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Joanna Manousis:
REFLECTED

BY SUSIE J. SILBERT

1
Demeter's Rose, crystal, steel,
stainless steel, 58 x 58 x 4"

2
Demeter's Rose (detail),
crystal, steel, stainless steel,
58 x 58 x 4"

3
Distilled Portrait I, crystal,
mirror, stainless steel,
taxidermy magpie, 15 x 6 x 6"



Sparkling and brilliant, Joanna Manousis' *The Dominant Sophia* is the kind of work that beckons from across the room. Inset into the wall like gemstones into a brooch, its 25 crystal components draw viewers in with their shimmering, gold-filled complexity. Immediately alluring, the piece is also perplexing, asking viewers to construct meaning out of seemingly disparate components. Are those braided sheaves of wheat within the glass? How do they relate to the form, whose radial configuration quotes so directly from stained glass church windows? These questions—questions of authenticity and identification, filtered through reflection and reflectivity—are at the heart of Manousis' artwork.

Raised in the United Kingdom, Manousis split her undergraduate education between two schools known for their glass programs: University of Wolverhampton in the West

Midlands region of England, where she received her undergraduate degree, and Alfred University in upstate New York, where she spent her junior year and earned her MFA. Today, she lives in Columbus, Ohio, where she and her husband, Zac Weinberg, both teach in the glass department at Ohio State University. But despite this material focus, Manousis came to glass indirectly, after an initial course of study in conceptual art led her to reevaluate her identification as a painter.

"I had gotten stuck in a rut," she explains, "...and I knew I wanted to continue with something in the art field, but [I thought] maybe I should take a step back. I've always painted and drawn—why not do something completely different?"

At first, glass was appealing because of its difficulty, what Manousis describes as the allure of "elusive mastery," but soon it was the visual language of the material that





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captured her imagination. Glass' optics and reflections, and its ability to convincingly portray a host of other materials, have served as the building blocks for ideas that traipse through myth and narrative, art history and self-perception. And though there are some through-threads in her work—mirrors are common throughout Manousis' pieces—she prefers to allow her concept to dictate form and technique.

She traces this expansive practice to her British education, a course of study "where design is really embraced, and refinement of ideas is key...Throughout a semester, you'll be given an assignment, and you refine and refine...and at the end of it all, if you can't blow glass, there's a technician on hand to make it for you." At Alfred, by contrast, the emphasis was on producing, and she found she had to adapt the simple techniques she knew to make the complicated pieces she imagined. Whatever the initial struggle, today she has developed a technical range to match her conceptual depth.

Working in a Trompe l'Oeil tradition, Manousis creates pieces that layer glass, found objects and other materials into visual puns that challenge the viewer to differentiate between what they see and what they know to be true. For instance, in her riff on Dutch and Flemish still life paintings, *Inverted Vanitas*,



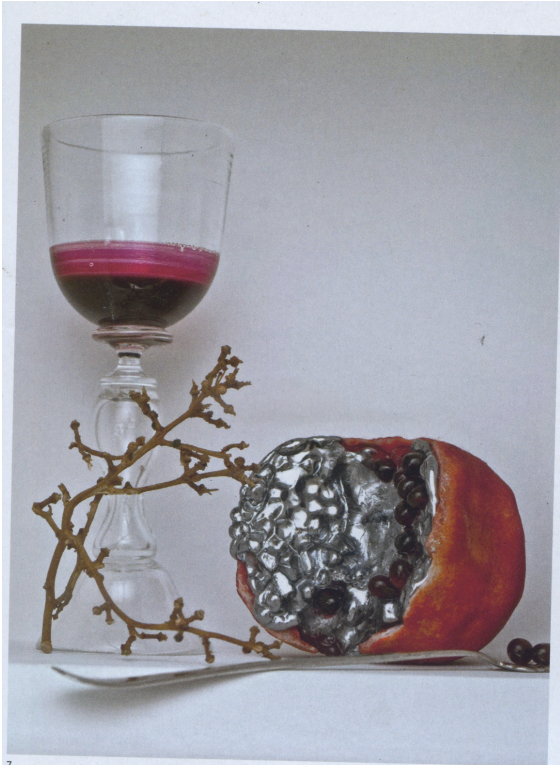
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Manousis advances the program of her 16th- and 17th-century predecessors by employing three-dimensional objects to spur reflection on the perils of excess. Inset in the wall and surrounded by a cast glass frame, she has arranged a tableau containing a partially full wine glass, a grape stalk plucked clean, a half-eaten pomegranate and a silver fork prepped with the next bite. Half are constructed of glass, half are not.

Confronted by the smell of the wine and the delicacy

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The Dominant Sophia,
crystal, mirror, stainless
steel, 47 x 47 x 4"

5
The Dominant Sophia
and *Distilled Portrait*
on view at Agnes Varis Arts
Centre.



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of the fruit, the viewer stumbles, searching their senses in order to determine the veracity of what they see before them. In this moment of doubt, Manousis has gotten to the heart of vanitas: life is fleeting, and knowledge is incomplete. As if to emphasize the point, the mirrored membrane of the pomegranate—so realistic in every other way—locates the viewer, through reflection, into the heart of the action as if to say, “This lesson applies to you.”

Despite its heavy subject matter, there is a central element of play to *vanitas*, one which is elaborated in *Reaching an Ulterior Realm*. A series of mirror-ized blown glass balloons, perfect copies of inflated mylar, are mounted at irregular heights along a wall. Surrounding them, bronze arrows stick out at rakish angles as if they have just left the archer’s bow. All but one have missed their targets. Dangling from this “lucky” arrow droops a shriveled and deflated balloon, the value of its prize called into question.

With the simplicity of its arrangement and the accessibility of its subject matter, the viewer instantly apprehends *Reaching an Ulterior Realm*, but its concept continues to unfurl long after the piece is out of sight, calling to mind disparate sources from Artemis and Orion to carnival games and William Tell. As in *Inverted Vanitas*, the mirrored surfaces of the balloons, whose slight concavity acts as a fisheye lens condensing a wide panorama, signal the viewer’s own vulnerability in the face of another’s intention. Sometimes you are aiming at the balloon, sometimes

the balloon is you.

More than simply a method to implicate the viewer within the work, Manousis’ use of reflection is part of an investigation into the process of self-fashioning. This self-recognition is particularly pronounced in works like *Distilled Portrait*, with its taxidermy magpie staring at its bottled reflection (magpies are the only birds known to recognize their visage), and it is also the motivation behind her most recent works, *The Dominant Sophia* and *Demeter’s Rose*. Adopting the form of a cathedral’s rose window, but replacing the passive transmission of light with an optic reflectivity, in these pieces Manousis emphasizes the universality and interconnection between all people. Reflected collectively within arcing webs of wheat, we are each individual kernels and a unified totality whose power is derived not from an unseen force above, but rather through the collective refraction of a gilded light within.

Currently, Manousis is at work on another rose window, a prismatic piece based on stardust from the dawn of the universe, to be shown with Wexler Gallery at *SOFA Chicago* show this fall. ●

Susie J. Silbert is a curator and writer with a background in craft and design. Based in Brooklyn, New York, she has worked on projects in Houston and North Carolina, and is a lecturer at the Rhode Island School of Design. She lectures and writes frequently on the history of craft.



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Reaching an Ulterior Realm, glass, mirror, bronze, x3 16 x 16 x 8" (approx.)

7
Pomegranate (Inverted Vanitas), glass, neon, mirror, mixed media, 23 x 25 x 3"

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Fertile Ground II (detail), steel, acrylic, taxidermy peacock, glass, 106 x 60 x 60"