

The collaborative career of Ben Edols and Kathy Elliott featured in museum exhibition in Japan



[Benjamin Edols and Kathy Elliott](#) have been creating polished, largely opaque, and intensely colored glass forms over a 24-year collaborative career. The full range of this prolific partnership is currently on view at the [Toyama Glass Art Museum](#). Entitled "[Light Marks.](#)" and on exhibit through September 25, 2016, the show marks the first time their modestly-scaled, buoyant works have been shown in a full career retrospective. In addition to the 46 works that span the pair's history, four previously unseen examples from their latest "[Deluge](#)" series of more-transparent, meticulously carved vessels, are also included in this extensive exhibition.



The Australian duo are unusual in their set division of labor: Edols blows the glass while Elliott typically does the cold work. The products of this hot- and coldworking partnership are notable for their elegant forms and highly refined finishes, living up to the standards of formal excellence set by the influential German-born glass artist, [Klaus Moje](#), who founded the glass program at the [Canberra School of Art](#) in 1982 (where Edols and Elliott first met) and who made an indelible imprint on Australian glass. Unlike Moje, though, Edols and Elliott's forms are notable for chromatic restraint, part of an overall sense of calm poise that flows through the simple, organically-inspired abstract works. Haruka Nakashima, curator at the Toyama Glass Art Museum, sees their “gentle, familiar contemplation of nature” coming through their work, saying in an essay on the exhibit that “the enjoyment of the abundance of nature in everyday life and the joy of living together with nature is evident.” In an email exchange with the *GLASS Quarterly Hot Sheet*, Edols said “I think as artists it’s your main ‘brief’ to reflect back your environment... If something of the tones of colour, the shape of leaves, just the huge scale of the Australian bush can be translated through our work, then we’ve done a great job.”



Edols and Elliott met in 1991 while studying glass at the Canberra School of Art — which has since been subsumed into the art school of [Australian National University](#). They began collaborating the next year. Soon after, the two left Australia to travel for many years, spending most of their time in the U.S. (Disclosure: During this period, they often worked out of [UrbanGlass](#).) In 1993, they were approached by jewelry designer and trendsetting decorative art-store owner, [Federico de Vera](#) (then of San Francisco), who offered them their first solo exhibition. Elliott credits this opportunity for “[making] us scale up the work and take it more seriously.” But they still didn’t see this collaboration as the defining career force it was borne out to be. “When we had our first solo exhibition in 1993 at [deVera](#) I think we were pretty happy to think we could work together and make a living, but I don’t think we ever thought it would last such a long time.”

This artistic partnership was never set in stone; it had to be repeatedly renewed through the hard-won process of forging common goals out of competing ideas. Edols said that, “There have been various moments when I’m sure one or other of us have thought they would like to be making work totally independently from each other! But I think when we are both at our ‘best,’ the work we make together is much stronger than we could ever produce separately. I clearly remember in some early days when I was a ‘fellow’ at the [Creative Glass Center of America](#) [at WheatonArts in Millville, New Jersey] and Kathy was in Brooklyn that I saw the value in the collaboration. Kathy commissioned someone else in NYC around that time to make some pieces for her to cold work, and I didn’t like it!” Elliott reiterated this unforced attitude towards their artistic union. “I don’t ever take it for granted. We’re only human; we live together, raise children together, and make one body of work.”



The duo's process reflects this: Elliott said they trade off the role of director. As she puts it, "whoever has a strong vision 'drives the train'... If I have an idea, I draw what I want and the idea evolves." Though the finished works exude an effortless style, their projects are wrought through a lengthy phase of iteration. "The blown form becomes a 3-D sketch. Sometimes the prototypes are really interesting but have too much flavour, too much happening. Then further ideas come through that. We talk about the outcomes of the prototypes, we lobby for what we see as the strengths. Sometimes our ideas align but they often don't, so we edit. As painful as that is, it's probably a strength for the work."

This exacting process is justified by the perfectionist level of execution in their works. But recently, Edols and Elliott have moved beyond the sole concerns of form and execution. They made a significant break with their previous body of work after being deeply impacted by the closure of their studio in 2014. Elliott began to dream of "crashing waves and huge bodies of water," and was motivated to "represent that through the carving." She found a precedent for her aquatic inspiration in the works of the early 19th-century Japanese artist [Katsushika Hokusai](#). These conceptually driven works, which make up the 'Deluge' series, are the pair's first to deal in symbolic imagery – an "analogy for sweeping change," as Edols sees it. "A tidal wave or Tsunami smashing in and sweeping clear for life's changes that we all have to face, for us it was [the] closing of a studio... I previously would have defined myself and Kathy strictly as decorative artists or craftspeople... but to have the work driven largely by the desire to express an emotion or idea is pretty much new territory."



Both artists expressed satisfaction with the show, and an affinity for the museum. The Toyama Glass Art Museum is located in a state-of-the-art building that just opened in August 2015. On top of a [permanent collection](#) of Chi-

huly installations that are displayed in their “Glass Art Garden,” the museum showcases rotating exhibitions of contemporary glass art collected by Toyama City over the past 30 years. Toyama is known as the “City of Glass Art,” and is a haven for lovers of the medium. Elliott considers herself, “a big fan of Toyama.” She says, “it’s a hidden treasure. Throughout the city they have displays of glass... beautiful pieces by international artists on display. For people who are interested in glass, it’s a delight.”

IF YOU GO:

Benjamin Edols and Kathy Elliott

“Light Marks”

July 15 – September 25, 2016

Toyama Glass Art Museum

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[*Website*](#)