

‘ I want to leave
no one behind.
To keep
& be kept.
The way a field turns
its secrets
into peonies
The way light
keeps its shadows
by swallowing it.’
- Ocean Vuong¹

Where is the demarked space in time of becoming? Of being inside, within, not witness to but intrinsically a part of the energy which can turn a vacant expanse into the midtone of a bright, dusty rose purple of peony pink. Where does that sensation dwell? The heightened state of knowing and feeling, that you are the shadow waiting to be consumed and held by light. Louis Grant speaks about this space as embodied in the amorphous quality of glass. Neither liquid nor solid, it is another type of matter, an entity that is constantly *becoming*; continually at the sublime precipice of neither “this” not “that”. It is a fluid medium, queer and situated outside of binary definition. Since graduating from the Australian National University School of Art & Design in 2018 Louis has sought to illuminate this nuanced quality of glass; to deconstruct and amplify the truth of the medium which is authentic in its position as non-binary and beautiful in this supposed imperfection.

In our ongoing conversations Louis acknowledges an intentional vulnerability within his work. The practice of cold working each glass component provides an opportunity of catharsis for the artist. As he works with his hands, Grant mentally sifts over and dredges memories that are sites of trauma. Turning over the glass, smoothing one side of the material’s surface and pitting another, Louis works through a spectrum of emotion until he reaches an introspective moment of reconciliation. This creative methodology relies on his ability to surrender to the material, to intuitively respond at each stage of the process and celebrate the defining flaws that emerge – scratches, colour inconsistencies and trapped pockets of air. Louis concludes that this procedure only finishes when he finds a moment of ‘awe’.² This being a defining instant when the object and his emotions merge to reach a state of equilibrium. It is in this tenderness toward the self without judgement, negativity, or doubt that he brings these works with optimism into conversation with the audience.

Staring at *Camp (performativity)* and its neon light partially obscured by glass I become aware of my body as the light flickers on and reaches out to absorb my being within its glow. In this moment I recall a vivid memory of

¹ Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2017. pg. 37

² Interview with Louis Grant 16 February 2022

myself aged six, kissing my then best friend in the backseat of my parents red Mazda. Parked in the driveway of our suburban street, her long black hair obscures my vision, and, in that moment, I am cognisant of familial shame. The light flickers off. Then as though a tide recedes within me this recollection has disappeared.

In Grant's work, and similarly in Roni Horn's (b. 1955) minimalist glass sculptures, 'there are no indicators, no specificities, no fixed framework in which to embed meaning'. Instead, the viewer's encounter with the work of art consists 'entirely of experience and sensation culminating in metaphor.'³ Horn, who works at an industrial scale, created *Pink Tons* in 2009, which is comprised of approximately 4.5 tons of baby pink cube shaped glass. It appears frosted on all four sides, scratched, and filled with irregularities from the casting process while the top is transparent and takes on the clear, rippled effect of water.⁴ In this intended play between the sheer strength of the object and the cultural associations of frosted pink – as juvenile and feminine – Horn challenges binary notions of masculinity and femininity as these markers of gender and sexuality inhabit *Pink Tons* simultaneously. Grant is also captivated by this exact facility of glass as it holds a non-binary positionality. Horn equates the experience of contemplating this aspect of the medium to the experience of being outside of language or binary structures: "the awe thing is beyond language. It's about how you reconcile what you feel with this world."⁵

Louis utilises a spectrum of flesh-like tints to render his work with tenuous bodily connections. Alluding to the appearance of soft tissue, he works with Fuchsia, Erbium and Coral Orange glass. At times appearing like a dew covered apricot or soft sticky candy his works of art are plump with tactile desire. For instance, Erbium, which at first appears like marshmallow, radically shifts to a synthetic icy pole magenta when fluorescent light radiates through the material's surface. Louis gently teases you to shift any associations you might hold of anachronistic notions of colour as a binary system of ascribing gender and also how you feel about yourself in this world.

Camp (performativity) flickers on and reaches out again to swallow me. I recall Esther and I sitting across from one another at the café one year ago. We ramble about our mutual interest in people who are emotionally withholding. I make an ironic comment and she erupts with laughter. The sound of her joy crashes against my body and I sense the hairs on the back of my neck as they stand on end. I feel a pressure in my throat. The light flickers off. Her voice disappears.

Camp (performativity) flickers on. Last night, Monique was teaching me how to box. The delicate tattoo on the back of her neck reads 'baby'. Last night, as she corrected the advance of my right fist, it makes direct contact with her palm for the first time. Smack. The light flickers off.

Ongoing practices with fluorescent light and glass are indebted to the work of the Minimalist sculpture Dan Flavin (1933–96). In 1961 Flavin began assembling wood and electric lights to create what he called "icons". Lacking figurative representation these minimal sculptures are painterly symbols of devotion which radiate an atmosphere of transcendent magic. For me, the most evocative of Flavin's breakthrough series from 1962 is *icon*

³ Kay Whitney, 'Roni Horn: Great Doubts' in *Sculpture A Publication of the International Sculpture Center*. accessed 2 March 2022 <https://sculpturemagazine.art/roni-horn-great-doubts/>

⁴ 'Tate collection 'Roni Horn' accessed 2 March 2022

⁵ 'Roni Horn on politics in art' accessed 2 March 2022 <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/roni-horn-on-politics-in-art/>

V (*Coran's Broadway Flesh*). Hung on the wall, the square Masonite canvas-like support is painted with flesh-tinted oil and gesso, the exterior edges of the wooden box are adorned with domestic "candle" light bulbs and pull chains. On this creative attribution to his queer, New York-loving friend Stanley Coran, Flavin wrote:

What I have made for him is a square block loaded with flesh tint, mechanised by lamps, and bounded by excurrent tips of clear glass glister. But beyond structure and phenomena, I have tried to infect my icon with a blank magic which is my art. I know that this is hard to cope with, but, if I have succeeded, *Coran's Broadway Flesh* will hold you simply, succinctly.⁶

Shortly after the completion of the *icon* series Flavin moved on from the domestic light bulb works to create his now iconic fluorescent light installations. Tactile and luminescent, they combat anxiety and alienation by secreting the essence of pure sensation which culminate in individual experiential metaphors. While Louis's works are not overt dedications, they are symbolic of lived emotions, self-infused with nostalgia, melancholy, and desire. For Louis, and as seen in the later works of Flavin, 'it is not so much the image of the lights as [...] the transforming quality of the light'. This quality shifts presupposed visual interest from the artwork as object to 'the effect of a charged atmosphere' and makes apparent how we are a primary element in the work.⁷ The critic, Michael Fried describes this situation as the 'endlessness' of spatial observation. An encounter which 'persists in time' as everything we perceive with our senses matters in the realisation of the work⁸ – an unending, durational experience of *becoming*. This relational experience sheds the coded mystery of 'high art' language to amplify the "neutral pleasure of seeing known to everyone"⁹ in the gallery space. Within this site of inclusivity, Grant welcomes all to find their authentic and fragile self.

Sublimity is the heightened state of knowing that you are the shadow waiting to be consumed and held by light. A transcendent state in which the boundaries between the two converge. In the queer, amorphous quality of glass, Grant reaches out with optimism and tenderness for self-acceptance.

Camp (performativity) flickers on....

- Anja Loughhead

⁶ Michael Govan. 'Irony and Light' in *Dan Flavin: A Retrospective*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. pg. 26

⁷ Ira Litch, 'Dan Flavin' in *Artscanada*. Number 124/127, December 1968. pp. 62-64

⁸ Michael Fried. *Art and Objecthood*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press Ltd., 1998

⁹ Dan Flavin cited Dan Graham "Art in Relation to Architecture/ Architecture in Relation to Art" in *Artforum*. Volume 17, No. 6 February 1979. pp. 22-29