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# A THREAD OF LIGHT

BY PAUL HARPER



Open Eye by Collin Reid



**FROM THE 30TH APRIL THE MUSEUM IN THE PARK WILL BE HOSTING A THREAD OF LIGHT, AN EXHIBITION THAT BRINGS TOGETHER THE WORK OF NINE LEADING BRITISH GLASS ARTISTS, JOINED BY TWO ESTABLISHED INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS. THEIR WORK CAN BE FOUND IN THE COLLECTIONS OF OVER 75 IMPORTANT MUSEUMS WORLDWIDE. A THREAD OF LIGHT WILL BE AN OPPORTUNITY TO SEE A DIVERSE RANGE OF PRACTICES BY AN OUTSTANDING GROUP OF ARTISTS WORKING IN THIS DISTINCTIVE MEDIUM. GLASS, CAST, GROUND AND POLISHED IN COMPLEX PROCESSES, HAS A BEGUILING DEPTH THAT DRAWS THE EYE INTO THE INTERIOR OF THE OBJECT. IT REFLECTS AND REFRACTS LIGHT SO THAT THE SCULPTURE SEEMS TO RESIST A STRAIGHTFORWARD READING – CHANGING AS THE LIGHT SHIFTS, OR AS THE VIEWER MOVES AROUND THE PIECE. GRADATIONS OF LIGHT AND SHADOW ANIMATE THE WORK, WHICH FLUCTUATES BETWEEN A SENSE OF OPACITY AND TRANSPARENCY, SOLIDITY AND INDETERMINATE FLUIDITY.**

It may not be immediately obvious why a major exhibition of world-class glassmakers, originally curated for the Liuli Museum Taipei, before travelling to the Liuli China Museum in Shanghai, should choose Stroud and the Museum in the Park for its next outing. As Andrew Brewerton, who has written a beautiful catalogue essay for the show, notes, "That which is significant internationally always has its home address in some locality". In this case, five of the featured artists, Colin Reid, Sally Fawkes, Richard Jackson, Karen Browning and Fiaz Elson are all based in and around Stroud. The connecting figure in this group of artists is Colin Reid, who established his kiln cast glass studio here in 1984. Colin is celebrated here, not only as an extraordinary artist in his own right, but as a mentor and inspiration to a generation of makers, most of whom worked with him as studio assistants at different times. The thread that connects these artists through Colin leads on, to include Keith Cummings, who was one of the pioneers of kiln-formed glass in the UK and who taught Colin in the 1970's. The presence of Loretta Yang and Chang Yi in the exhibition marks the international scope of the medium and the sense of fellowship between these artists.

The concentration of such renowned glass-artists, working independently in a small Gloucestershire town, may be unusual, but it seems quite in keeping with the wider cultural history of this place. The Stroud Valleys have a long history of attracting and sustaining artists and craftspeople. Creative work is deeply embedded in the town's history, and continues to be a defining characteristic of its contemporary identity. This is partly explained by transport links and the many useful workspaces that are a legacy of its industrial heritage, but the critical mass of artists, musicians, filmmakers and writers seems to be generative. It becomes a self-fulfilling reputation.

There is an ongoing chain of cause and effect that can be traced back to include the Arts and Crafts collective that gathered around Ernest Gimson near Sapperton in the early Twentieth Century, and later by The Pangolin Foundry at Chalford. Its founders came to Gloucestershire as young graduates to work as the sculptor Lynn Chadwick's assistants. When they set up the foundry in 1985, they were greatly supported by their on-going relationship with Chadwick. Pangolin is now one of a small cluster of art related industries in Stroud employing a significant number of arts graduates who, sustained by income generating employment and highly skilled in specialist areas of art production, go on to make their own contributions to the conviviality of Stroud life. In drawing these talented glass artists to work with him, Colin Reid has played a part in a

distinguished tradition.

In 1938 Gloucester Guildhall hosted a major exhibition titled Realism and Surrealism; several phases of contemporary art. The exhibition was opened by Herbert Reed, who also contributed a catalogue essay, and featured works by most of the key figures in the Surrealist movement as well as artists who might be described as fellow travellers, including Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Paul Nash and Ben Nicholson. Much of the work was being seen in the UK for the first time. Following its showing at Gloucester it went on to Toronto, Canada. On the face of it, this was also a surprising location for such a prestigious exhibition.

Realism and Surrealism was a collaboration between London-based galleries and, crucially, a local Exhibition Committee that included Sir William Rothenstein, artist and ex-Principal of the Royal College of Art who lived at Far Oakridge, and art collector Hugh Willoughby. It was a reflection of the cultural richness of the area at that time – an interested audience that included collectors, artists and public intellectuals of the day.

Seen in this context, A Thread of Light can be seen as part of a continuum of art making and

presentation that has a long history.

Just as Stroud may seem to be an unlikely location, the Museum in the Park is not an internationally significant gallery. It is nevertheless a natural host for this exhibition – a beautiful space that has played its own role in nurturing the arts, demonstrated in the value that they place on nurturing an audience and on building working relationships with local artists. Sally Fawkes, one of the participating artists says, "I feel very fortunate to live and work in Stroud, it is such a vibrant and creative environment and I consider it a privilege to be able to show my work to a local audience. For many of us in the exhibition, Stroud was the real starting point of our careers as professional artists and so bringing A Thread of Light to the Museum in the Park is a sort of homecoming!" Regardless of local connections, these artists have established their reputations in the wider world and this exhibition presents a rare opportunity to encounter their work away from cosmopolitan centres and close to the place of its making.

Stroud has long been associated with textiles, particularly the scarlet broadcloth that was produced in the many mills that line the five valleys, and which can be seen in a vivid painting in the museum, strung out across the hillsides to dry. The specific association lends itself to the metaphor of a thread that runs through the valleys. To extend this metaphor, there are numerous strands of creative practice that are woven into the fabric of this place, and brilliant amongst these is the thread of light that seems to have its source in Colin Reid's workshop in the Slad Valley.

A Thread Of Light: Three Generations of Kiln Cast Glass Artists opens on Saturday 30th April with a Private View (4-6pm) and runs until Sunday 12th June. For further information visit [museuminthepark.org.uk](http://museuminthepark.org.uk)

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Cobalt Lozenge Agate Geode by Angela Jarman, Photo: Sylvain-Delieu