

Material Languages

Glass is a contradictory material. Within a scientific taxonomy, it is defined as amorphous and, along with the category's liquid, solid and gas, glass is a unique state of matter. Not all that long ago, it was thought that glass was a liquid and that over many hundreds of years, window glass would be affected by its slow-moving liquid state and become thicker at its base (it doesn't). I recall walking through the National Gallery of Victoria, under the Leonard French glass ceiling, listening to two people discussing how this glass roof would one day collapse due to glass sliding from its dalle de verre¹ foundations. This folklore has become the 'truth' because glass is so ingrained in our lives, even for those who are not material experts. Windows, drinkware, phones, fibre optics, food packing, and reading glasses. From the mundane functionality of a modern kitchen splashback to the much loved (or loathed) crystal heirloom. Yet it is also imbued with an element of fear; it can be fragile, it can break, it can cut you. As an artistic material, the viewer tends to think of it as simply glass. For the maker, glass can be cast, fused, blown, poured, decorated, glued, and hot-sculptured. This extensive material language includes neon and mosaic, bead making, and even bong making. It can be complex, technical, risky, and utterly beautiful. It is addictive.

For the artists, Louis Grant and Madisyn Zabel, the material qualities of glass are first and foremost in their minds. The potential in glass colour, shape, texture, and clarity joins them in a mutual love for the material. They both play with these ideas of contradiction. Natural or industrial, intimate or imposing, flawless or imperfect, looking at or looking through.

The exhibition title *Two-Tone* suggests that within two opposing ideas, there are infinite stages when traversing from one to the other. Between black and white, there isn't just grey. According to a quick Google search, there are more than 500 transitional shades of grey that the human eye can see. French painter Georges Seurat describes how colour and tone can be used to create particular emotional effects: 'Gaiety is obtained through the use of dominant luminosity in tone; of prevailing warmth in colour.'² Here, both Grant and Zabel celebrate colour.

Zabel describes her work as 'focussing on planes within a geometric form and expanding illusionary aspects within the form'³. Within these prismatic sculptural forms, Zabel adds colour to produce the distinctive bold geometric shapes that seem to create or emphasise an inner volume. These attributes draw attention to the space within the form. Sharp surface planes create an external boundary that holds the interior. This exploration of the inner and outer is deeply linked to our relationship to architecture and volume in space. Here too, there are contradictions; the solid mass of material is accessible on the interior only due to the transparent nature of the material. The viewer can experience, interact, and explore these inner planes without actually entering them. The scale of these pieces also prevents our physical access. However, our relationship to architecture and geometric

¹ Dalle de verre, from French: "glass slab", is a glass art technique that uses pieces of coloured glass set in a matrix of concrete and epoxy resin (definition from Wikipedia)

² 'Tone' Art Term – Art and Artist, Tate website

³ Conversation with the artist Madisyn Zabel, 19 March 2023

planes allows our minds to be drawn into these spaces as if walking through a door where one space becomes another – from black to white or, in this case, from daylight into pure orange brilliance.

As Seurat described, the luminosity displayed within these works does have an emotional effect, the feeling of warmth, like viewing a vivid sunset. There is also an exciting interdependency between the form, the shadow, and the internal refraction, which creates a fourth dimension to these works – that of time. Light, shadow and reflection move around and through these pieces as the sun moves around the sky. Encountering these works at midday will bring a different experience to viewing them at dusk. Placement, arrangement, and gallery lighting also play into this, light can be thrown and enhanced or softened and dispersed, allowing the viewer to have an element of control. However, Zabel is ultimately in control. Her use of transparent glass overlaid or joined to opaque sections creates spaces that we can freely explore and those which are off-limits.

Grant's work also plays with scale and grouping forms. He has developed a framework for assembling objects, colours, textures, and shapes to create his own material language, often including industrial materials such as concrete, bricks and terrazzo alongside glass. For *Two-Tone*, Grant focuses on glass with unexpected colour combinations and grouping with slightly unsettling proportions that feel intentionally off balance. This cheeky, joyful, yet somewhat unnerving body of work offers an insight into the artist's life experience as a young queer man. Glass provides a platform for this, a material that he describes as non-binary, neither liquid nor solid. Like Zabel, he uses transparency to allow the viewer in and creates silky opaque forms as private spaces. This public/private dichotomy is highlighted in Grant's use of scale; each piece can fit in the palm of your hand, and the surface finish entices the viewer to want to touch them. There is an intimacy between each sculptural element and between the piece and the viewer.

I've always been drawn to Grant's titles. The titles provide an instant ah-ha moment unlocking the work, again playing with the public/private. *(I get) anxious* perfectly describes the feeling of imbalance of a sizeable mat-white sphere tittering on top of a small bright orange orb. In this work, Grant pushes our sense of visual balance and flips it on its head, challenging the 'normal'. These titles are lyrics from contemporary pop music, like a perfected mixed tape or Spotify playlist. They provide a generational marker and expand on the artist's interests in pop culture and the all-consuming world of social media. This might be the most critical contradiction that Grant highlights – the need to break the norms versus the need to be liked and to fit into this modern construct.

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