

BEING ‘MEDIUMED’: LOUIS GRANT AND SPENCE MESSIH

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Maybe it's too obvious to say, but, well, where else to begin? Mediums are not just materials, but material-social forms. They're interactive, existing between people and between aspiration and reality. They resist, they make possible. As one negotiates a medium, therefore, one is engaging with a whole suite of interlocked imaginal-relational structures. And it's in doing so, or refusing to (which is also a way of engaging), that an artist forms a specific sort of relationship that forms them in turn; they become *mediumed*.

Though never once and for all. Being 'mediumed' is an ongoing process, a live rollercoaster of a courting ritual uniting artist and substance that, like all relationships, is a mess of partial connects and embarrassing disconnects, a continual restless asking what we want from it as we try and fathom what this other (and all it stands for) might want from us. None of which is obviously perfectly definable, and so the energies gather around certain circles of wanting that generate centrifugal forces that become what we call traditions. Or, hell, at least scenes. Like I said, obvious.

Still, with this held loosely in mind, the practices of Louis Grant and Spence Messih might be seen to offer two modes for how glass *mediums* in a way that doesn't merely sit tangentially to what is typical of the studio glass realm, but dialectically says something about the capacities, potential and limits that form that tradition/scene too. Both do so from a certain point of remove from the 'mainstream' glass field, coming at the medium from a sculptural position and locating their output under the mantle of contemporary art.

A key concern of Grant's practice thus far has been his response to the *discipline* of glass. A provocative word that, discipline. Meaningful, though, as early in his training Grant was sensitive to the fact that medium 'mastery' was not only a skill set but a subject position, and one that was often highly gendered and riven with other lines of power besides. Instead of seeking to transcend this fact, or work counter to it, he chose to adopt a creatively ambivalent attitude that would bring the fissures of mastery to the surface.

Shifting out of the agreed signs of proper form, Grant began cultivating a degraded finish using elements and methods that exacerbate the glitches that most glass artists would seek to expunge from their work. This is: he checks in at the border between finish and finished. At art school, for instance,¹ he used plain glass and scratched into it, a gesture that turns cold working around a little to include emo-cultural aspects of agitation and defacement. Moreover, in his current work he has been adding baking soda to increase the bubble content, a move decidedly against the typical attitude to 'the gases' that are seen as defects and 'squeezed out' if possible. There's also a general embrace of chance, an increasing unwillingness to intervene in the process of crafting; once he's set a form in motion, in flow, the results are the results. It's an open-ended approach which links Grant to, among other folk, a minimal tradition indebted to John Cage.

There's also a performative edge that's evident in the sculptural assembly of a piece in response to its environment. Non-glass elements frame the works



Louis Grant, *someday when you leave me*, 2022, installation view, 'Breakable Heaven', Canberra Contemporary Art Space Manuka, Kamberrri/Canberra, 2022; kilnformed glass; courtesy the artist; photo: Brenton McGeachie



– neon, painted walls, and so on – to stage a kind of pared-back theatre around the glass forms. The ensuing affects he creates are typically in the form of a bubbling emotionality that, he says, rises up from the melodrama of millennial social media experience across changing (earlyish) formats such as MSN Messenger and Facebook. These have so often been sites of oversharing that shape a kind of social hysteria that in turn exists as its own ‘creation’; an artform not necessarily related to a truth beyond its format’s parameters. Grant sees such spaces as redolent with a queered vulnerability; a share awaits its response and, as it does, a sense of quivering feeling-focused anticipation becomes part of the medium itself, making communications impossible to master too. Such extensive affects are rendered in Grant’s work in the overall tone of a work/show and, at a more granular level, in titling systems that use song lyrics poised on the edge of being too much.

Little wonder, then, that in addition to folk like Dan Flavin, Roni Horn and Bruce Nauman, he cites Tracey Emin as a key influence; there’s a refusal to emotionally ‘tidy up’ that sees the work dealing with the stickiness of ambivalent connectivities – pulling closer, pushing away, opening up, concealing. There’s a sense of transferring the aroused ambiguities of a self into the world and onto other material forms that foregrounds the idea of medium as a record, as a scapegoat and as a go-between. It’s worth pointing out that Grant sees a kind of queerness to glass in this mode; he considers it as a non-binary substance, neither liquid nor solid. It has a sense of latency, a potential to shift that frames the ways his own employment of the medium makes evident social, psychological and material activities that are themselves *unstable*

compounds, and *unresolved solutions*. From which attitude, Grant fashions oversensitive, hyper-fragile entities that are not so much fragile because they’re made of glass but because of the emotional tumult they’re arranged in and by; and that makes the certainties of mastery more fragile too, and, from some angles, a kind of defence mechanism.

Spence Messih has a rather different take on glass as a medium and mediums as such. Like many contemporary artists, Messih is open to what’s most applicable in a given situation. This makes additional sense, given that their work is at once conceptual, literary, curatorial, editorial and experiential. Rather than being set within the framework of glass, they have on occasion incorporated it as part of an ensemble of materials selected for how these signify, shape perception, delineate space and arrange the viewer (and with the knowledge that none of these factors are separable from the others).

To read these qualities as entwined is vital for the appreciation of the way Messih’s work resonates as they fashion objects and installations that explicitly articulate how one might approach/receive them. Indeed, it’s through these dynamics that the artist platforms zones of intimacy as *problematics*. These don’t produce intimacy nor ward it off, but distil a sequence of considerations around (for example) gate versus obstacle, barrier versus welcome, closure versus porosity, near versus far, image versus object – all of which run in alignment with an awareness of how the mediums of language and power locate and divide and unite and release and smother us.

Positioning is naturally key, and this was at the heart of their exhibition ‘Lectus’ in early 2022.² This saw Messih employ leadlight works held out with an

Louis Grant, *afterglow*, 2022, installation view, 'Breakable Heaven', Canberra Contemporary Art Space Manuka, Kamberri/Canberra, 2022; hot-cast and cold-worked glass, neon, acrylic, vinyl; courtesy the artist; photo: Brenton McGeachie



For Messih and for Grant, the notion of a medium is one of immersion and entanglement, refusal and critique that parallels, impacts on, and colours an array of discursive and subjective fields.

elegant support system from the walls that ‘read’ as illuminated sculptural impositions. Initial inspiration came from experiencing churches where the lead-light windows are illuminated only from within the church and mostly looking up. Darkness without, light within. Messih considers this as a way of speaking in oblique terms about a lack of trans ancestors in general, of not having a tradition of trans artists in particular, and (relatedly) perhaps in a complicated relation to *visibility* itself. None of which is obvious, nor revealed as such; while a meaning, a sense, exists, it is not offered as a code but as an opening that complicates and involves a wholly physical response.

This is true of most of their work, as Messih’s practice quietly taunts and proposes, parries and flickers rather than demonstrates. It’s a quality perfectly captured in their short text for *Stars above/concrete below* that was included in their installation for the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia’s ‘Primavera 2018’ exhibition:

Hard systems have edges, like joins and words too. I know of forms that relentlessly ooze and work to soften these edges. People only really notice things when they can recognise them. Everything else ferments in the cracks, anxiously awaiting the future.³

The borders of the work are, therefore, always in play, and often provocatively so as these extend to the reflexive texts (such as the one quoted from above

and also by others) that work through doubts about a project’s intention or possible reception. By turns wrong-footing, looping, ironic, sassy even, such texts displace the requirement for commentary with something a little more labile and volatile. These, too, are ways spaces are defined and claimed, negotiated and destabilised. The projects are questions, not sealed up deliveries of information in other guises. In this manner, the binary notion of material translation (of idea and of substance) is actively suspended, and the material foundation of sign systems held in alluring abeyance.

How a person might be situated in these kinds of contexts is at the heart of Messih’s new large-scale commission *Minor truths* for Murray Art Museum Albury. The work came into being from their research into the life of trans man Michael Dillon, and reading his 1957 collection *Poems of Truth*. Dillon is considered to be one of the first people to have gender-affirming medical care and surgery, and was (among other things) an Irish doctor versed in trans healthcare who moved to India, becoming a monk and ultimately changing his name to Lobzang Jivaka as a gesture of multi-dimensional renewal.

Messih’s luminous response is situated in the foyer of the museum and composed of various units of kilnformed glass held in place by jarrah armatures (as well as text and sound). It’s far from a portrait and more an expansive evocation that constantly interacts with its environment. They chose kilnformed glass for the project (made at Canberra Glassworks),

Louis Grant, *thought you'd never be replaced*, 2022, hot-sculpted and cold-worked glass, blown glass neon, wood, paint, mirror; courtesy the artist; photo: Ashley St George/Pew Pew Studio



Spence Messih, *Sinew I-II*, 2021, installation view, 'Lectus',
Firstdraft, Warrang/Sydney, 2022; leadlight, diptych, 44 x 34cm (each);
courtesy the artist; photo: Zan Wimberley



Spence Messih, *Minor truths*, 2022, installation view, Murray Art Museum Albury, 2022; kilnformed glass, jarrah; jarrah armatures: Celeste Stein; courtesy the artist; photo: Jeremy Weihrauch



because of 'its ability to be fused into layers, reflect/refract/resonate and its capacity to balance high gloss with matt surfaces'. Composed of sections of related colours (amber, soft red, umber, gentle yellow) that lean into and accommodate each other, Messih has created a glowingly inquisitive and respectful presencing. Indeed, its modulating lightness and energy is a brilliant response to Dillon's transformation that he called an 'escape from what had been a prison of darkness'.⁴ Messih's medium does not *describe* Dillon, but brings forth the quality of transformation and continues it forward.

Which leads to a thought: I think we can see that for Messih and for Grant the notion of a medium is one of immersion and entanglement, refusal and critique that parallels, impacts on, and colours an array of discursive and subjective fields ... and that, in turn, re-composes the manner in which those fields intersect.

Which leads to a too-fervent extrapolation: perhaps they also get at the ways we are all medium-like, materials in process, becoming *mediumed* and *mediuming* in turn.

Which leads to a cry: O.O.O.
At which point, I'll stop typing.
O.

1. In 2018, Grant graduated with a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) from the ANU School of Art & Design in Kamberri/ Canberra.
2. 'Lectus' was on display at Firstdraft, Warrang/Sydney, from 12 January until 13 February 2022.
3. See www.mca.com.au/files/documents/Primavera_Spence_Messih_2018.pdf, accessed 2 November 2022.
4. Michael Dillon/Lobzang Jivaka, *Out of the Ordinary: A Life of Gender and Spiritual Transitions*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2017, p. 99.

The author wishes to thank the artists for their generosity in discussing their complex practices and for their contributions to this essay. All quotes are from phone conversations with the author: Louis Grant on 11 October 2022; and Spence Messih on 12 October 2022. Grant's work is currently showing as part of 'Glass Chrysalis: Glass Art of Promise', at the National Art Glass Gallery, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, until 15 January 2023; Spence Messih's 'Minor truths' is at Murray Art Museum Albury until 19 February 2023.