

MEDITATIONS ON COLOUR AND FORM

Damon Dowbak
Thunder Bay Art Gallery
Curated by Nadia Kurd
June 14 – September 8, 2013



Fig.1
yellow/CYAN: Glimpse of a film negative
2012
84 x 168 cm

A REFLECTION ON LIGHT AND FORM: THE ART OF DAMON DOWBAK

BY NADIA KURD

In a 1977 monograph on the German architectural glass artist Ludwig Schaffrath (1924-2011), writer Erich Stephany laments that,

Light has almost become too common and is taken too much for granted, to catch its essence clearly. With the facilities of artificial light we expel darkness and we can make day out of night. We outshine and expel the mysteries of the old spaces. Floodlights light up the sport arenas and reduce the spectators to a mass in the half-dark. Enormous light sources light up the workshops, say the open pit mines, and let the day-night rhythm disappear.¹

The ubiquity of manufactured light is no doubt a condition of our contemporary life. Schaffrath, an artist whose method of glassmaking revived and indeed, re-energized the practice of stained glass developed a more abstract and minimalist aesthetic post-WWII. His work also focused on the intricate play between light and colour.² Eschewing some of the more religious and narrative subject matter of European stained glass, Schaffrath not only understood but mastered the beauty of natural light through his vivid and graphic compositions.

Given the monumentality of Schaffrath's practice, it is appropriate then to consider his impact on artist Damon Dowbak. As in the work of Schaffrath, the relationship between light, painted surfaces and shapes is at the heart of his most recent work in *meditations on colour and form*. This series of large-scale glassworks integrates both geometric shapes, and contrasting painted surfaces. In the exhibition, works are displayed either suspended from the ceiling or using freestanding, handcrafted wooden supports. Though lit with gallery floodlights, the reflecting light reveals sonorous balance of line and colour. These works utilize the scale of architecture, but also weave together the genres of painting and glassmaking. Shifting between artistic fields comes naturally to Dowbak, as he points out,

I began my arts career as a photographer and painter. In my work, I have transferred the skills and concepts of a photographer and painter to the design and fabrication of glass including the combination of canvas and carved plexi-glass.³

"ALTHOUGH THE VARIOUS FORMS OF ANIMATE AND INANIMATE LIFE IN THE WORLD SEEM SEPARATE AND DISSIMILAR, THEY ARE, AT THE MOST PROFOUND LEVEL, INSEPARABLE, SIMILAR, AND ONE."

Dowbak's method of amalgamating various artistic techniques to create his pieces is necessary to the process of making stained glass. First and foremost, the design of the glasswork starts with a series of drawings on vellum. These drawings map out both the cut lines and configuration of forms, which are ultimately scored and cut from sheets of glass. The shapes are then painted using various glazing, staining and firing techniques, which are then abutted using soldered, reinforced H-sectioned metal strips. This process is refined, exacted and repeated several times over to create the overall structure. No easy task, Dowbak describes the trials of working with stained glass:

I am often faced with the challenges of bringing elements together, specifically finding the points where they converge. Although the various forms of animate and inanimate life in the world seem separate and dissimilar, they are, at the most profound level, inseparable, similar, and one.⁴

As artist and author (and an early teacher to Dowbak) Patrick Reyntiens notes, the practice of stained glass is one that above all, requires meticulousness in the process and in the studio. This exacting practice is one that Dowbak has developed over a thirty-year career. The modernist approach to colour and form is at the basis of his art and presents an analytic rigor in balance and design. However, this methodology evolves far more lyrically in his compositions. Based on meditations on natural and urban landscapes, Dowbak's designs incorporate elements such as water, rock, air and colours.⁵ These ideas are then drawn, designed and translated onto glass. For example, in works such as *yellow/CYAN* (fig.1) and *yelloworange* (fig.2), undulating lines are contrasted with solid colours. Paint brushed surfaces mark moments of luminosity and



Fig.2
yelloworange
2013
206.4 x 53.9 cm



opacity at once. The tensions between these treatments bring us back to the inexplicableness of light—no longer taken for granted, light is brought to the precipice and transformed.

Conceptually, light has served as the basis of a number of philosophies. For Aristotle, light was “not substance but the actualization of the transparency inherent in media such as air and water.”⁶ For the Arab philosopher and mathematician Alhazen, it was “seen as subject to the principles of geometry—of straight lines and angles—thus providing the framework for a mathematical structure of the universe.”⁷ Preceding either of these thinkers, light was rooted in the domain of spiritual life and contemplation. This ongoing pursuit of colour and form has led Dowbak to investigate some of the mysteries of light. Here, light is no longer relegated to a past, prior to industrialization, but is part of a contemporary expressive design. The works give us pause to consider the luminosity of glass.

This exhibition is the culmination of a focused, three-year creative and technical exploration of glass and light by Damon Dowbak. These works build upon his parallel career as a commercial stained glass artist with commissions across Northwestern Ontario. Trained as a painter and photographer, and also noted locally as an accomplished musician, Dowbak investigates the multifocal dimensions of glass in these new works. They combine the size and scale of modern architecture, the luminosity of a painter’s palette and the understanding of light reflection of a glassmaker. *Meditations on colour and form* is an experiential exhibit that unifies our perceptivity on the inflections of light, architecture and the bold vibrancy of colour.

ARTIST STATEMENT

DAMON DOWBAK

The idea of playing with light and colours has always intrigued me. I began my arts career as a photographer and painter. In my work, I have transferred the skills and concepts of a photographer and painter to the design and fabrication of glass including the combination of canvas and carved plexi-glass. As an artist, I am inspired by light and how it can be manipulated and played with in the glassmaking process. In working with glass, I have had the opportunity to develop a very strong understanding and respect for the many aspects of light. I believe it has taken me into deeper realms of creative process. I’m influenced by the natural world, poetry and music.

I am often faced with the challenges of bringing elements together, specifically finding the points where they converge. Although the various forms of animate and inanimate life in the world seem separate and dissimilar, they are, at the most profound level, inseparable, similar, and one.

The works are abstracted from memory of meditations on nature and urban landscapes, specifically textural variations of the elements - water, rock, air and colours selected for their emotional presence. The works are architectural in form, and often display the effects of erosion and growth – specifically the transitional moments in nature.

My passion is to integrate myself with the work, through intuition and meditation. Through these works, I am able to breathe life into the medium of glass, animating the physicality of colour and form.

Damon Dowbak is a multidisciplinary artist and musician based in Thunder Bay. As a glass artist, Damon has studied under Johannes Schreiter and Patrick Reyntiens. His commissioned work can be found across Northwestern Ontario. Since 1976, he has owned and operated Kleewyck Stained Glass Studio.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Erich Stephany, “Introduction.” In *Ludwig Schaffrath, Krefeld, Germany: Scherpe, 1977, 8.*
- ² Oxford Art Online. “Stained Glass”, www.oxfordartonline.com (accessed: May 21, 2013).
- ³ Damon Dowbak, Artist Statement, 2012.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Oxford Art Online. “Light”, www.oxfordartonline.com (accessed: May 21, 2013).
- ⁷ Ibid.



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Image:
REDorangeYellow: *Crystaline Column*
2012
50 x 192 cm