective, where it acknowledges past and future in the same moment. The spiral is a good illustration of that, since it folds back on itself even though it still has a directional movement. Now I think, of course, those candles were always that, with their twists



Kelly Akashi, *Wielded Whorl*, 2020. Hand-blown glass, bronze, walnut pedestal, sculpture 19 x 10 x 8 1/2 in. (48.3 x 25.4 x 21.6 cm.), pedestal 59 1/4 x 14 x 14 in. (48.3 x 25.4 x 21.6 cm.), overall 78 1/4 x 14 x 14 in. (198.8 x 35.6 x 35.6 cm.) Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

DM: I remember you wrapping the candles around the copper tubing (*Downtime Machine*, 2017), and it became very animal, like a creature from the Precambrian period. There are so many possible evolutionary configurations for propulsion. I like thinking about how the notochord, which became the root of all vertebrates, was just a blip among the diversity of life before a mass extinction made it the dominant form. I think your earlier work with shells, from your 2019 exhibition at François Ghebaly, brought up that kind of morphological introspection.

KA: Yeah, spirals are mystical, ancient: shells, galaxies. For that show, I was researching shells and how they are built. I love that shells have an architectural component—they are homes. And the body of the shelled creature moves, so the shape includes past inhabited spaces.

DM: Were you looking at brachiopods?

KA: Yeah, I was looking at brachiopods and whelks. I chose four distinct species from a few different areas that I thought would articulate the spirals in different ways.



Kelly Akashi, *Downtime Machine*, 2017. Handmade candles, glass, copper, bronze wire, dimensions variable, 18 × 54 × 54 in. (45.7 × 137.2 × 137.2 cm.) Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles.

DM: Let's talk about the upstairs works. Looking at these pieces, I was thinking about the photographer Nobuyoshi Araki and suspension, and wondering about the disposition of the knots and the places where the loose ropes go over them. Or the long downward hangs—they aren't structural, right?

KA: No, there's one main structural support. All of these have a central body or bodies that other pieces of glass are stuck to or bend around. The meaning and the making converge here, because there are a lot of restrictions. The end of each piece, made from the initial rod of glass, is the place to tie the rope. At a certain point, the glass can't support itself. It takes four of us to work on all of these because they are so intense. And the first one shattered after two hours of work. None of us knew the limits of this form with this material. We just had to do one that pushed too far in order to learn.

DM: What's this branching piece called?

KA: This one is called *Serrated Cell (2020)*. I've been funny about embracing previous artists' influence. I don't like to say that I'm looking at one person or another. But for these I kept thinking about how the forms were based on these branches I'm collecting. The goal has been to find branches that encompass an obvious volume, around themselves or inside of their arms. Thinking about that, I was reminded of the language of Louise Bourgeois and her cages and her *Cells*. Researching the word cell after I had read a bit about Bourgeois, I found so many similarities in her work—not even just the obvious ones like hands, or the body and nature. But also, it seems she hoarded a lot of things...

DM: Indeed! Her house is near here, on 20th Street.

KA: I don't hoard hard, but I do keep my fingernails...I have my own version of hoarding. I put a lot of that stuff in my work, because then I know where it is! I know it will be safe and taken care of. This is just a side thing, but it was interesting to read that later in life Bourgeois placed hoarded things into works as well, also because she knew the stuff would be safe.



Kelly Akashi, *Mood Organ*, installation view, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, February 27–April 18, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo: Pierre Le Hors.

DM: Seems quite effective, since artworks are one of the things that, as a culture, we try and take care of indefinitely.

KA: Yeah. I thought I'd embrace this relationship and I stuck with "cell" because it is about isolation, but also about protection in this case. And then also, obviously, a cell is a biological building block. I think the fine line there is in the language between architecture and the body.

DM: In a tree, when a new branch comes out, is that called a node? When I saw these, I was thinking about coral. They bud. The biological analogies are profligate here.

KA: Definitely. I had someone come into the studio once and ask if the leaves in an older work were like fingernails, and I really liked that! It's so obvious, but I think that often the cells can rest between antlers, coral, tree branches, fire, flames. What all these things share is more important than any one reference—how something might spread out and populate, for instance.



Kelly Akashi, *Serrated Cell*, 2020. Detail. Hand-blown glass, rope, glass only 24 1/2 × 12 × 14 in. (62.2 × 30.5 × 35.6 cm.), overall 111 × 24 × 12 in. (281.9 × 61 × 30.5 cm.) Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

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Kelly Akashi, *Triple Helix*, 2020. Detail. Hand-blown glass, rope, hair, quartz bell, granite, steel, overall 60 × 72 × 72 in. (152.4 × 182.9 × 182.9 cm.), glass bell (installation height variable) 6 1/2 × 9 × 9 in. (16.5 × 22.9 × 22.9 cm.) Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

I've learned enough about glass now that I'm able to take traditions from Murano and interpret them differently. It's a very patriarchal scene there and I bring a different perspective. There is traditional *incalmo* happening here, there's frit, there's assembly work, there's cane work, there're prunts... All on these rather feminine vessels, in the end. In the back of my mind is the labor history of the studio art glass movement. My understanding of it comes from a Venetian glassblower, Lino Tagliapietra, who retired from a glass factory and started his own studios in Murano and Seattle. He's 85. He's a maestro. Before the studio art glass movement, you had to work at the factory to be a glassblower. You couldn't work on your own. The studio furnace didn't exist.

DM: So that language of the glory hole and all that—does that come from the studio art glass movement too?

KA: Or Murano? I don't know. Those are English interpretations. But there is a feminist vein in all this, though it's still struggling to find its way. These petaled vessels focus on an internal force. How are we all here right now? And what is inside us? Organs, sure, but I'm thinking more like intuition, instinct, and emotion. Those things have also been developed and cultivated and changed by our ancestors. I feel that through my own participation in some version of the studio art movement: receiving technical knowledge that is also the story of the people who pass it down.

DM: And the bell, is that a part of the same piece?

KA: Yes, a scientific glassblower in Oakland made it. It's made of blown quartz, so it will ring for quite some time after being struck. Quartz has a predictable vibration. It's used in timekeeping devices and scientific experiments because of that. I designed it to have a low frequency. I had been reading about the ear when I was working on those shell works and I learned that the lower the frequency is, the deeper inside your ear you hear it. You're hearing this in the deepest part of the ear. I was really excited to make a piece that talks about this internal force but part of it, the frequency, would actually reach inside of you.

Kelly Akashi lives and works in Los Angeles, California. Winner of the 2019 Carolyn Glasoe Bailey Foundation Art Prize, Akashi's institutional exhibitions include *Long Exposure*, curated by Ruba Katrib, at SculptureCenter; *Made in L.A.*, curated by Aram Moshayedi and Hamza Walker, at the Hammer Museum; *Take me (I'm Yours)*, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Jens Hoffmann, and Kelly Taxter, at the Jewish Museum; and *Can't Reach Me There*, curated by Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, at Midway Contemporary Art.

David Muenzer is an artist and writer. He formerly co-directed the space Full Haus. New work will be on view in *Delusionarium 5*, curated by Becky Koblick and Jesse Benson, at Night Gallery later this year.

“Reach Inside: Kelly Akashi and David Muenzer,” X-Tra, April 15, 2020.
<https://www.x-traonline.org/online/reach-inside-kelly-akashi>