

Silvia

Exploring the Dark Recesses of Human Relationships

Levenson

by Colleen Bryan

Silvia Levenson's kiln cast glass art is a conceptual examination of the muddy middle between political and personal landscapes. She examines the personal impact of violence from both political forces and intimate partners, as we humans strive to create the illusion of safety, security, beauty, and happiness amidst impending treachery and threat. Now living and working between her refuge in Italy and her birthplace of Argentina, Levenson speaks with the resonant voice of a global citizen. She addresses sweeping issues using a vocabulary of images and artifacts that are disarmingly commonplace and recognizable across continents and cultures.

Levenson came to art as a painter, having trained in graphic design. She happened upon a glass show of Bertil Vallien's work in New York City in 1985. "I was so surprised. I hadn't known that glass could be used as an artistic medium." Subsequently, she studied pâte de verre with Antoine Leperlier and Vincent Van Ginneke at Musée-Atelier du Verre in Sars-Poteries, France. She opened her own studio in Vigevano, a town close to Milan, Italy, in 1990 and began to show her glass artwork in 1994.

The artist explores the use of glass as a narrative medium to express and evoke complicated emotional context. While her own autobiography provides an inroad to questions of safety, violence, and intimacy, her artwork maintains a sociological distance and timeless perspective on the questions she addresses. "As an artist I have always been interested in interpersonal relationships and in the relationship between family and society."

Coming of Age in the Midst of Terror

Born in the late 1950s and reared in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Levenson grew into young adulthood during a tragic era in the life of her country. General Jorge Rafael Videla, whose military dictatorship lasted from 1976 through 1983, presided over mass imprisonment, torture, and murder of mostly young Argentines during a period known as the Dirty War. For Videla and his regime, the definition of "terrorist" included "not only someone who plants bombs but a person whose ideas are contrary to Western, Christian civilization."

People who were identified as terrorists were abducted or murdered outright in their homes or safe houses, at their jobs or high schools, even while getting off the bus. Women who were pregnant when abducted were routinely kept alive and tortured until they had given birth. Others were impregnated through rape while in prison. Their children were systematically given to military or police families or others who supported the regime to raise after the mothers were thrown into the river to their deaths. During the dictatorship, 30,000 people disappeared, including members of Levenson's own family.

Human rights activists began standing in fierce opposition to these actions by the junta very early on. Notably, in 1977 the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo was formed by grandmothers whose grandchildren had disappeared. By 2016, this group had identified 119 of the estimated 500 children who were stolen as babies.



Silvia Levenson, *Welcome to Europe*, blown glass, 25 cm x 100 cm x 25 cm, 2015.
Photo by Marco Del Comune, courtesy of Lorch Seidel Gallery, Berlin, Germany.



*Silvia Levenson, 13 lb of love, kiln formed glass, 12" x 8" x 6", 2014.
Photo by Marco Del Comune, courtesy of Luciano Colatonia, Brescia, Italy.*



*The artist in her studio.
Photo by Marco Del Comune.*



*Silvia Levenson, Strange Little Girl #4 (Baby Sheep), kiln cast glass, mixed media, 41.75" x 17" x 10.75", 2011.
Photo by Marco Del Comune, courtesy of Bullseye Projects, Portland, Oregon.*

As a young teenager, Levenson stepped into this outrage as a political activist. She and her family lived in hiding for three years. In 1981, warned that she had been discovered and that her life was at risk, Levenson fled Argentina with her husband and two young children to find refuge in Italy where he had family. She was 23 years old at the time.

"I think of myself as a survivor. I feel that all of us are surviving some failure, some breakdown in the life that we and society are busily striving to construct. What happened throughout the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983 changed my life, as it did for the majority of Argentinians. It certainly influenced and continues to resonate in my artwork."

Finding a Voice through Art

Concurrent with this turmoil on both personal and political fronts, the young woman stepped into the life of an artist, taking a degree and a job in graphic design in Argentina and later in Italy. She gravitated to painting and eventually to glass.

Levenson's artwork primarily concerns itself with revelation, making visible that which is normally hidden or cannot be seen. Her use of glass extends this metaphor: "In glass containers and bottles, we preserve the integrity of fruits and vegetables over time. In my artwork I use glass to preserve the memory of persons and objects for future generations. I am not interested in the potential beauty of glass as a material, but in its function to preserve and protect. To me, glass embodies the idea of resilience. Glass artifacts from thousands of years ago are retrieved today. Some are whole while others are in pieces and require time and dedication to be put together again. But in the end, each artifact speaks to us of the person who created it and brings us back to that person's time."

Following a trip home to visit family in Argentina in 1993, Levenson's art began to refocus, moving away from the purely decorative, juxtaposing the personal and political in an attempt to hold irreconcilable realities in tandem. Art and glass gave her a voice with which to articulate a complex emotional landscape that spoken word alone struggles to encompass—the illusion of security disrupted by sudden violence and loss. In her art, Levenson addresses the difficulties of living with threats of violence that are out of our control, both political and domestic. She models the process of coming to terms with fear by confronting our most uncomfortable emotions.

Art Transmuted by the Experiences of Participants

Most recently, the artist traveled with her long-running itinerant project *Identidad Desaparecida*, which translates to *identity cards of the missing*. This installation was seeded in Buenos Aires in 1996. It opened there in 2014, toured eight cities on three continents, and saw its finale in the Murano Glass Museum in Venice in the late spring of 2016. On November 2, 2016, the show will open at Bullseye Projects.

A child's tricycle stands abandoned atop a rug map of Argentina, confronting, almost questioning, a life-size photograph of scarved protestors. A glass cushion provides cold comfort to a child's wooden chair. A toddler's play tent, a wonderful hideaway for childhood secrets and discoveries, is joined at the seams by twisted barbed wire. Taken as a whole, the exhibit speaks of a lost generation. At each stop on the tour—from Buenos Aires to La Plata, from Montevideo to Washington, to Barcelona and Paris, Riga and Tallin—the show took on new variations, a different presentation, a different perspective.

In Buenos Aires, the exhibit was shown inside the Casa de las Abuelas, the largest illegal detention center in the region. Specifically, it was staged in the former ESMA, a place in which many female prisoners gave birth. "It was a very powerful experience for me. My aunt Elsa Rabinovich de Levenson had been imprisoned there before being thrown with other prisoners into the river from a helicopter, all of them *los desaparecidos* (the disappeared)."

In Montevideo in the Espacio de Arte Contemporáneo, the artist organized a glass "selfie" workshop for children, with the idea of exploring the concept of identity. In Barcelona and Paris, some nieces and nephews, stolen children who regained their identities thanks to the work of the Grandmothers, were invited to share their stories. "We spoke about human rights in the former Jewish ghetto of Riga, Latvia, where I repeatedly saw my last name written amongst the names of the victims of the Nazi Holocaust."

Art often foreshadows the future, and Levenson's work as early as 2001 presaged the waves of refugees that currently flood into Europe from Africa. "I am making new pieces that address what is happening right now, as well as using old pieces connected to this theme."



Silvia Levenson, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, kiln cast glass and metal, 17.75" x 13.75" x 4.375" installed, 2009. Photo by Marco Del Comune, courtesy of Bullseye Projects, Portland, Oregon.



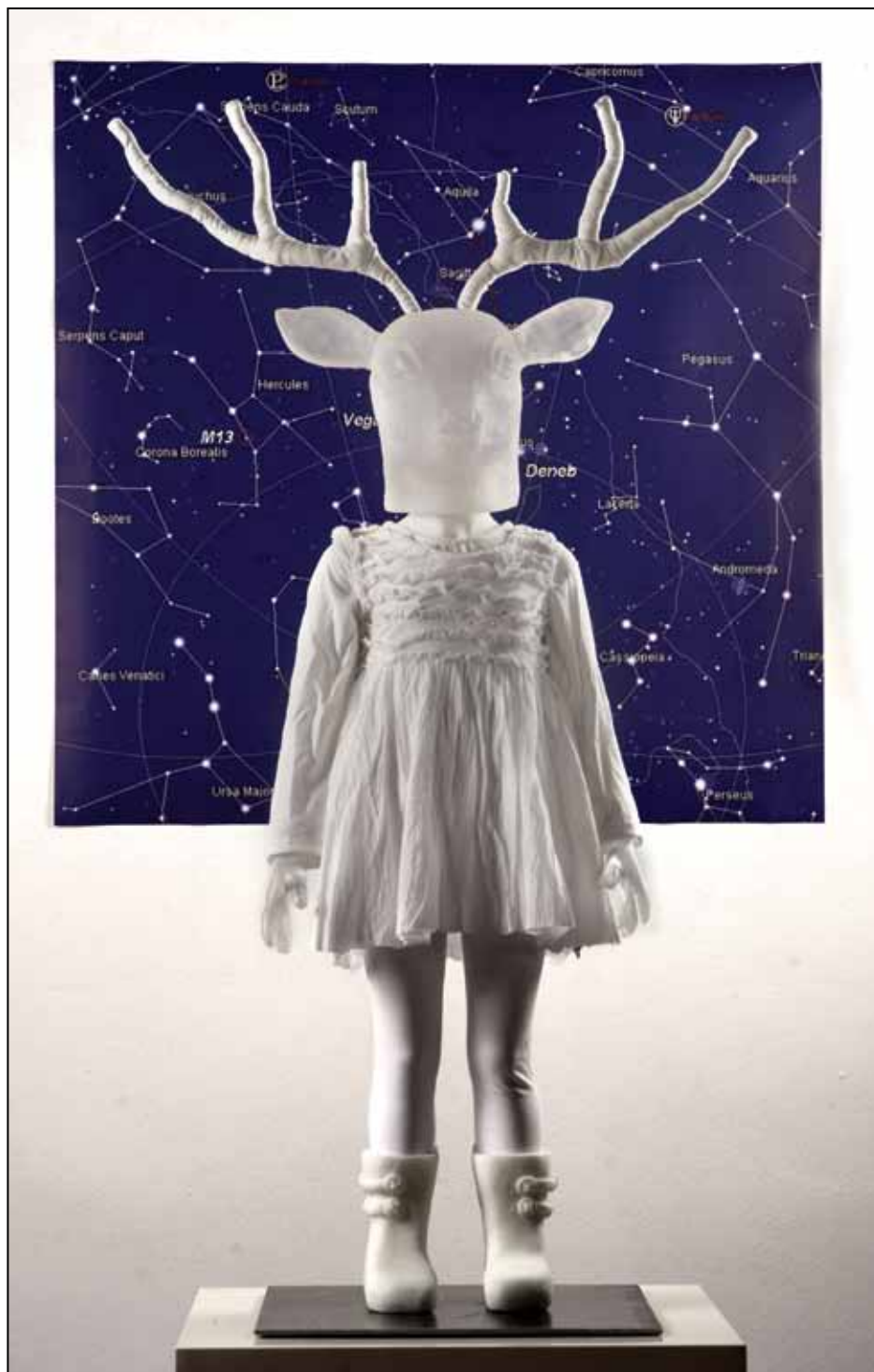
Silvia Levenson, Identidad Desaparecida (detail), installation at the Glass Museum of Murano, Italy. Photo by Paolo Sacchi, courtesy of Bullseye Projects, Portland, Oregon.

The artist notes that none of her shows are exhibits in the traditional sense of a static installation comprised of preselected pieces. Rather, they are gatherings of artifacts around a common theme, subjectively influenced at each site by the participants. They can also be multimedia. The show *Identidad Desaparecida* included a choral feature that reflected the varied awareness and viewpoints the artist encountered along the way. "I have been helped, inspired, and supported by a lot of people as I travel with the exhibit, and in all these cities I had surprising encounters and created new relationships."

Threats from Inside the Security Zone

Levenson recognizes that not all violence is externally imposed. Society promotes and individuals cling to the notion of family as sanctuary. Meanwhile, there is ample evidence that it is also a dangerous place, particularly for women and girls. Some of the most awful forms of violence perpetrated against the female gender take place within the "safe" surrounds of family.

UNICEF reports that violence against women and girls is the most prevalent human rights violation in the world, and that one-third of murdered women worldwide are killed by husbands or partners. While the specific types of violence shift among countries and cultures, the pattern prevails among developing, war-torn, and already developed, ostensibly "peaceful," societies. Statistics speak to the frequency with which violence occurs inside the family, where the aggressors are not unknown intruders, but rather people who were once loved by the women and girls.



Silvia Levenson, (left to right) *Strange Little Girl #6 (Baby Deer)* kiln formed glass, mixed media, 42.5" x 17" x 10.75", and *Girl #8*, 41.75" x 17" x 10.75", both pieces from 2014. Photos by Marco Del Comune, courtesy of Bullseye Projects, Portland, Oregon.

Several of Levenson's exhibits highlight this condition of intimate partner violence. In her 2014 installation *Body of Evidence*, the artist catalogued the 128 incidents of women in Italy who died at the hands of their intimate partners over the course of the previous year and constructed an artifact denoting the instrument of death in every case. Guns, machetes, knives, pills, hands, pipes, and gasoline are framed sentimentally against backdrops of flocked wallpaper or cheerful polka dots. "In this way I placed the objects in the home, a domestic yet sometimes uncertain place." In another exhibit *Until Death Do Us Part*, a lovely, empty, fragile wedding cake confection is topped by a pink hand grenade engraved with the word *amor*.

Instruments of torture and death virtually litter Levenson's work. Pretty pink glass hand grenades are tastefully arranged in cut glass fruit bowls or dangle merrily, interspersed in beaded curtains. Razor blades and barbed wire decorate shopping bags and lamp shades and comfy armchairs. Large glass butcher knives are suspended over images of young girls at play. In a present-day world awash with both terrorism and family violence, it stirs the viewer to question where, when, and whether real safety and security can be found or constructed.

Levenson's installation *Identidad 2015* features children's clothing made of glass and arranged as though on a clothesline. Glass tiles display a sketch of the absent children behind empty chairs. A glass swing hangs suspended over an empty pair of a child's shoes.

Another major theme of Levenson's work has dealt with the intense desire that people have to fit into a happily-ever-after script. "Sometimes it's hard to face our feelings, so we just pretend that things are okay." Her works such as *Something Ain't Right* and *Here and Now* focus on the subtle tensions pervading couple relationships and the differences between what we really feel and what we are willing to express.

Levenson's glass art is not a place where one goes to revel in the beautiful, light-filled fluidity or patterns characteristic of the material. Rather, this artist exploits the medium's transparency, its capacity to preserve, its hardness to reveal important aspects of society and relationships. For these qualities, she received the Award in Glass in Venice by Instituto veneto di Scienze, Lettere e Arti at Palazzo Franchetti, Venice, on September 26, 2016. **GA**

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