

CIRCUS OF SPHERES: MONICA GUGGISBERG & PHILIP BALDWIN

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A Musée de Design et d'Arts Appliqués Contemporains touring show. Although now based in Paris, glass-makers Monica Guggisberg and Philip Baldwin previously ran a studio at Nonfoux in Switzerland for many years. Hence the source of this touring exhibition. Seizing the opportunity to push beyond the vessel form, the duo have crossed over into the field of sculpture – not pure glass sculpture à la Dale Chihuly, but a new hybrid genre combining decorated glass spheres with curved metal armatures.

Circus of Spheres was a jolly, upbeat, playful exhibition – spectacular in the fairground sense of the word. The title conjures up images of clowns, acrobats and trapeze artists, highly appropriate analogies for these dynamic and exuberant works. Mostly floor-based, with the exception of one wall-mounted piece, the sculptures are just taller than human height. Composed of different-sized coloured glass spheres threaded on twisting poles, their lively, agile forms suggest the rhythms of a juggler throwing balls into the air. The circus theme is much more than just a metaphor. In some cases, such as *The High Wire Act*, evoking a tight-rope walker carrying a balancing pole, it has prompted the structure of individual works. The bowed *Archer 1* and *Archer 2*, the gyrating *Fire Pole* and the looped *Rubber Band Conjure* up a variety of other circus acts.

Multicoloured balls attached to springy metal rods suggest the inspiration of Alexander Calder's mobiles. Significantly Calder, too, was obsessed with the circus. But his spontaneity is in marked contrast to the much more controlled and calculated effects of Guggisberg and Baldwin's globular sculptures, where nothing is left to chance. With their carefully formulated colourways and precisely graded components, Guggisberg and Baldwin's jaunty glass bauble sculptures resemble giant necklaces or earrings magnified up to an Alice in Wonderland scale.

Bubbles, of course, are a natural part of glassblowing process, so in terms of shape, there is nothing



'Circo di Lune' (detail), Monica Guggisberg and Philip Baldwin, iron, glass, 2 x 2.68 m, 2004

particularly extraordinary about the sphere. But while the form of these balls embodies simplicity itself, their surfaces are extremely complex and busy. Tactility is a crucial element of Guggisberg and Baldwin's aesthetic, giving physical immediacy to their glass by abrading it, making it less rarefied by deliberately taking off the shine. They are adept at exploiting the intricate, textural, matt-cutting process known as *battuto*. The patterns on these spheres are incredibly diverse. Long snaking lines, short spiky nicks, irregular facets, shallow hammering, honeycomb and basket-weave patterns – these are just a few of the innumerable variations. While some pieces are blown in a single colour, others are multi-layered. Rich mosaic-like effects or crisp stripes are created by slicing through the different-coloured coats.

Colour co-ordination is a key feature, with most limited to a palette of four or five tones. This heightened awareness of colour relationships suggests an interest in textiles and

interior design, and, indeed, clear evidence of such cross-fertilisation is provided by the duo's recent collaboration with the Swiss firm of Jakob Schlaepfer, who specialise in *couture* fabrics for the fashion industry. Included in the exhibition were several translucent textiles digitally printed with enlarged photographic images of the patterns on their glass. Another intriguing crossover piece was a folding screen called *The Ball Wall*. Made of black-lacquered wood, it was pierced by holes containing dark red glass spheres swivelling on steel rods. Reminiscent of the solar system, the spheres evoked planets in the night sky.

Guggisberg and Baldwin's unique pieces encompassed half the exhibition. The rest of the show was devoted to their complementary designs for Venini, also on a spherical theme. In fact, it was their *Abaco* lamp for Venini, dating from 1998, that first set them off on this path. *Abaco* (meaning abacus)

consists of a stack of globes, strung on an upright metal stem. The abacus idea is even more apparent in *Circo di Lune*, a series of limited-edition sculptures composed of multicoloured spheres suspended at intervals on undulating rods held in a rectangular black steel frame. The emphasis here is on colour rather than pattern, with many globes left undecorated. Produced in three sizes varying in height from 45 centimetres to two metres, these are imposing large-scale decorative objects for interiors.

Whereas the Venini pieces have clearly defined borders, in their unique works Guggisberg and Baldwin have symbolically pushed beyond the confines of the frame. The artists have clearly had great fun with this project, which is reflected in the buoyant mood of the work. It has reinvigorated them creatively and catapulted them into an exciting new domain.

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