# As **One**

Some **artistic collaborations between couples** result in an alchemical fusion of two practices into a singular body of work that far exceeds individual efforts.

BY EMMA PARK

**Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová,** *The Kiss*, **1958-1960. Cast glass. H 6, W 6, D 2 [illegible] in.**
COURTESY: THE CORNING MUSEUM OF GLASS, CORNING, NEW YORK

**How many people does it take to make a work of art?** Legions if it's a cathedral, a ballet, or a film production. A sonnet or a still life? Usually just one. No matter how many authors there may be, however, there is nearly always—in Western culture at least—a single person credited as the "guiding vision" to which everyone else's contribution is subordinate. This may stem from the cultural expectation that art is the product of a single personality, from the artist's ego and desire for control and credit, or perhaps it is simply the money to be made from a single artist's celebrity status.

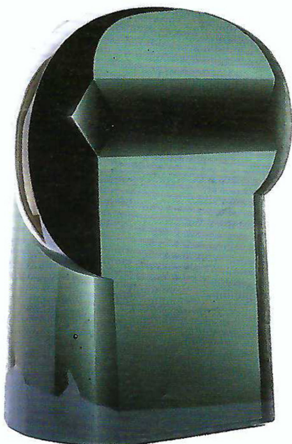
Whatever the reason, the result is that multiple authorship remains the exception in the visual arts. Where it does exist, such pairs tend to have a close personal bond, each with its distinctive dynamic—whether siblings, parent and child, or romantic couples. These duos "challeng[e] the concept of individual authorship," wrote the critic Fiona Maddocks in a blog for the Royal Academy of Arts (2016). Examples of artist couples do exist: Gilbert & George, the Starn twins, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Bruno Pogačnik Tremow and Ivana Vukšić (known jointly as TARWUK). But they seem to provoke unease and can end up being labeled, rather mystically, as a "single entity."

In glass art, though, collaboration is second nature. Numerous glass artists who are couples in life sign their work separately, or collaborate with each other or other artists only on an ad hoc basis. The phenomenon of the artist couple who co-signs and, in one way or another, co-creates all or much of their work over many years, is harder to find, and is the subject of this article. Neither one "entity" nor completely separate agents, these duos are something in between, and their joint output often unleashes something powerful, with results far exceeding their individual efforts.

For historical reasons that have to do with widespread gender inequality and homophobia, it is extremely hard to find artist couples of any kind before the mid-20th century. In glassmaking, the first notable example, and in many ways the paradigm, is the Czech kiln-cast artists Stanislav Libenský (1921-2002) and Jaroslava Brychtová (1924-2020). They started collaborating—and conducting a clandestine relationship—in Communist Czechoslovakia around 1955.

In the 1940s, Brychtová studied sculpture at Prague's Academy of Applied Arts (known today as UMPRUM). After graduating in 1950, and having three children with her first husband, she founded the Center for Glass in Architecture in Pelechov within the industrial glassworks at Železný Brod, where she had grown up. As recorded by Sylva Petrová, the historian of Czech glass, Brychtová was employed as forewoman—what would today be called a "designer"—and supervised the glassmaking team at the CGA until her retirement in 1983. Libenský, meanwhile, studied at UMPRUM, and then in 1954 was appointed director of the Železný Brod Specialised School of Glassmaking. In 1963, he was

## Stanislav Libenský & Jaroslava Brychtová



ABOVE *Head V with Square Eye*, **1987. Cast glass. H 19 ½, W 14 ½, D 9 in.**
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

RIGHT **A 1996 portrait by photographer Russell Johnson of Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová in Železný Brod, Czech Republic.**
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

*Winged Head 1*, **1962. Cast glass, metal stand. H 13 ½, W 26, D 9 in.**
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

appointed Professor of Glass Art at UMPRUM, where he remained until he was ousted, for obscure political reasons, in 1987.

Love and glass art defined the pair's relationship from the beginning. They first met at the Železný Brod school, which Jaroslav Brychta, Brychtová's father, had founded in 1920. In Brychta's office, Brychtová saw a drawing of Libenský's lying on the table. She asked him if she could cast it in glass. That became their first joint piece, *Head-Bowl* (1955-56), a bottle green dish in which a woman's head emerges from one end, her hair sweeping round the sides.

What with Libenský's public position, the authorities were not happy about the affair. "The communists prided themselves on being the backbone of propriety," says Katya Heller, who worked for the couple for many years as a translator. "But they were both very adamant about it." After divorcing their spouses and then remarrying each other in 1963, they continued to live and work together for nearly half a century. "Stanislav was super charming and could be very convincing," says Heller. "I think that Jaroslava was swept off her feet ... and she was beautiful and talented and the daughter of the [former] director." One of the defining works of this period is *Head I – High* (1957-58), a sculpture of an elongated human face. But seen in profile, it suggests two people kissing. In Heller's view, "this secret inside this piece was like a parallel for their relationship at the time."

In the late 1950s and 60s, the pair moved from representationalism to abstraction, experimenting with large-scale geometric forms in different colors and thicknesses of glass, and their interaction with light. They maintained from the beginning more or less the same division of roles. Libenský had the artistic vision and sketched it on paper; Brychtová turned it into a three-dimensional sculpture, first modeling it in clay and then casting it with a team

## Joey Kirkpatrick & Flora Mace

of assistants. Thanks to Brychtová's position at the CGA, and the couple's turn to abstract art, they gained access to large-scale state commissions for architectural projects and international shows. They could not have done this had they kept within the traditional "fine arts" category, which was closely controlled by the regime.

The price for artistic freedom was high: the couple did not own any of the work they produced, which all belonged to the state. Some works, like those shown at Expo 1967 in Montreal, were lost, presumably by careless bureaucrats, and never recovered. After Expo 1970 in Osaka, the regime tightened its grip even over glass art, which had used the exhibition to criticise the invasion of the country by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968. Brychtová's membership in the Party was canceled. As well as a lowering of her status, this led, says Heller, to a "disillusionment with the system." In the 70s and early 80s, the couple's work entered a new phase of optical glass, in works such as *Cube in Sphere* (1980-81). "I think it was their drawing inward," says Heller. "It was a really dark time."

Both partners were involved in supervising the casting process. Libenský taught at UMPRUM from Monday to Friday, where he influenced generations of students. When he came home to Železný Brod on Friday evening, says Heller, he would "he would come in [to the CGA] and slap everybody on the back and say, 'Great job. Let's have a beer.'" Having discussed the progress of the casting with Brychtová over the weekend, on Monday morning he would stop by the factory and tell the men all the things they needed to correct. "He would basically, in advance, approve what Jaroslava said so that the guys would hear it from him, and then he would leave," says Heller. "But she would be the one with the feet on the ground there—a woman dealing with a studio full of men, which was very unusual."

The couple's talents were different, and complementary. Libenský had the artistic vision and the ability to sketch a perfect form in minutes. For Heller, his personality is epitomised in a drawing that she found among his papers when she visited Brychtová after his death. It was a picture, drawn when he was about 15, of a huge building, titled *Libenský Palace*. "His father was a small-town blacksmith, the family was poor," says Heller. "But even when he was very young, he had a vision of something great that he was after." If Libenský was the extrovert, Brychtová was the introvert. She never had his confidence of vision, but, says Heller, "she was very confident about the physicality of things, and she could be incredibly straightforward about it."

In 1963, the pair successfully entered a competition to design two monumental windows in St. Vitus Cathedral, Prague, which were subsequently made at the CGA and installed in 1968. This was one of the defining moments in their joint career—their way of becoming "part of Czech history," as Heller puts it. In her opinion, it was Brychtová who gained the "deep understanding" of the different elements of the design: the reference to the colors of the Czech and Slovak flags, the angles and cuts of the glass suggestive of the Czech crown jewels. She discussed it with Libenský, he did the sketches, and they worked on the realization together. Libenský was "the one who could sell the brief to somebody."

After Libenský's forced retirement, the pair spent their last years together making art in the studio they had built at home. With their children grown up, says Heller, "a lot of their life was really just about their work." Yet it was a happy and productive time, as evidenced by the number of sculptures they produced between 1987 and 2002. Brychtová never made any independent work of her own after her husband's death, but did found a gallery bearing their names in Železný Brod. Their lives and work were intertwined till the end.

If Libenský-Brychtová are the paradigm, several glassmaking couples have since emerged in the U.S. and Europe with their own ways of working together. Comparison between them reveals the importance of the personalities of the individuals involved and their context, but also suggests some common themes.

Three couples whose working relationship dates back to the heyday of the Studio Glass movement include Joey Kirkpatrick and Flora Mace, Philip Baldwin and Monica Guggisberg, and John Littleton (son of Harvey) and Kate Vogel. Littleton met Vogel at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1978, and they moved to their current studio in Bakersville, North Carolina, the following year. Kirkpatrick met Mace at Pilchuck Glass School in 1979; Baldwin met Guggisberg at the Orrefors Factory Glass School,

**Philip Baldwin & Monica Guggisberg**

Sweden, also in 1979. More recently, Sally Fawkes and Richard Jackson met in 1995 at the Surrey Institute of Art & Design, in southern England, where he was a technician and she was doing a BA in 3D glass design.

The point at which each couple decided to co-sign their work varied depending on the course of their work and relationship. Baldwin–Guggisberg made the decision at an early stage. "In Sweden, we both had our own designs," said Guggisberg. "Then we started to work together, and it just got to a point where it didn't make any sense—was that your idea or my idea? Rather, let's make a good idea." For Littleton–Vogel, it was that "the collaboration was taking us in really exciting directions," says Vogel, so their individual projects "just fell by the wayside." For Kirkpatrick–Mace, the decision was more difficult. "People thought, oh boy, you're going to lose your independence and individuality," says Kirkpatrick. "We had to take a ride in the country and decide whether we were going to co-sign."

A different approach was adopted by Jackson–Fawkes, who set up studio together at the turn of the millennium but did not begin co-signing their work until about 2005, when Fawkes was asked to make a commission for an Australian couple. When the latter came round to the studio, they saw Jackson's work for the first time, and suggested the two collaborate. "And it just worked," says Fawkes. Today, their collaborative work has become about 40 percent of their output, the rest of which is still signed individually. Thus, rather than a replacement for independent work, collaboration has become an additional string to their bow; Jackson describes it as their "third voice."

Such collaborations include the couple's largest ever commission, *Winter*, an outdoor cast-glass sculpture standing six feet tall and weighing 440 pounds, which was designed to be displayed in a walled garden in the misty English countryside. The form suggests the contours of an Iron Age tool—a shared interest of Jackson–Fawkes's—while the gray-blue glass contains sheets of color fused onto billets and then heated in the kiln, creating an effect of moving planes of color. The result is a harmony between the sculpture, the landscape, and its ancient agricultural traditions.

The differences between partners tend to be more pronounced toward the beginning of the relationship. When Kirkpatrick–Mace started, there was a clear division of roles. "We recognised very soon that we needed to bring our different talents to the collaboration," says Kirkpatrick. "That's what makes it a collaboration."

Like Libenský–Brychtová, Kirkpatrick made the paintings and drawings to begin with, and Mace devised ways of giving them three-dimensional form, whether in glass, wood, or other media. "We call her the 'mad professor,'" Kirkpatrick says. However, in their most recent series, "Botanicals," the idea of capturing dried flowers inside layers of composite and flat glass evolved between them from an earlier series, "Alphabet of Flowers." "When we first started working together, I was more the ideas person and she was more the technical person," says Kirkpatrick. "Over 43 years, that gap closed significantly, and now we're both the ideas person. But she's still the technical person."

Baldwin–Guggisberg have a different allocation of roles. Early on in their collaboration, he became the primary glassblower while she focused on drawing out the designs. This division

**John Littleton & Kate Vogel**

continues today, although sometimes Guggisberg will assist Baldwin in the hot shop. To do the deep cold-cutting characteristic of their work, they employ a team of assistants, whom they jointly supervise. The pair stress, however, that their ideas for each project have long been made together, often from shared experiences, like the trip to the Narbonne archaeological site that inspired their 2022 show "Amphore-Métaphore" (reviewed in *Glass* #168). "We share an intellectual perspective about the way the world works," says Baldwin.

In contrast, Jackson–Fawkes work on all stages of the making, as well as the ideas, together. They usually start in a sketchbook, which will pass between them, like a children's game. "Sometimes you just need to stop what you're doing in the studio for 20 minutes, and you'll come in and have a bit of a scribble and a doodle, and then you chuck it back onto the other person's desk and it'll be their turn," says Jackson. "So it's literally got both of our hands on it."

Littleton–Vogel also tend to work on all stages together, from the ideas to sketching to 3D modeling and then making. Littleton, though, "love[s] cutting and polishing," while Vogel does not, so he tends to take on more of that side of the work. He is also left-handed, while she is right-handed, so some parts of the studio are adapted to one or the other. They often draw their ideas from shared experiences and interests: stargazing, nature walks, or their family. For instance, in their 2005 sculpture *What Binds Us,* they cast each of their three children's hands and linked them together in a circle.

All of the couples I spoke to agreed on one thing: that an important advantage of working together is the critical and creative input of the other partner. "If you work as a couple, you have this constant dialogue going on," says Guggisberg. "It has sort of an organic flow. I think that is rather unique to a collaborative team." "It's pretty lonely in the studio by yourself," says Mace. "It's great to have somebody to bounce ideas off." That does not mean there is no friction. "We've got to be honest," says Baldwin, "if anybody asks, our first advice is, do not work as a couple. It's stressful!"

Do clients, gallerists, or other viewers look at an artwork differently because it is produced and co-signed by a pair rather than by a single artist? For glassmaking couples, at least, the answer seems to be no—even in the case of Kirkpatrick–Mace, despite their fears about losing independence. In the 90s, an American gallery advertised a design by Baldwin–Guggisberg in Baldwin's name alone. "I had a bit of a fit," says Guggisberg, but it only happened once.

You might think that the more glassmakers aspire to be recognised as artists, the more they will jealously guard their individual names. Yet there are some younger artist couples who co-sign, such as Edward Shuster and Claudia Moseley, who create conceptual art out of glass lenses, screens, and prisms. In design, which is perhaps less judgmental, the London-based couple Cristina Vezzini and Stan Chen make lighting fixtures that combine ceramics and glass. While they each make the parts separately, the end products are, as their website states, "unified compositions" and the result of a "creative partnership."

It is not by chance, though, that this essay has focused on artist couples at a later stage in their careers. For if there is anything which their example suggests, it is that it takes time, patience, and commitment for a relationship to bear fruit—in art as in life. ■

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**Sally Fawkes & Richard Jackson**