



The exterior of the S12 studio.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Stine Bidstrup's work *Let Your Eyes* from the "Young and Loving" exhibition in 2012; Hitoshi Kuriyama's 2013 installation *Inflation*; Maria Bang Espersen's work *Gently*; In *Familiar Structures* (2015), artist Maria Koshenkova collaborated with Richard Deutsch to create an interactive sound environment that incorporated everyday objects rendered in glass.

Northern Outpost

Only a decade old, **Norway's S12 Studio and Gallery** has become a global leader in fostering notable cross-disciplinary work from a new generation of artists using glass.

BY JUSTIN GINSBERG

Public-access glass studios can be found all over the world, each with its own distinct vision and organizational structure. Some are privately owned, others are nonprofits, but most, understandably, have an entrepreneurial side. While artist residencies and community outreach are often the focus, income-producing activities inevitably become a priority as a way to keep the furnaces lit. Despite these studios' divergent offerings, priorities, and missions, fund-raising activities and profitable education programs often take on an outsized role.

Yet there is a place where such economic considerations are kept at bay. Tucked away in the maze of streets and alleyways in Bergen, Norway, the studio and gallery S12 celebrated its 10th anniversary in May. Many things make this ambitious, artist-run gallery and workshop stand out, in particular its dedication to interdisciplinary projects, and yet it is perhaps most unique for its unwavering focus on supporting art-making opportunities. Conceived of and founded by artists Æsa Björk and Herdis Torsvik in 2007, the privately owned organization was soon joined by Ingrid Nord and Linn Kalseth. The new organization quickly developed a reputation for supporting international

artists who take experimental, conceptual, and innovative approaches to working with glass.

During its first four years of operation, S12 was funded largely out of pocket. While it received support from the city of Bergen and the Norwegian Arts Council for equipment and specific projects, its operational costs quickly began to mount. It wasn't until 2011, when S12 received a breakthrough grant from the Norwegian Arts Council, that the bruising financial pressure lifted. That grant, along with the lifeline offered by the building's owners, who charged a reduced rate during the financially perilous early years, allowed S12 to survive and keep its mission intact.

Many glass studios and galleries sacrifice some of their initial vision in response to pressures to find ways to generate money. However, S12 was conceived in a unique country. Funded by national and local arts grants, as well as the income generated by government-contracted educational projects, the organization has been able to position itself at the frontier of pure authenticity. The funding it has received for the past 10 years, as well as countless hours of help from dedicated volunteers, has allowed the organization to focus on identifying artists who have a new



Detail of Javier Pérez's 2011 work *Carraña (Carrion)*, which was displayed as part of his 2013 exhibition at S12.

approach to the material of glass—freeing them to explore, experiment, and innovate—as well as bringing contemporary art to the general public.

You will not find any glass-pumpkin sales or fancy gala nights at S12. You will not find customers waiting in line with a Groupon for a workshop to make paperweights and glass flowers, or a gallery stocked with tchotchkes. S12 has avoided making production items for the tourists who come to see the fjords, eat unfathomable amounts of salmon, and purchase local wares. Instead you will find a humble group of passionate individuals who all contribute to the studio's ethos.

Here are the key players:

Æsa Björk, now the artistic advisor of S12, is an interdisciplinary artist. She graduated with a master's from Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland, studied at the Academy of Arts of Architecture and Design in Prague with Vladimír Kopecký, and taught at Alfred University in New York for three years.

Bergljót Jónsdóttir, S12's managing director, has more than 40 years of experience in cultural management. She was the first director of Nordic Culture Point in Helsinki, Finland, as well as director of the Bergen International Festival, the largest arts festival in Norway. With a diploma in European cultural management and a master's in music and music education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, she has worked throughout her career to promote culture and the arts in regional, national, and international contexts.

Anett Haukås is a coordinator at S12, with a master's in art history and a bachelor's in visual arts and culture from the University of Bergen. She assists with managing the gallery as

well as with writing proposals, grants, and funding requests.

Maria Frantzen is the educational officer. She has worked in glass since 1996 and has a master's degree from Edinburgh College of Art. Charlotte Lemaire is currently the workshop manager, which is a rotating position.

Though the use of glass for fine art arguably began more than a century ago, many overlook outstanding examples from the 20th and 21st centuries and continue to label artists who use glass as "glass artists." It always surprises me when astute art connoisseurs, historians, and even the "glass world" continue to separate the terms *artist* and *glass artist*. One barely needs to do any digging to recognize that, from Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915) to works by Robert Smithson, Maya Lin, Anselm Kiefer, Raimund Kummer, and Josiah McElheny, glass is indeed a material that can be used to express profound emotional or theoretical ideas. Yet glass in fine art is often overlooked, shadowed by its historical relationship to craft and function.

This is not to say that producing something that is well made, functional, and/or decorative is any less important. It's not an argument of hierarchy. Rather, S12 has stubbornly and vigorously committed to a vision of identity, supporting artists whose work is expressive, experimental, conceptual, innovative, and thoughtful—and beyond technical prowess, beauty, and function. It subverts the mentality that is focused on glass as a craft medium.

In its first decade of existence, S12 has promoted, sponsored, and supported 64 exhibitions featuring nearly 270 artists. Sixty emerging artists have been showcased on an international stage through its annual "Young and Loving" exhibition.

Though we live in age in which more equals better, and quantity sometimes surpasses quality, what is unique at S12 is its vast quantity and quality. Its exhibitions are not just about filling the space—or filling the residency—but carefully and masterfully orchestrating these opportunities to show its commitment to a boundary-smashing vision.

In 2011, S12 launched an artist-in-residence program that has since hosted 42 international artists who work both within and outside the glass field. These artists in residence have varied skill levels and familiarity with glass. Some have specific project concepts, and others approach the opportunity with a drive to challenge, experiment, play, and engage. Often multiple artists are hosted at the same time or overlapping, nurturing the potential for collaboration, although this is not a requirement. Artists are provided with housing, access to the studio, assistants, and in many cases an exhibition at the end of their stay. S12's unique situation, as a studio that maintains and runs a gallery, allows artists to think about the exhibition space during the development of their work while also giving the public a chance to see how expressive glass can be, even if at times the work is not immediately understood.

When asked about the memorable artists S12 has hosted, Björk and Jónsdóttir independently listed nearly every artist in the

studio's history. However, some were particularly noteworthy for their cross-disciplinary and conceptually driven work. Maria Bang Espersen (Denmark) and Max Syron (U.S.) came as individual artists in residence, but pursued several collaborative projects that combined object-making and performance. Maria Koshenkova (Russia) was also a standout. With her tireless energy and spontaneous nature, she used materials she had scavenged from a building that was being torn down in the city. Pieces of wood, with the stratified residue of generations of paint and wallpaper, became a study of history that can only be revealed through an act of destruction. Maria collaborated with sound artist Richard Deutsch (U.S.) for an exhibition titled "Familiar Structures." Tinna Thorsteinsdóttir (Iceland) is a musician and sound artist who completed a residency in 2015 and has since collaborated not only with Æsa Björk, but with John Drury (U.S.) and Robbie Miller (Canada) of the duo CUD, and, most recently, the American

artist Alli Hoag in a series of performances at the Chrysler Museum of Art in Richmond, Virginia, and at UrbanGlass in Brooklyn this year. Whether it's Hitoshi Kuriyama's exquisite installation using fluorescent light bulbs, created at and for S12, or the interactive, spontaneous, and impromptu community-takeover approach of CUD, which still permeates the city, S12 hosts the thoughtful, the intellectual, and the profound.

Looking at the history of S12's residency program is like going through a directory of who's who—or, more accurately, who's next—in the field. Its roster is unmatched. The program recently teamed up with Pilchuck Glass School to give the top-ranked Pilchuck scholarship applicant a residency and exhibition opportunity at S12. Americans Mike Simi, Jonathan Rafael, Julia Chamberlain, and most recently Kate Clements, reflect the next generation's interest in becoming instigators for cross-disciplinary progress and development. None of them



TOP Anna Mlasowsky's work *Tension* was featured in S12's annual "Young and Loving" exhibition.

BOTTOM Hiromi Takizawa, *Space in Between*, 2009. Magnifying glass, metal, wood, neon. COURTESY: S12





ABOVE **Baptiste Debombourg**, *Raging Dreams*, 2017. Site-specific installation at S12. Dimensions variable.



LEFT An exterior shot of the S12 gallery.

consider glass their only medium. S12 attracts some of the best candidates through its reputation, competitive application pool, outreach, and research, but the collaboration with Pilchuck further establishes S12 as a leader in the field.

Beyond its artist-in-residence program, S12 hosts a number of exhibitions. It has sponsored solo exhibitions for established artists, such as Cuban artist Yoel Díaz Vázquez in 2009, Spanish artist Javier Pérez in 2013, and French artist Baptiste Debombourg in 2017, as well as a handful of group exhibitions. But one of S12's favorite, longest-running projects is the "Young and Loving" exhibition, which presents six emerging artists each year.

When reviewing the 10-year history of the selected participants, it would seem that this director/art advisor duo have a gift for spotting talent early in an artist's blossoming career. This project has been one of the staples of the organization from its

conception. They select 60 artists through referrals, scouring university web pages, this magazine, *New Glass Review*, and other sources. But what a challenge! Young artists are easily exposed to glass while also getting a rich and diverse education in art history, contemporary art, and studio practices. And they seem interested in looking at the material differently than in other time periods. This outlook, combined with the development of new technologies, has instigated a whirlwind of development, innovation, and profundity that, in part, is nurtured through S12.

A quick survey of these artists—Stine Bidstrup (Denmark), Hiromi Takizawa (Japan), Liesl Schubel (U.S.), Madisyn Zabel (Australia), and Riikka Haapasaari (Finland)—is extraordinary. And often when one compares the date of the exhibition and the artist's career now, it is obvious that S12 has gift for spotting talent early and supporting it. In 2010, Anna Mlasowsky was one such artist. Since

being featured in "Young and Loving," she has won the U.K. Glass Prize and the Coburg Glass Prize, and was the youngest artist to receive a specialty residency at The Corning Museum of Glass. More significantly, she continues to flourish in the art world. She recently completed a residency at the Vermont Studio Center, received an Artist Trust Fellowship from Washington State, and was selected for a Sculpture Space residency in New York State for 2018.

Another example is Rui Sasaki, who exhibited in the "Young and Loving" exhibition in 2013 and two years later was accepted for the residency program, which helped catapult her, seemingly instantaneously, to the top of the field. Sasaki has been awarded—deep breath—the Irvin Borowsky International Prize in Glass Art in 2016; first place in the Jutta Cuny-Franz Memorial Award from the Jutta Cuny-Franz Foundation in Dusseldorf, Germany in 2016; the International Glass Prize 2016; and recently walked away with the top award in the "Young Glass" exhibition in Edinburgh, to name just a few.

Almost all of the artists exhibited are now leaders in the field, or on their way, and all are artists who continue to push the boundaries of the material. If future contemporary galleries and museums want to have their finger on the pulse of the new generation of emerging artists, they need only look as far as S12 and its masterful curatorial approach. These individuals will be the names that pop up for the world's top awards, residencies, and exhibitions.

S12 has taken the toughest road possible, and it is paying off. Yet it is important to note that they are by no means coasting on easy street. They work to operate not one, but two entities: a gallery that shows temporary, site-specific, experimental installations and a studio with a hot shop, a cold shop, and a shop for casting, fusing, and mold-making.

S12 offers a utopian vision that many dream of. It is a fantastic place where artists can experiment, create, and exhibit within the walls of a single location, with no pressure to commodify their efforts. With a studio in which you can try nearly anything and a space that welcomes the wild, the astounding, and the profound, S12 is indeed a very special place.

So what does the future hold?

It is uncertain. While that statement may seem negative or suggest big changes in the future, the reality is that S12 fights and struggles and works every day to sustain its funding without having to embrace a more commercial way of thinking. Its dedicated team sends proposals for grants and funding out monthly to ensure the continuation of this important organization within the field. Its success each year is unknown because the money is not guaranteed. Besides its reliance on government funding, which is always subject to change, gentrification is hitting the city of Bergen. Real estate investors and an uncomfortable number of hipsters are investing in culturally diverse neighborhoods, and building prices are on the rise. Everywhere people seem more interested in making money than supporting culture, particularly the arts, and particularly when you are doing something which is not the usual or expected approach.

But Norway and the city of Bergen do seem to have a soft spot for supporting community cultural endeavors. And there are a few building owners who will agree to subsidize artists instead of seeking profit. USF, a world-renowned residency program in Bergen, exists because the owner of its building, formerly a massive sardine factory, allows artists to stay even though its exquisite waterfront site is worth an ungodly amount of money.

So *Æsa Björk*, *Bergljót Jónsdóttir*, and their dedicated team remain hopeful. Their tenacity and passion suggest that they will find a way to contribute to the progress of glass as a contemporary medium. Their outsized impact, in just a brief decade's time—combined with their stubborn propensity to remain steadfast to their vision—is certainly an inspiration and a sign of hope for aspiring artists in difficult times. ■

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Javier Pérez's *Máscara de seducción II* was exhibited as part of a solo exhibition at S12 in 2013.

