

# Unbreakable Spirit: Berengo Glass Studio

December 18, 2020 by Thea Hawlin

A set of deep blue glass sculptures sits in a window of Peggy Guggenheim's unfinished palazzo, overlooking Venice's Grand Canal. Made from sketches by Picasso, they are a rare relic of Guggenheim's collaboration with Egidio Costantini, Murano's "master of masters." The azure figures stand as a testament to the island's history of inspiring great artists to work with glass. Today, one man, contemporary glass connoisseur Adriano Berengo, is working to continue and transform this legacy.



Ursula Von Rydingsvard, *Luminosa*, 2013. Glass, 245 x 200 x 6 cm. Photo: Francesco Allegretto

“I am an actor in the art world,” Berengo says candidly. “I have a role now, a role recognized by my collectors, but recognized most of all by the artists.” The born-and-bred Venetian has worked hard to achieve this role, as well as the success he now enjoys with Berengo Studio and the Fondazione Berengo. Starting as an outsider in the contemporary art world, Berengo began pursuing his mission when he realized the untapped potential of glass as a medium for sculpture and learned how Guggenheim had funded Costantini’s furnace, which enabled great artists to work directly with artisans. Dubbed *Fucina degli Angeli* (the “Furnace of Angels”) by Jean Cocteau in the 1960s, that furnace once produced collaborations with the likes of Jean Arp, Alexander Calder, and Marc Chagall. But it no longer existed, and its site was home to a restaurant. Where were the contemporary glass masters who aspired to work with present-day Picassos? There was no one.

Berengo grasped the powerful potential of creating a new place where artists could feel free to experiment and explore new possibilities. Glass, whose language can take years to learn, can be an intimidating material for those who have never worked with it. By founding a studio in 1989 and filling it with experts ready to act as an artist’s hands, Berengo sought to bridge the gap. His glass maestros could act as translators, guided by the vision of an artist to manifest a new kind of sculpture in glass. So it was that Berengo became the gatekeeper of Murano, ushering contemporary artists into new arenas.

While Guggenheim and Costantini split the work (she provided the money, he supplied the expertise), Berengo stands alone: “I’m not supported by anybody, not by the city, not by private clients; we are a self-made foundation, I’m a self-made man.” As a result, Berengo has found himself caught between the world of art and the world of business. “I sustained the balance by selling; in a way, I have created a two-fold structure,” he explains. “On the one hand, I invite artists of good quality, but not as famous as the blue-chip ones; we have a gallery, and we sell those works at a reasonable price. This revenue helps me to support everything else.” The sales come full circle, with Berengo reinvesting practically all of the profits into running the furnace, creating new artworks, and forging new collaborations. “It’s always coming from selling. I am doomed to die by selling a piece unfortunately,” he laments. “But I see this is also what artists like in the end, it’s not so much for the money; they like that their work can spread, can reach collectors’ houses, that their work can be a comfort and can be spoken about.”

Berengo’s homegrown studio, aimed at elevating Murano glass as a material for sculpture rather than more traditional utilitarian glassware, is up against family dynasties such as Barovier & Toso, founded in 1295, whose furnaces sit just down the street on Murano’s *Fondamenta dei Vetrai*. Another intimidating neighbor is the internationally renowned Venini, which still profits from its collaborations with iconic Italian designers such as Carlo Scarpa, Gio Ponti, and Ettore Sottsass. Berengo has neither lineage nor history to lean on, yet in just 30 years, he’s managed to make a mark on Murano, and the world.

It wasn’t easy. He remembers the rejections when he first invited artists to work on the island: “They saw it as too commercial.” Many questioned his ideas, dismissing glass as a material for contemporary art—Murano was too weighted with history, glass even more so. Bringing artists to the island became a key aspect of Berengo’s strategy. At first, he offered a small apartment that he had renovated next to the studio; now he can pay for his guests to stay in local hotels. Living in Murano, artists are able to watch the maestros at work, gaining an in-depth understanding of how their designs are translated into glass sculptures. With this time and attention, Berengo saw how preconceived notions of glass could change. One of his first major collaborations was with the English artist Martin Bradley. In 1991, they created an homage to the famous chessboard made by Costantini and the Surrealist Max Ernst, a work that was exhibited in the Doge’s Apartments in Venice’s Palazzo Ducale. The popularity of the giant chess set proved that an appetite for artworks in glass persisted. After reinvesting profits back into the studio, Berengo went on to work with Riccardo Licata, one of the great Italian masters, Austrian Pop Art painter Kiki Kogelnik, and Elvira Bach, a member of the *Junge Wilde* (“Young Wild Ones”) movement.

Approaching artists to work in the studio has always been a kind of courtship for Berengo: “In the case of Ai Weiwei, it took me six years to chase him down.” To woo Ai, Berengo first flew to Beijing, where the Chinese artist was under house arrest, and convinced him to allow a team of glass maestros in Murano to experiment with transforming one of his most famous images, from photo series “Study of Perspective,” into a glass sculpture. Starting with a cast of Ai’s hand, Berengo began to develop what would become Murano’s largest glass casting studio. Hunting down expert technicians from all over Europe, he built a team capable of bringing Ai’s “finger to power” to life by casting the artist’s hand and arm in glass. The result was a striking standalone sculpture. When Ai moved to Berlin, Berengo drove to visit him with prototypes of the glass work rattling in the boot of his car. Berengo’s relentless energy has since turned Ai into a powerful friend and ally. The two have collaborated extensively over the last few years, developing new casting techniques and what may be the studio’s most exciting project to date—a contemporary spin on a classic Murano chandelier, composed of contorted skeletal creatures and black glass bones. “It’s probably one of the largest pieces ever made in glass,” Berengo says. If all goes to plan, the sculpture will be exhibited in 2021 as a public installation at the center of Rome.

Though remote collaborations have become a necessity during the pandemic, Berengo’s goal is to pass on the experience of working with Murano’s maestros. He’s eager for the glass sculptures to be collaborations in every sense of the word—the artists have a say in the translation of their design, and they are present at the birth of their sculptures. Berengo wants them to be active, vocal participants in the process: “It’s not that the artist gives you a drawing, and you make the drawing in glass. The artist has to come here with me to suffer the heat in summer and to suffer the difficulties in explaining their vision. Often they have to find a new language to communicate with the maestro.” Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves used gesture, pulling at the soft folds of her skin in order to convey how she wanted the glass to gather in thick rolls to replicate human flesh. French Tunisian artist eL Seed twisted a small coil of wire for the maestros to follow as they manipulated elegant glass strands to re-create the architecture of Arabic script. Italian artist Paolo Valle sat smoking his pipe, his eyes never leaving the molten material, occasionally rising to bark directions in dialect. Each artist is different.

“In the beginning, I was really stressed because I was trying to penetrate all these new markets and new situations,” Berengo recalls. “But then I realized that glass, too, has an innate stress and that’s part of what makes it work.” This stress gave birth to Berengo’s bi-annual exhibition Glasstress, which launched as a collateral event of the 2010 Venice Biennale. Since then, it has become one of the most important exhibitions of contemporary glass art in the world, showcasing the collaborations created in Berengo Studio for all to see.

To date, the studio has worked with more than 300 artists, and the list continues to grow. Last year, it made history by collaborating with not one, but three different pavilions at the Venice Biennale, creating a field of red roses for Renate Bertlmann in the Austrian pavilion, a glass sword in the stone for Liliana Moro in the Italian pavilion, and a variety of aqueous creatures and fountains for Turner Prize winner Laure Prouvost in the French pavilion. These artists have embraced Berengo’s ethos—that the identity of an artwork should not be confined by the medium in which it is made. “I feel we have liberated glass from the constraints of the market on one side, and of craftsmanship on the other,” Berengo says. “I’m proud to say that we have established a new dimension of sculpture in glass.”

Berengo's most recent exhibition showcases works by more than 60 female artists who have collaborated with the studio over the last 30 years, including ORLAN, Tracey Emin, Cornelia Parker, Ursula von Rydingsvard, and Joana Vasconcelos. The variety of work on view at the Fondazione Berengo Art Space in the heart of Murano is striking in terms of color, style, and finish. Glass as clear, mirrored, solid; textured, smooth; glass whole, glass broken. Tributaries of transparent glass veins form a skeletal body for Prune Nourry's *River Woman*. Reflective crystal orbs, which pass from clear to jet black, line the floor in Marion Borgelt's lunar progressions. The spectral form of Karen LaMonte's *Reclining Nocturne* presents an invisible body, which lounges in drapes of cast glass fabric. In these works, classical images of femininity are shattered at every turn, as are expectations of what glass can do as a medium. There is a real sense of movement in the exhibition space, captured by the expanding mirrored stomachs of Charlotte Gyllenhammar or the legs of a dancer, her body splayed in an artful arc, who seems to have leapt from one of Rose Wylie's paintings. An entire corridor is lined with Lucy Orta's colorful glass masks, a project conceived during lockdown at the start of 2020. Orta uses imagery from a range of cultures, reimagining vibrant masks that reject fear and radiate a resilient joy when it is needed most.

Berengo called the exhibition "Unbreakable," a term that could just as easily be used to describe his own unwavering spirit. At a time when many people are looking to art as solace and a means of expression in a tumultuous world, the energy and creativity that Berengo Studio brings to the ancient art of glass provides an antidote to despair and a promise of greater things to come. Though the future may be uncertain, the vision of the man leading the renaissance of glass art remains clear.

*"Unbreakable: Women in Glass" is scheduled to be on view at the Fondazione Berengo through January 7, 2021. More information is available at [www.fondazioneberengo.org](http://www.fondazioneberengo.org).*

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