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Jennifer Opie:
The Explorer

Finland's Markku Salo switches freely between glass techniques in his restless journey of constant reinvention and breathtaking discovery.

Born in 1955 [1954], Markku Salo is among the most interesting and inventive glass artist – designers to have emerged from Finland in the last 30 years. Hailed as a rising star in the late 1980s, he has remained at the forefront of experimental, glass-based installation art in Europe ever since.

Though his work was recently the subject of a major solo retrospective show at the Finnish Glass Museum entitled “Cries and Whispers” (May 9 – September 7, 2008), Salo may still need some introduction in the United States where even though his work is in the collections of the Corning Museum of Glass and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, he has had limited exposure outside of SOFA and the occasional group exhibition. The earliest of these was a 1985 show entitled “The Modern Spirit”, which traveled in the U.S., Canada, and Germany (See GLASS 49, Fall 1992, p. 42).

Like many creative Scandinavians, Salo practices in several disciplines at his studio in his native Finland. He began his career as a trained electrical product and graphics designer. His first experience of glass came when he took up full-time employment at Nuutajärvi glassworks (now Iittala Group) in 1983. In 1991 he went independent, establishing his own design company for the production of tableware and limited series of small art objects, leaving him with some financial cushioning to experiment with the unique artworks on which his international reputation rests.

To understand the training and experiences that form Salo's background is to only get halfway to the true reference points of his work, let alone to a full appreciation of his often extraordinary vision. Though we will not investigate it fully in these pages, Salo's design background is inseparable from his art, and this close relationship should not be forgotten. He is not an easy interviewee; there is no “artist's statement”, nor any discussion of interpretation leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions. He has, in the past, wagged an admonishing finger at this author for spotting a connection (and, in his opinion, getting it wrong). He has said, repeatedly, that he doesn't think about ideas until he sees the proposed space or has in mind a technique he hasn't previously tried. However, there are connections, and they provide stepping stones, however slippery, through the Salo landscape.

Throughout his career Salo has been interested in utilizing motor-driven movement. He has considerable welding and motor mechanical expertise, adequate to keep his 1963 Fordson Major tractor running. He is a keen sailor and keeps a boat in the Finnish archipelago in the Baltic Sea. He is a talented craftsman with boat, house building, and repairing skills (his 19th-century log home is a massive 60 feet in length); he is fully licensed hunter and woodsman. He has a sharp eye for history, especially, since childhood, that of ancient Egypt; he likes music and dogs.

Like many artists bringing multiple techniques and materials to his work, he does not, for instance, blow his own glass, but he has mastered some hot-working skills as well as pâte de verre. He does his own metalworking, and he may yet study professional stone carving.

Although he recognizes no hierarchy between the materials he uses, he is primarily an artist known for working in glass with a rich, cornucopia-like imagination. It is difficult to place him among his contemporaries internationally, but for American audiences, his magpie tendencies might bring up comparisons to Richard Marquis.

In 1987 two key events alerted Finland, and those fortunate to have been in the country at the right moment, to the arrival of a major force. Salo's first solo exhibition took place at Helsinki's Gallery Bronda that year, and was titled "The Dreams of the Pilot: Variations in Glass". It was made up of assemblages of colorful "lighthouses" and standing vessels.

Unlike Iittala itself, the much-older Nuutajärvi glassworks was always enthusiastic about color and the techniques arising from it, such as filigrano. Salo still makes the most of this. But the most significant element then was the emergence of his trademark use of metal mesh and wire. Glass blown into pre-formed cages or baskets, sometimes irremovably, sometimes removable but retaining the mesh imprint, remains a Salo motif to this day, often with additional sandblasted texturing.

Later in 1987, the motorized, wing-flapping bird entitled *Danger of Frost* (1987) was launched as part of the "Light and Material" group show held in Helsinki's City Art Gallery. With the support of the Nuutajärvi factory, where the management recognized the publicity possible through association with such a vibrant artist, Salo was able to have the glass in this ambitious artwork made at the factory's expense, as he had for the Bronda show.

Since his early gallery exhibitions, Salo has often incorporated kinetic aspects, though he has always been well aware of the dangers of introducing movement to the material of glass. "It is very interesting but can be problematic; it must be balanced and to scale with the work – it shouldn't be more interesting than the glass itself", he says. He rationalizes the inclusion of metalwork, as do many artists wishing to build large; the difference with Salo is that the inevitably limited size of glass elements is complemented by the supporting metal frame. It is an integral part of the design-idea, and in his case, a practical skill supplied by the artist himself.

Salo used this technique with *Weather Forecast for Seamen* (1988), a four-part aerial installation in the Strand Intercontinental Hotel (now the Hilton Helsinki Strand; the work is still there), *Amazonas* (1991), a strikingly weighty, almost unwieldy dress figure, and *Gazebo* (1991), a delicately assembled, conical, tent-like construction containing an encyclopedia of Salo themes, confirmed his unusual vision. These two major works were shown in a 1991 solo exhibition at the Finnish Glass Museum and chronicled Salo's rise to fame and his importance to the country's glass identity. Perhaps the largest of all has been the multicolored *Windsock* (1994), installed at Malmi House in Helsinki and a massive 39 feet long.

Salo says now that "making big" is a useful device for him and delivers his ideas at their best, although, as with movement, he recognizes the danger of oversizing; an accurate "sense of scale is vital". At the other end of the size spectrum, *Standing Dog* (1996), using a wine bottle form and the simplest of wire frames, is one of many portraits of dogs that are tender and accurately observed. Introducing some gentle humor is an example of Salo's confidence in his artistic identity.

Following these successes, Salo was included in the "Venice Aperto Vetro" exhibitions of 1996 and 1998, and in each of the "Global Art Glass" triennials in Borgholm, Sweden, since 1999. Since 2002, the entrance to the Nuutajärvi glass village has been advertised on the main highway by Salo's light-gathering, metal frame-mounted disk, *Glass Time* (2002).

Venice prompted new departures that Salo continues to explore. An installation of found or made items assembled on a table first appeared in *Depends on Water* (1996), which was a collection of blown bottles containing water mounted on a wheeled table. Minimally vibrated, it gave off a discreet tinkling glassy sound so familiar that in approaching it in the Doge's Palace, one's sense of apprehension was already aroused; the work itself was an intensely theatrical performance, the jiggling glass suggesting amusing yet also rather sinister marionettes. Recently, the table-top installations have been culled from found objects stored away "for future use" in his own extensive workshop, or rescued from the glass factory's own detritus. At the same time he assembles newly made installations like *From Another Star* (2007) or *Mermaid's Lap* (2005), which combine almost every technique Salo has used for the past 30 years.

In 1998 in Venice, Salo surprised everyone by a move into the arcane world of *pâte de verre*, partly inspired by his own curiosity about a technique practiced with such finesse by his compatriot Päivi Kekäläinen. He regards *pâte de verre* as much more "precious" than blown glass and, unexpectedly, he regards it as a drawing material. Being Salo, his Venice offering was far from small and delicate, instead, *Sense of Ice* was a towering ten feet tall and, despite the title, its linear design referred to the network of Venetian canals and even suggested a necklace for a monumental goddess. Furthering the possibilities of drawing in *pâte de verre*, he has developed a rich palette of colors: *Blowing* (1998), a windswept flower, shades from a rust-red to a strong blue-green, suggesting brushwork rather than pencil line.

Movement continued to engage him. In 1998 he installed a major work, *Secret Garden*, in the exhibition complex at the Retretti caves in Central Finland. There, a robot driven by a computer program that was choreographed by a dancer from the Finnish National Ballet, took individual blown objects from a display on shelving, "inspected" them, and, with elegant nonchalance, swept them through the flooder display floor. The sense of hoarding, of secret gloating by an obsessed collector, was almost overwhelming.

Galleria Uusitalo, Salo's Helsinki gallerist, normally specializes in exhibiting paintings but has shown his large-scale glass regularly, following a first successful outing in 1999. In the spring of 2009, he exhibited at the Finnish Institute in Madrid and the prestigious Clara Scremini Gallery in Paris. His latest glass includes several new developments as well as continuing the series of canopic jars, amphorae, and other mesh-blown containers first seen back in 1987. He remains as fascinated by techniques as ever, using sandblasting, cutting, and engraving. Now he is experimenting further with wallmounted works. In some ways these are simply an upending of the table-top installations he has worked with for more than ten years, but they also offer a refreshed perspective and allow him to play very differently with three-dimensionality. The extreme energy of *Zaza* (2009), one of the "Action Stories" series, and *Opearatic Aria* (2009) contrasts very directly with Salo's other new works.

Visiting the northern Barents Sea has drawn him back into a more ancient world, one perhaps closer to home than the classical Mediterranean cultures that provided him with so much inspiration at the start. Granite pebbles are selected for their ripe roundedness, their smooth, finely speckled skins matched by equally perfect shapes in chair-worked glass. Some are simply balanced on top – a beach game perhaps, or the age-old practice of leaving cairns for others to follow. Others are shaped just enough to lie comfortably on their granite partners, embracing them with tenderness. Occasionally, delicate, lace-like sandblasted texturing occurs – marks that Salo has played with for many years and which complement his signature mesh imprinting.

In his latest work, Markku Salo shows no sign of running out of ideas. Instead, he is demonstrating that this master of glass profusion also has a more reflective side.

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