

FRESTONIAN GALLERY

SAM HERMAN

1936 - 2020

Private View: Thursday 5th May, 6-9pm

Exhibition: 6th May – 11th June 2022

Frestonian Gallery presents a memorial exhibition reflecting on, and celebrating, the extraordinary life and work of Sam Herman. His legacy stands as Britain's most pioneering and celebrated glass artist; and as a vital figure in the development of British Modernism throughout the transformative era of the 1960s and far beyond.

In recent years, the previously established hierarchy of artistic media – with painting and sculpture seen as the most legitimate expressions of 'high art' and all other mediums thereafter in a sliding scale downwards towards 'craft' has thankfully been eroded, if not entirely exploded. Now, one is as likely to visit a museum or gallery and see centre stage given to, for example, the textile works of Sonia Delaunay, Louise Bourgeois or Sheila Hicks; or the ceramics of Grayson Perry or Magdalene Odundo. When Herman arrived at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in 1966, working across the hall from his colleagues Hans Coper and Eduardo Paolozzi, he would not have realised quite how major a part he would play, alongside them, in this shift of understanding towards a non-hierarchical appreciation of materials.

That same year, Herman built the first 'small tank furnace' in the UK, a moment that would change the course of British glass art forevermore. This furnace, along with the tools needed to work with it, that Herman had helped to devise and innovate under Harvey Littleton at the University of Wisconsin four years earlier, made it possible for glass artists and designers to work directly with molten glass. This immediately freed self-expression, one of the central aims of what soon became known as the 'Studio Glass Movement'. How this movement changed glass art, might be most readily compared to how the invention of oil paint transformed painting, with Herman arguably its greatest international proponent.

Herman became a champion of the movement in ways beyond simply his own practice and his teaching at the RCA. Acutely aware of the prohibitive expense of running a furnace as a single artist, he came up with the idea and raised the finance for what would become The Glasshouse in Covent Garden. He described it as 'a halfway house' for students – a place to sustain their practices as a collective after they left the well-resourced confines of the RCA. Opened in 1969 and backed by the Crafts Council, The Glasshouse ran for three decades, facilitating and nurturing the practices of hundreds of studio glass artists. Aside from his own work, it is perhaps Herman's most enduring legacy to the growth of interest in Studio Glass.

In 1971, the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, recognised Herman's position at the forefront of the Studio Glass Movement when, at the age of just 35, he became the first contemporary glass artist to be given an exhibition within their hallowed halls. He described it as 'a jolt' to have his work shown in the midst of 2,000 years plus of art history, but was certainly not overawed. Instead, he recommitted himself to pushing his practice further, continuing his exploration into developing new techniques, exploring new forms and finding ways of realising increasingly more sophisticated pattern and colour within his work.

The V&A exhibition preceded a further thirty exhibitions in the 1970s in the UK, across Europe and as far afield as Japan, a country where he felt most philosophically aligned with their lack of distinction between the merits of art and craft. In 1974, with an ever-increasing international reputation, Herman accepted an invitation from the South Australian Government to found what would become a highly influential glass studio at the Jam Factory Studios in Adelaide. He saw this as a further opportunity to spread the understanding of the Studio Glass Movement both as teacher, mentor and artist. His work from this period

was profoundly inspired by the light and atmosphere and palette of the Australian landscape, introducing a subtle but distinct elemental aspect to his oeuvre.

In 1979, Herman returned to the UK to set up a studio in Lots Road, Chelsea, and the following five years marked a settled period of creativity and a mature style marked by its bold use of colour and a move toward new thematic forms. However, in 1984 in a bold and unexpected shift, Herman shut down his furnace and opened a new studio in Mallorca, taking the radical decision to re-focus his talents on painting and sculpture, the path he had initially set out on some twenty-five years before, prior to his meeting with Littleton.

In paint and metallic sculpture, as in glass, he was fascinated by the love of the physical material. The layers of oil which he worked so originally onto the surface of his canvases shine with a luminosity that reflect and echo the depth of colour in his glass works. His sculptures in metal and wood frequently incorporated fragments of coloured glass, recalling the tradition of medieval window glassmakers. During this period and up until his death, Herman only occasionally returned to the glass furnace, first in 2007, then again in 2012, to mark the 50th anniversary of the birth of the Studio Glass Movement, and finally in 2015. Even with such a long period away from the furnace, this late period of work shows all the confidence and retained skill of a true master and an artist in total command of his practice and has proved a revelation and a delight to his fans.

In the Spring of 2019, Frestonian Gallery had the honour of celebrating the launch of Sam Herman's major monograph - published by Lund Humphries - with an accompanying retrospective exhibition. A few months later, whilst in his beloved Mallorca, Herman suffered a stroke, that would ultimately lead to his death in November 2020. As anyone affected by a stroke can attest, often the greatest cruelty is the sudden theft or dulling of one's faculties. This was never more acutely felt than with Herman, whose life could perhaps be most readily defined by the miraculous connections that fizzed and sparked between his mind and fingers. It was as though Hephaestus had been robbed of his hammer and it quickly became evident that this was the beginning of the end. For those who knew Herman best, this was perhaps the hardest thing to witness, but equally it sharpened the realisation of quite how much his passion for 'making' had oxygenated every cell of his being throughout his extraordinary 84 years of life.

Sam Herman's magical creations in glass are the tangible product of a creative spirit, a philosophy, and a crusading energy that place him at the very centre of the story of contemporary studio glass.

Philippe Garner

NOTES ON THE ARTIST

Sam Herman, born in Mexico City in 1936; was brought up in Queen's New York, US; lived in London, UK; Adelaide, Australia; Banyalbufar, Mallorca, Spain and died in Gloucestershire, UK. He was a glass artist, painter and sculptor. A true modernist, Herman was at the very centre of the development of the International Studio Glass Movement. He was not only present for the birth of the Movement at the University of Wisconsin in 1962, but he was its founding father in Great Britain and Australia. His influence is seminal, as an artist and teacher he inspired a generation of glass artists, developed revolutionary techniques and following his lead, colours in blown glass would become more textured and fluid. Herman founded the Glass House in Covent Garden in 1969, which would become the focal point for British glass art. He became a Research Fellow in the Glass Department at the Royal College of Art (RCA), London, in 1966 and then Head of Department from 1967 to 1974. He was made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Art in 1983.

Herman exhibited extensively throughout the world and his work is held in numerous public and private collections including, amongst many others, the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC; Art Institute of Chicago; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge and the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.