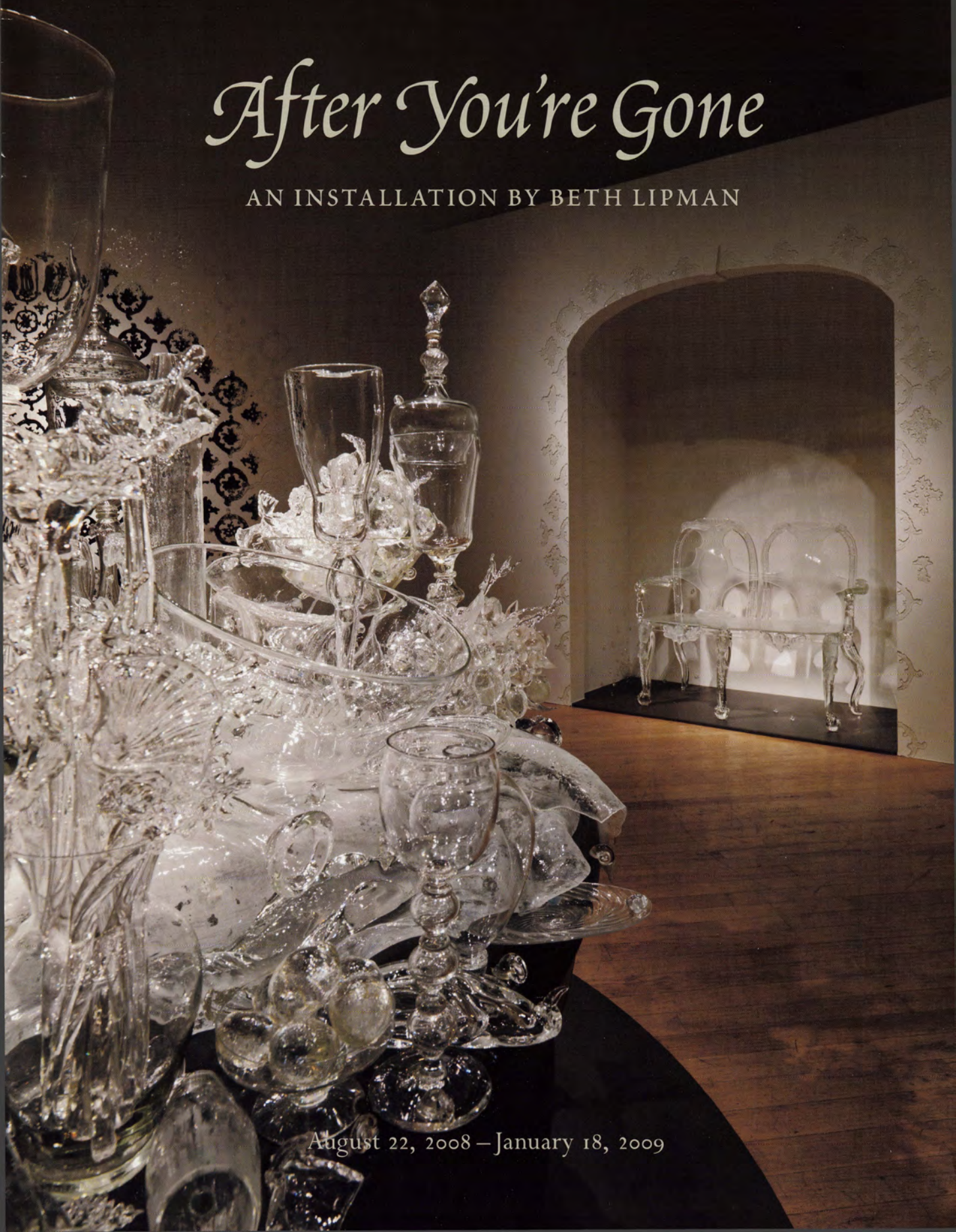
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design
Exhibition Notes | Number 33 | Fall 2008

After You're Gone

AN INSTALLATION BY BETH LIPMAN



August 22, 2008 – January 18, 2009

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

IN JULY 2006, RISD Museum director Hope Alswang and curator Judith Tannenbaum encountered Beth Lipman's 20-foot-long glass tableau entitled *Bancketje (Banquet)*, then on exhibit at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington. This *tour de force,* created in 2003 (now in the permanent collection of the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.), inspired The RISD Museum to invite the artist to visit its galleries, as well as collections in storage, in order to create an exhibition here. In October 2007, Lipman visited the Museum and was particularly excited by its American period rooms in Pendleton House and the decorative arts collections. She returned in March 2008 to work with students in RISD's Glass Department. With their assistance in the hot shop, she produced several topiary sculptures and parts of the full-size glass settee featured in this installation, which she decided to entitle *After You're Gone*. From her home base in Wisconsin, Lipman created glass "wallpaper" based on an 18th-century French pattern sample in The RISD Museum's collection, two "portraits" in glass, 500 snails, and two squirrels. The installation also incorporates *Laid Table (Still Life with Metal Pitcher)*, a large circular sculpture, which she made in September 2007 with this exhibition in mind.

INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

Interview conducted in July 2008
JT *Judith Tannenbaum, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art, The RISD Museum*
BL *Beth Lipman, artist*

JT *After You're Gone* features still-life imagery, your primary subject for the past eight years, but here it is presented in the larger context of the historic "period room." How did this shift come about? How are these two genres related for you?

BL I have been fascinated with decorative arts for a long time, and the parallel between the still-life genre and decorative arts is interesting in that they both are seen as subordinate to "high art." Still life was considered primarily a technical feat and was not as highly valued as portraiture or landscape painting, for instance. The traditional craft that is employed in the making of decorative art is not considered of much relevance in the context of "fine art." I am fascinated with the period room as an extension of decorative art, the art of decorating the spaces in which we abide, the task of choosing the objects with which we surround ourselves, and with how these chosen objects describe us. Period rooms illustrate what life was like at a certain point in time, in a certain place, from a certain point of view.

JT Period rooms traditionally had this instructive goal in museums, but the rooms in Pendleton House are not true "period rooms." Rather than literally reconstructing Charles Pendleton's home, most of the rooms are thematically focused. The objects and décor of one room are related to the China Trade and neoclassical period; another presents colonial Newport furniture. The settee that you became so interested in is from a room assembled from pieces that exhibit rococo ornament as it appears over several periods. It occurs to me that still life (*nature morte*) deals with the transient nature of life and the inevitability of death, while period rooms freeze or preserve how people lived in the past. How do you see the differences between still life and the period room or decorative arts?

BL The still-life genre is firmly entrenched in the fine-art world. In contrast, the period room is a reflection of the decorative-art world, and it is an educational tool for museums and historic sites. It is a presentation of a proper domestic environment for various eras. Both the period room and still life suggest how we should live and what denotes wealth.

PENDLETON HOUSE

Recognized as the first museum "wing" dedicated to American decorative arts, Pendleton House opened at The RISD Museum in 1906 as a state-of-the-art fireproof facility to display the collection of Charles L. Pendleton (1846–1904). Curators set up its rooms to duplicate the arrangements in Pendleton's Providence home, so the new museum wing had a Victorian-era aesthetic and showed his premier pieces of 18th-century American furniture, ceramics, and metalwork alongside oriental carpets and Old Master paintings with darkened varnish. Today, Pendleton House partially retains the character of this initial presentation, but it exhibits an expanded range of objects that includes 19th-century materials.

Pendleton House does not contain "period rooms" in the sense that curators intend to produce a snapshot of life at a given time and place. Instead, its rooms might highlight furniture associated with a certain place, for example Newport, Rhode Island, or objects grouped around a theme, such as neoclassicism or American trade with China.

Beth Lipman's contemporary glass installation, *After You're Gone,* integrates her impressions of Pendleton House and draws particular inspiration from a specific double chair-back settee on view there. This mahogany settee is an early 20th-century copy of a 19th-century reproduction of an 18th-century chair, so Lipman's glass version extends a nearly 300-year-old tale as told through one ornate rococo design. The background story is that Charles Pendleton purchased a chair of this pattern thinking it was an English original from about 1740 associated with the celebrated carver Grinling Gibbons (1648–1721). Pendleton hired the firm of Morlock and Bayer to create six chairs and the settee to accompany his prize. It is now known that instead of an "antique" chair, Pendleton had mistakenly purchased a 19th-century reproduction of an English design then on view in London's Sir John Soane's Museum.

These layers of history and changing definitions of value enrich the visitor's experience of Pendleton House. The rooms not only provide a glimpse into the domestic lives of past generations and witness our finest craft achievements, but also help to explain the ever-unfolding history of collecting and preservation.

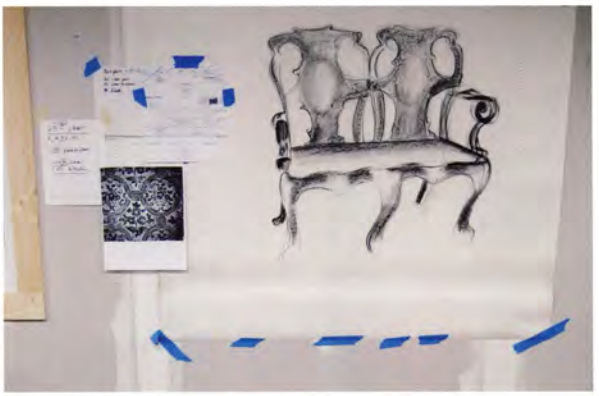
Melissa Buchanan, Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts, The RISD Museum

JT Yes, I agree that the "period room" is a reflection of current decorative-arts practices and is useful as an imperfect educational tool. I would point out that period rooms are often criticized for portraying inaccuracies just as much as they are lauded for having the power to transport a viewer to another place and time in a meaningful way. It is difficult for a curator to install a room without bending to the characteristics of available objects and showing our own contemporary aesthetic taste.

Can you talk a little about your specific inspirations for this project? What in particular struck you or appealed to you about the Museum's Pendleton House, which was the first "wing" for American decorative art in the country?

BL In the case of Pendleton House, it is fascinating to me that Charles Pendleton created very personal spaces that are not necessarily historically "correct" with objects that are not necessarily valuable from a curatorial standpoint. The rooms were created out of desire, obsession, and the compulsion to collect. In the case of the settee that I became so interested in, it is inspired by a reproduction of a reproduction of a settee from a chair that was believed to be crafted by Grinling Gibbons, whom I greatly admire. Pendleton commissioned 16 copies and two settees of this particular chair.

JT Not as valuable *today.* Curators chose to retain some of Pendleton's selections but over the years have added other furniture, paintings, and objects because the Pendleton House installation is in part about the



Settee: drawing by the artist and completed work as installed. Top photo courtesy of the artist

history of collecting and how over time what is valued changes for curators, collectors, and dealers. For instance, Pendleton decorated his own walls with copies of Old Master paintings, which we do not exhibit today in this setting.

BL I was told that from a dec-arts perspective, the settee has very little impact on the field or any monetary or aesthetic worth, yet Pendleton went to great efforts to replicate the chair it was based on.

JT Yes, Melissa Buchanan, our decorative arts curator, said that compared to other furniture in the collection or in that room, it isn't as valuable on the market. A chair made in Providence around 1900 in a revival style may not be precious on the art market, but the story behind this transference of design ideas through time and Pendleton's concern is hugely valuable to us. To clarify, Pendleton thought until his death that he had the greatest 18th-century English chair in this country. It was published as "The Pride of the Pendleton Collection" in 1928 by Wallace Nutting, the famous colonial-revival antiquarian/furniture maker, in his *Furniture Treasury*. Pendleton made copies because he valued that chair above his other furniture.

BL This love affair with material culture, which we continue to perpetuate, is very interesting. In addition, the settee itself is really the embodiment of two people, sitting side by side, which led to my creation for this installation of the two "portraits" who witness the table. Of course, The RISD Museum's wallpaper collection was also hard to ignore. The representation of a bountiful basket of flowers, which signifies abundance and wealth, in a French wallpaper pattern from the 1700s [ca. 1765–75] was too fabulous for me to pass up. The wallpaper in *After You're Gone* is not a literal representation of the original, but a glass mutation. Wallpaper is intriguing because of its reduction of nature to pattern, its blurring outside with inside. In this specific pattern, the representation of nature's bounty within the domestic setting.

JT Why did you choose to use black glass in some parts of the installation?

BL The black-glass portrait frames and wallpaper relate formally to the black table [*Laid Table (Still Life with Metal Pitcher)*] and become silhouette, shadow, or decay. The transition from black to clear in the wallpaper alludes to a memory or ghost image of the pattern before it literally fades away.

JT What kind of research, and how much, did you do in anticipation of creating work for *After You're Gone*?

BL My site visit in October was extremely important. It enabled me to understand the milieu in which the exhibition would be taking place. The RISD Museum offered a plethora of inspirational objects—to select, study, recreate, and use in a new context. I have also been reading books about the domestic and decorative arts, and the history of the Pendleton House. I read the book you gave me about Pendleton House, and also *Household Gods* by Deborah Cohen and *The Artificial Kingdom* by Celeste Olalquiaga, which is about the history of kitsch. Other books that have influenced me recently are *The Craftsman* by Richard Sennett and a host of books on still life, such as *The Body of Raphaelle Peale* by Alexander Nemerov.

Wallpaper, French, ca. 1765–1775. Mary B. Jackson Fund

JT What is the significance of the title?

BL *After You're Gone* alludes to what remains after death. The objects that surround us are what remains after we're gone. They tell the story of who we were and how we lived. We are represented by everything around us.

JT Is there particular symbolism attached to various components of the show—for example, the wallpaper, the portraits, the squirrel, the snails?

BL Each object represents a great many things historically, theologically, economically, and culturally. That is an exciting aspect of the still-life tradition. I know about some of the symbolism; some meanings have been lost over time; some continue to evolve. Specifically, the squirrels represent chaos and mischief. Cracked and melted glass, snails, and puddles represent decay. I spoke about the wallpaper a bit earlier in this interview. The frames with no portraits in them represent us.

JT Do you mean the artist or the viewers?

BL Both. Everyone. The portraits are blank or absent. They could be and are anyone. This is all I can say about them at the moment; it's too soon to comment further.

JT How did you come to work in glass? What are the qualities that attracted you to it and that continue to interest you?

Beth Lipman working with students in the RISD hot shop, March 2008

BL I took a glassblowing class at summer camp when I was 15. The first time I blew glass was really frustrating and difficult. By the end of the third week I had made a small deformed bowl, which for some reason inspired me to continue to work in the material. I majored in glass and fiber at Tyler School of Art, Temple University, in Philadelphia, and it was there that I began solid sculpting, which freed my practice tremendously.

Glass represents mortality. It is strong and fragile, elusive and concrete, fleeting and eternal. It frustrates your ability to visually own what you see, because you are looking through it and seeing things reflected at the same time. I use the process of glassworking in an expressive way, literally capturing a moment in time through my skill with a material that subverts the still-life tradition of mimicry or *trompe l'oeil* and owes a debt to abstract expressionism in some ways.

JT You rarely use color, but instead work with clear glass, black or white. Why?

BL In the case of my work, the addition of color would be decorative and the end result would be kitsch. Colorless glass distills objects to their essence. In the past when I have used black or white, I use it monochromatically, trying to capture a similar ephemeral or elusive quality that is inherent in the clear glass.

JT What has been the biggest challenge for you in preparing for this exhibition—technical or otherwise?

BL The settee has truly been the most challenging aspect of *After You're Gone*. I am not sure it is going to hold up under its own weight and that risk will be taken in public on site during the installation. Why do I work this way?

JT What way?

BL By completing the work on site during the installation, without a dress rehearsal, I expose my creative process. I keep asking myself if spontaneity reveals something interesting. I use the process to explore vulnerability and unattainable aspirations. Will the settee be more interesting if it breaks apart under its own weight? What crutches am I willing to give it to "survive" in a whole state? This tension remains in the work afterwards. I think there is inherent value in sharing the spontaneity of a moment in the creative process. I have few expectations regarding what the actual finished object will look like.

JT Really?

BL Yes. I make choices in the moment as everyone does who practices, but I am open to how the process of making determines the finished object. Whatever happens happens. That's life.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

BETH LIPMAN (American, b. 1971) works with hand-sculpted glass. The artist is best known for clear glass objects and elaborate installations inspired by historical still-life paintings that depict abundance and material wealth. She is also interested in museum presentations of the arts and crafts of previous eras. Lipman pays homage to the Old Masters, their virtuosity and the formal supremacy of their compositions. Simultaneously, she dwells on an artwork's symbolism and meaning within a wider cultural, historical, political, and economic context. Ideas about aging and decay, exuberance and excess, value and material consumption are all embodied in the work.

Lipman attended Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, and received a BFA degree from Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, in 1994. In 1995, she held an apprenticeship at The Fabric Workshop and Museum, also in Philadelphia. She was the education director at UrbanGlass, Brooklyn, New York, from 1996 to 2000, and from 2002 to 2004 she headed the glass department at Worcester Center for Crafts, Worcester, Massachusetts. During 2004/2005, she served as studio manager of education at WheatonArts, Millville, New Jersey. In 2003, Lipman was invited to become an artist-in-residence at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, where she has held the position of arts/industry coordinator since 2005. In 2007, Lipman was commissioned to design the collection *Earthly Pleasures* for Steuben Glass (available Fall 2008).

Beth Lipman currently lives and works in Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, and is represented by Heller Gallery, New York.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Heller Gallery, New York (2001, 2004, 2007); John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin (2003); Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton, Massachusetts (2004); Museum of American Glass, WheatonArts, Millville, New Jersey (2004); Museum of Glass, Tacoma, Washington (2005); and S12 Galleri og Verksted, Bergen, Norway (2007).

SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

Artists in the Market Place 18th Annual Exhibition, Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, New York (1998); *American Glass,* Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, Hempstead, New York (1999); *Glassworks: Emerging Artists,* Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York (2000); *20/20 Vision,* Museum of American Glass, WheatonArts, Millville, New Jersey (2003); *Cheonju International Craft Biennale 05,* Cheonju, South Korea; *The Edges of Grace,* Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton, Massachusetts (2006); *Wisconsin Triennial,* Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison (2007); *From the Ground Up: Renwick Craft Invitational 2007,* Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; *Interiority,* Hyde Park Arts Center, Chicago, Illinois (2007); and *Shattering Glass: New Perspectives,* Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, New York (2007).

SELECTED INSTRUCTOR/ GUEST-ARTIST POSITIONS

Pittsburgh Glass Center, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Studio at Corning, Corning, New York; Penland School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina; Bard Graduate Center for the Decorative Arts, New York, New York; Parsons School of Design, New York, New York; WheatonArts and Cultural Center, Millville, New Jersey; Konstfack University, Stockholm, Sweden; Glasskolan, Orrefors, Sweden; University of Wisconsin, Madison; Glas og Keramikskolen, Bornholm, Denmark; Ox-Bow School of Art, Saugatuck, Michigan; and Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, Colorado.

SELECTED AWARDS AND GRANTS

American-Scandinavian Foundation, Ruth Chenven Foundation, Peter S. Reed Foundation, New Hampshire State Council on the Arts/National Endowment for the Arts, and Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation.

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Museum of American Glass, Wheaton Village, Millville, New Jersey; Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York; Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, New York; Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky; Museum of Glass, Tacoma, Washington; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., as well as numerous private collections.

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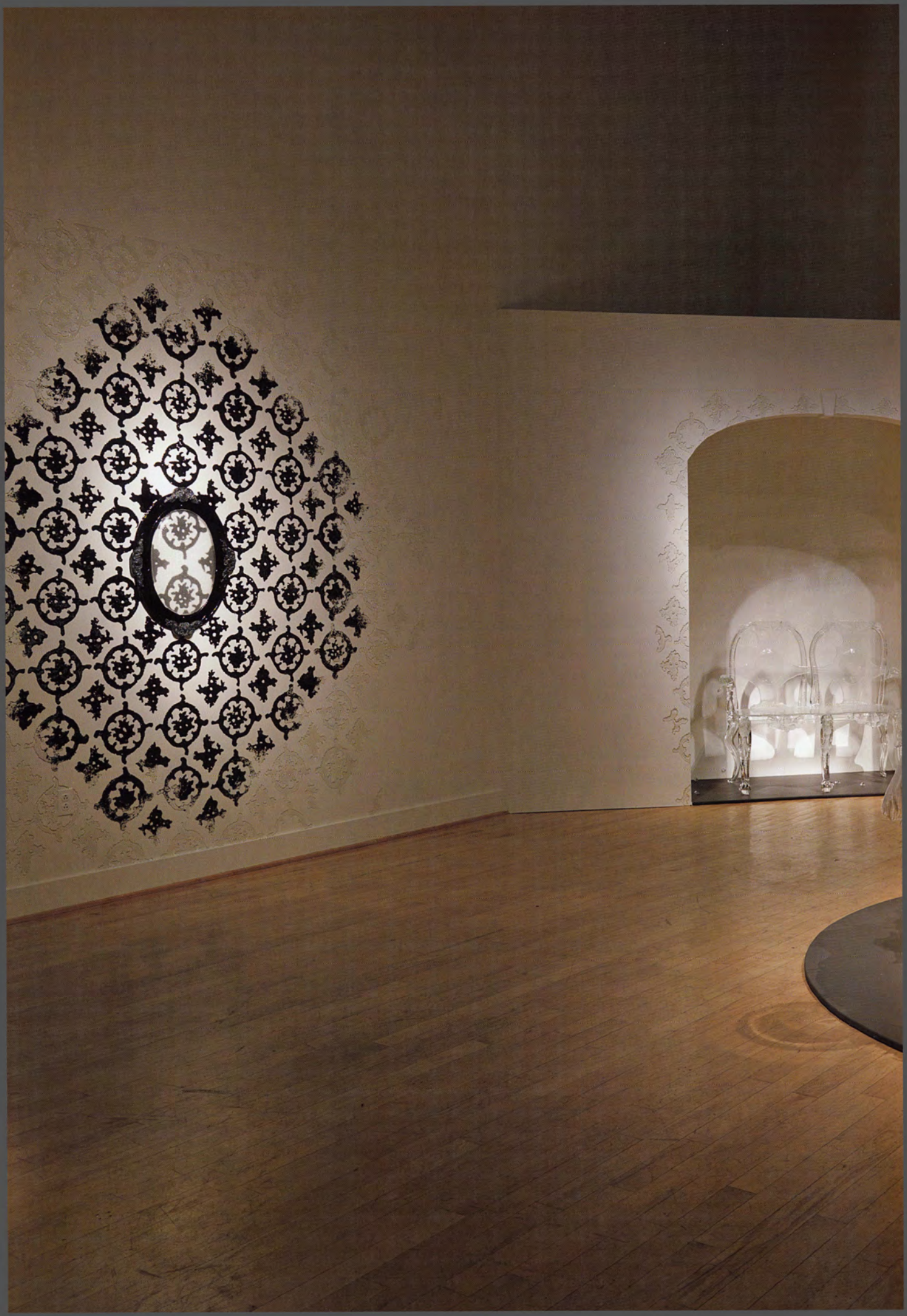

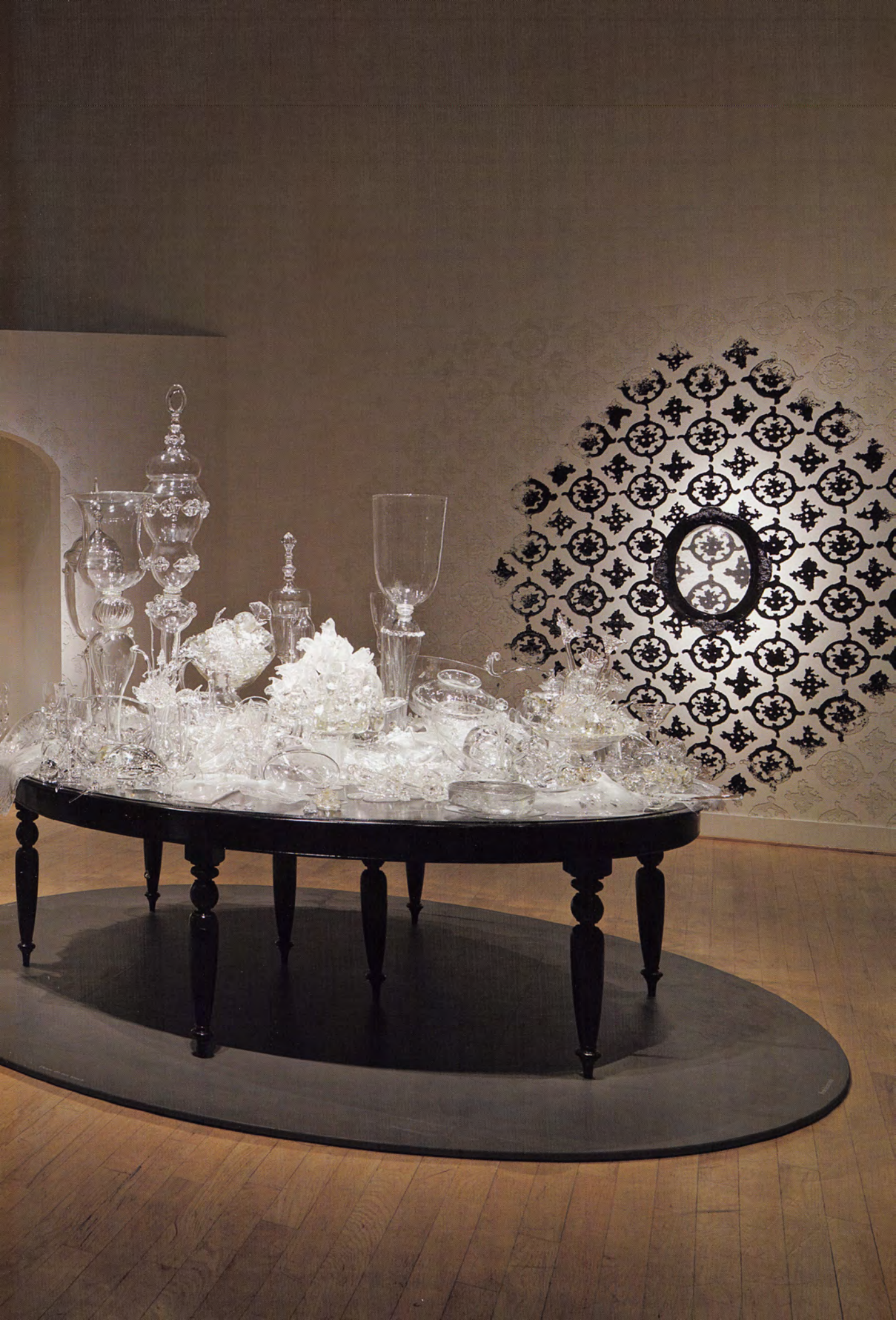

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are given in inches;
height precedes width precedes depth

Mixed Fruit Centerpiece (III), 2008
Blown and sculpted glass; glue. 20 ½ x 10 x 10

Laid Table (Still Life with Metal Pitcher), 2007
Blown, sculpted, kiln-formed, kiln-cast, lampworked glass; glue; paint; wood. 85 x 103 x 96

Wallpaper, 2008
1100 components: kiln-formed glass; glue.
Dimensions variable

Two portraits, 2008
Kiln-formed, kiln-cast glass; glue. 27 ½ x 22 x 2 each

Settee (after Grinling Gibbons), 2008
Blown, sculpted, kiln-formed, kiln-cast, lampworked glass; glue. 43 x 48 x 22

Jumping Squirrel, 2008
Sculpted glass. 18 x 5 x 10

Sitting Squirrel with Acorns, 2008
Sculpted and lampworked glass. 10 x 6 x 6

Snails, 2008
500 pieces: lampworked glass. ¾ x 1 x ½ (approx.) each

All works are on loan from the artist, courtesy of Heller Gallery, New York

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TOP *Sitting Squirrel with Acorns*; BOTTOM Snails, *Jumping Squirrel*
OPPOSITE *Mixed Fruit Centerpiece (III)*