

Rhoda Baer  
VIEW FROM WITHIN





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June 17 - August 13, 2023

American University Museum  
at the Katzen Arts Center

Washington, DC

ALPER INITIATIVE FOR WASHINGTON ART



# FOREWORD

The Alper Initiative for Washington Art was endowed by artist and philanthropist Carolyn Alper. She wanted it to be a place for meeting and celebrating the artists of our region and an opportunity for us to understand and occasionally rewrite our region's visual arts canon as it is handed down to the next generation of artists and art lovers.

Fifty years ago and four miles from the American University campus, the National Park Service took over the abandoned Glen Echo Amusement Park and somewhat inexplicably began offering raw studio space to artists in exchange for teaching classes. Some of the best artists in Washington began their careers in those studios. Sculptors Jim Sanborn and Raya Bodnarchuk took over the Crystal Pool and the First-Aid Station, while Robin Moyer started Photoworks in another rather dilapidated space and took on Rhoda Baer as his apprentice.

*Rhoda Baer... likens entering the Photoworks space to passing through a tiny "Alice-in-Wonderland door... into a deep dark cave," a room with bare bulbs and wet floors. Despite the paltry conditions, or perhaps because of them, a remarkable sense of community developed at Photoworks and continues to this day.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1975, Moyer decided to move to Asia, and Baer, with only one year's experience making photographs, became artist-in-residence with Frank "Tico" Herrera. It wasn't long before Baer became a well-established professional photographer, shooting subjects as diverse as death row inmates and the president of the United States. Then, at the height of her success, Baer stumbled into a class in glass at Glen Echo Park in 2005 and fell in love all over again.

*I remember the first piece of glass I cut. It was purple. I remember breaking it, and I remember saying "oh... this is it!" I knew! I could see the possibilities instantly in glass. I took classes for four weekends and then went out and bought a kiln. I haven't turned my back on photography, I just won't do it professionally anymore because I don't have to.<sup>2</sup>*

Baer's exhibition of her recent glass sculpture in the Alper Initiative for Washington Art is at once balanced and breathtaking. Researched and refined over the past eighteen years, her sculptures capture and transmit the essence of color and light in a way that cannot be duplicated by photography or any other medium. They are born of fire but are cool as ice. Positively transcendent, they move beyond their sources and methods to a place of playful perfection.

On behalf of the students, faculty, staff, and supporters of American University, I want to thank Rhoda Baer for sharing her art, Diane Charnov for her informed and insightful discussion of Baer's sculpture, Vida Russell of Lloyd Greenberg Design for this gorgeous catalog, and our Preparator Kevin Runyun for working creatively with his installation team and the artist to present her vision so beautifully and appropriately.

Jack Rasmussen  
Director and Curator  
American University Museum  
at the Katzen Arts Center  
Washington, DC

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Gordon, *Presence of Place: Photoworks at Glen Echo Park*, (Washington, DC, American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, 2015) p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Rhoda Baer, conversation with author, April 10, 2023.



*Snow Hawk At Dawn*, 2022. 14 in. h x 5.25 in. w x 4.5 in. d.



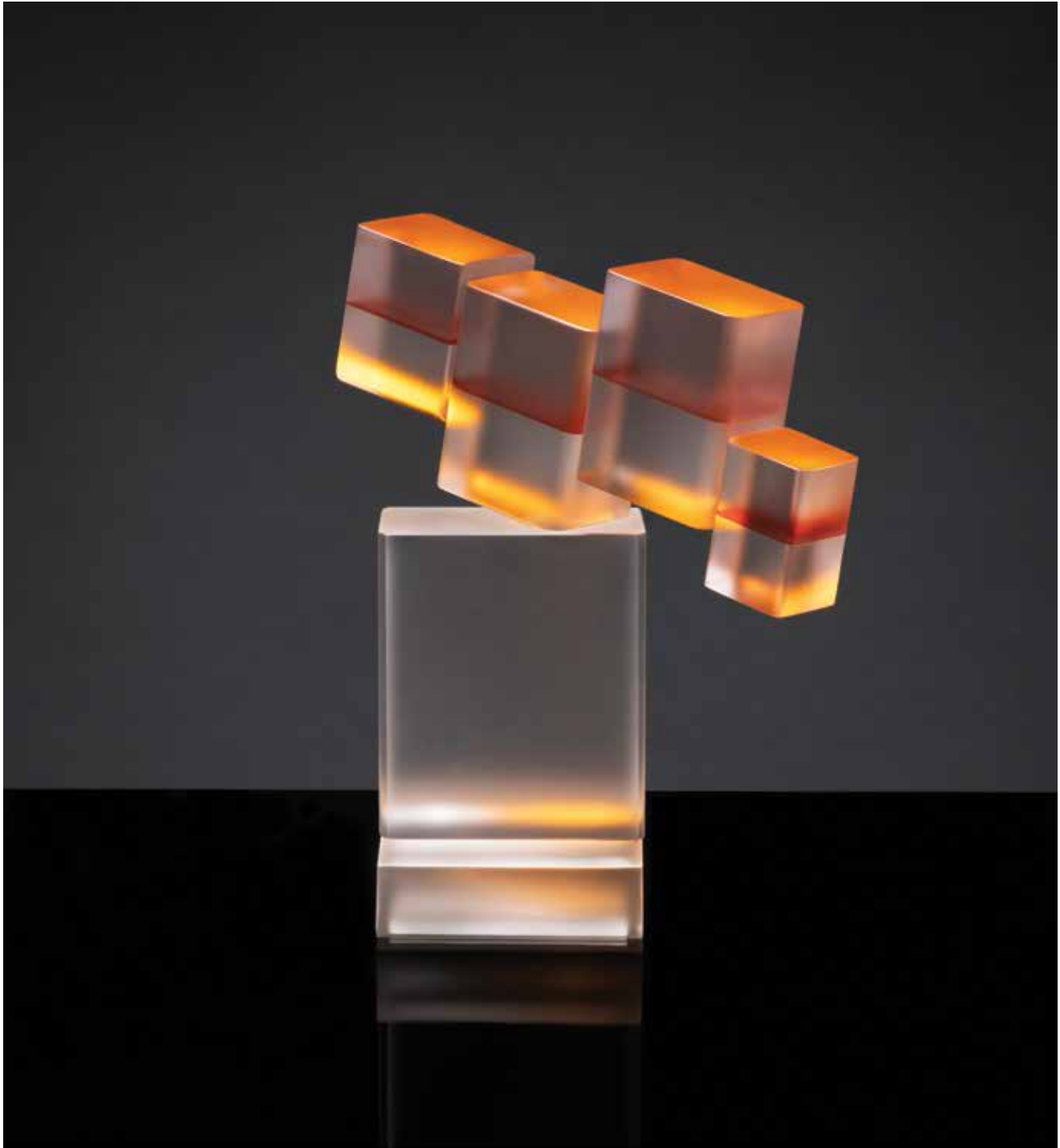
*Mist Falling On Angel Wings*, 2022. 12.75 in. h x 6.25 in. w x 5.75 in. d. From A Private Collection.





“YOU KNOW, LIGHT,  
IN MY EYES,  
IS TO ARCHITECTURE  
WHAT SOUND IS  
TO MUSIC.”

Santiago Calatrava



*The Tiger and the Long Satin Dress*, 2022. 12.75 in. h x 11.25 in. w x 9.5 in. d. From the Collection of JP & Kelly Ward.

Opposite: *Everyone Should Whistle*, 2022. 19 in. h x 7 in. w x 6.25 in. d.



# VIEW FROM WITHIN: RHODA BAER

By Diane J. Charnov

In *View From Within*, Rhoda Baer blends alchemy, science, and art to create optical glass sculptures in her first, one-person museum show. Wandering through the exhibition, an increasingly delicate balancing act is apparent. Diagonal cuts appear to slide and separate and a sense of risk and tension grows. Verticals are engaged in dialogue with horizontals and a precarious relationship emerges. Baer is an expert in pushing boundaries across geometric forms, allowing colors to shift and shapes to transform. The artist creates a world where sculptures seem to soar off their pedestals and reach heights that exceed their measurements.

Baer's mirror-image self-portrait at the entrance to the exhibit radiates a sly smile. "It's a double portrait with a double meaning," Baer says. "It's about looking inside the piece and inside oneself." It's a magical dance. At certain angles the sculptures appear to be colorless. Yet, as the viewer circles a piece, colors appear, disappear and blend together.

Surrounded in one gallery by all of her sculptures, it is easy to forget that at their largest, the pieces range in height from just under 9 inches to over 19 inches. Despite their stature, their impact is disproportional to their size. They reverberate as dynamic works that sit proudly on their pedestals. While each piece was created one-by-one over several years, they stand together and play off each other, a powerful group as well as commanding individual pieces.



In her studio process, Baer's assemblies invariably change from their initial concept. She is constantly analyzing, re-analyzing, and reversing decisions as she constructs each piece. Over months, Baer shuffles sequences and orientations of each segment until the last glue joint has hardened.

This evolution of change is evident in the making of *Paradox of Contradictory Conclusions*. In her initial sketches it was envisioned in shades of blue and purple. After testing colors, the artist changed the palette to sorbet-like shades of lemony yellow and summer peach. Perhaps a nod to artists she admires, this work, adorned with a bird-like pinnacle soars Brancusi-like, while other pieces stand more erect, reminiscent of a Giacometti sculpture; yet, all are uniquely Baer.

To visit Baer's studio is to see how she uses traditional and non-traditional hand tools and equipment to cut, shape, and finish her pieces. Some of her equipment has been repurposed from the world of construction. Other items come from scientific labs. She builds scaffolding out of reclaimed wood, tests colors on microscope slides, and grinds large pieces of glass on a reciprolap designed to smooth stone.

There is an inventive nature to how Baer works. Unique color formulations come from bottles filled with minerals. Her sketchbook shares space with stacks of colored glass, pipettes, and calculations etched onto aluminum foil-lined tables. Boxes of optical glass, a playground of shapes reminiscent of Froebel's blocks, sit near the space where she erects her riggings, mini-scaffoldings to build her complex glass puzzles.

Baer is often asked, "How did you do that?" Viewers are intrigued by the movement of the light and the complexity of her constructions, so exacting that no evidence of assembly is apparent. Baer, who prefers to "show" versus "tell" created a video that reveals the painstaking steps of her artistic process. Against the sounds of a







cello's timbre, Baer shows us her own rhythm of making: sawing optical glass with a diamond blade, smoothing glass with a hand pad and grit, calibrating colorant to the glue, and assembling the final pieces. The endless hours and days of a precise process are condensed into a short film that explains it all.

In naming the pieces, Baer also plays with us. She hints at a secret meaning when she reveals, "the words in each title have deep meaning for me, but do not relate specifically to the sculpture. All my work is nonrepresentational." Each piece is titled with words that may evoke delight, *Everyone Should Whistle*, mystery, *The Tiger in the Long Satin Dress*, or protection, *Mist Falling on Angel Wings*; or maybe not.

For a show that debuts in 2023, it is hard to overlook the fact that many of these works were created against the backdrop of COVID-19. Made at the height of the pandemic, which Baer speaks of as an unparalleled crisis, she also reveals that it provided her with "a gift of time and isolation" which were key to this unique period of making.

There is a beautiful irony in *View From Within*. Baer's sculptures, born in solitude, are celebrated in a museum space where people gather, within a gallery, within a museum. Viewers are gifted time to gaze within each piece and inhale an ethereal quality of light that resonates from within, but is celebrated by those outside.

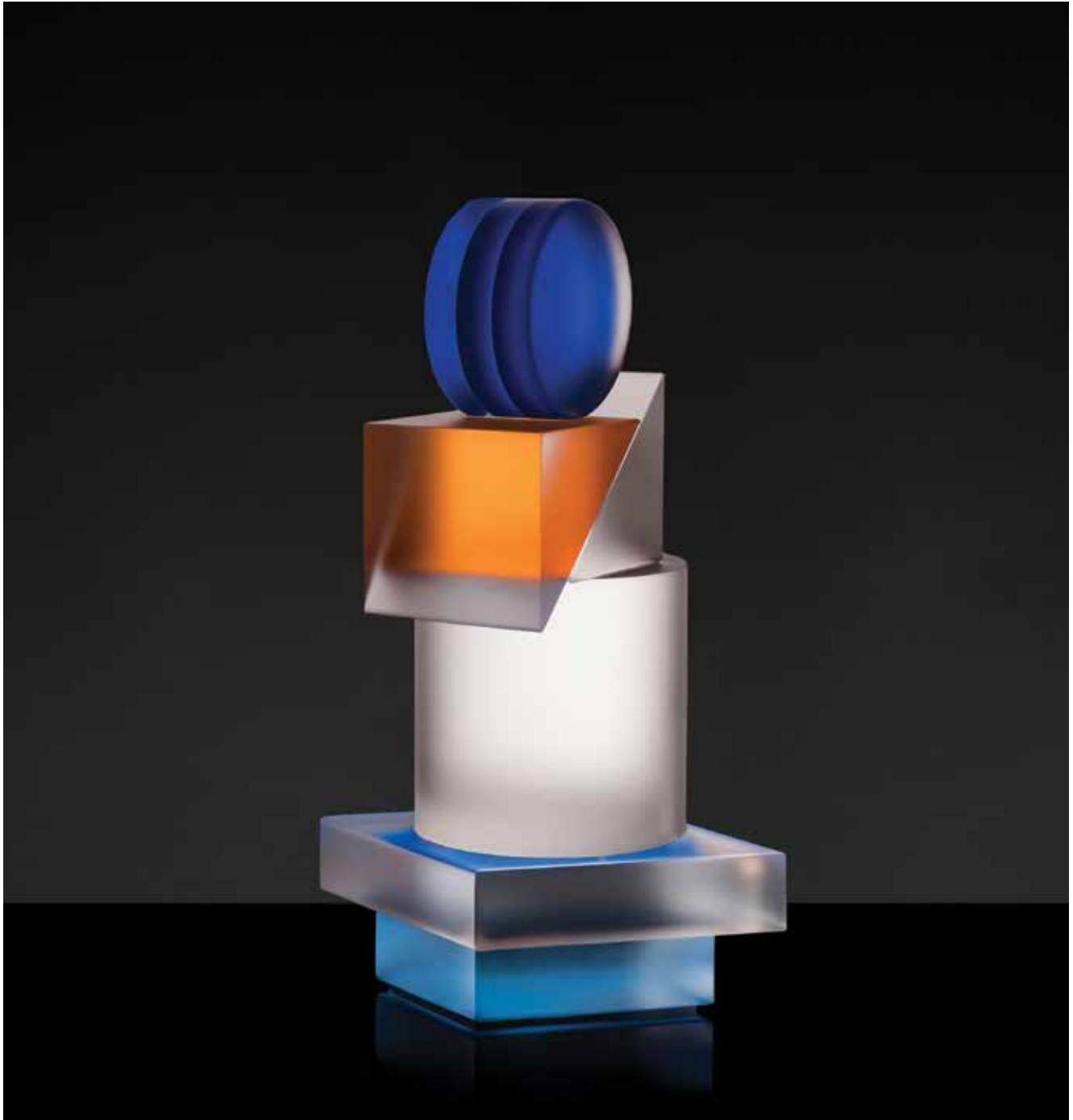
*All quotes are excerpts from a series of interviews conducted with the artist at her studio from 2021-2023.*

DIANE CHARNOV is an award-winning arts writer and nonprofit arts consultant. She is a Trustee of the Penland School of Craft and a board member of the Center for Craft and the James Renwick Alliance for Craft. [www.dianecharnovstudios.com](http://www.dianecharnovstudios.com)



“I FOUND I COULD  
SAY THINGS WITH  
COLORS AND SHAPES  
THAT I COULDN'T SAY  
IN ANY OTHER WAY ...  
THINGS THAT I HAD  
NO WORDS FOR.”

**Georgia O'Keeffe**



*Where Dreams Live*, 2019. 12.25 in. h x 6.25 in. w x 5.5 in. d.

Opposite: *Pulled Threads*, 2021. 9.5 in. h x 5.5 in. w x 6.25 in. d.







*Blue Larkspur in Fading Light*, 2018. 17.75 in. h x 5 in. w x 3.75 in. d. From the Estate of Carolyn Alper.

Opposite: *Summer Tides Recede*, 2019. 15.75 in. h x 4.25 in. w x 3.5 in. d.





“...WHETHER WE KNOW IT  
OR NOT, WE ARE  
EMOTIONALLY AFFECTED  
BY SHAPE, PURE SHAPE,  
BY ROUNDNESS,  
SQUARENESS,  
SHARPNESS...”

Henry Moore



## MY STORY

I realized at a young age that I am happiest when I'm making art. When I was 10 years old, my art teacher organized a contest for my class; design a cover for a small, plain wooden box with a hinge. The winner would be able to put their design on the box and keep it. My line drawing of a doe resting on the forest floor won the prize, and I was given a wood burning tool to engrave the image on the box lid. I had never won anything before. The recognition that I was good at something was important to me.

## FIRST THERE WAS PHOTOGRAPHY...

In the late 1970s, after college and a brief career in the publicity department of a large nonprofit corporation, I began a multi-year photography apprenticeship at an artist's colony at an abandoned amusement park in Glen Echo, Maryland. This was the beginning of my thirty-year adventure taking prize-winning images all over the world for corporate, editorial, and advertising clients.

I photographed everything from elite movers and shakers to superstars and death row inmates. Along the way, I charmed cobras, stood alongside doctors performing groundbreaking surgeries, hung out of helicopters and even flew upside down in a biplane just to get the right shot. There was the afternoon I spent at the White House photographing Bill Clinton for the Fulbright Commission. At the end of the session we talked about movies, and he ordered pizza for dinner. And there was the day I asked astronaut John Glenn what surprised him most upon returning to earth. He replied "how much my head weighed!"

In 1998, while continuing to work as a professional photographer, I set about fulfilling a lifelong dream of studying studio arts. I began at the Corcoran College of Art with classes in sculpture, drawing, and painting, and continued at the Washington Studio School where I immersed myself in painting and color theory.

2006



*Untitled No. 5, Emerge Finalist, Bullseye Glass.*

2012



*Red and Orange Squares, New Glass Review 33, Corning Museum of Glass.*

## THEN THERE WAS GLASS...

In 2005, quite by accident, I wandered into a glass studio and found myself immediately drawn to this ubiquitous material. Like photography, with its unique ability to capture light, this liquid substance, which appears to be a solid, drew me in with its capacity to illuminate and animate form. And so began a new journey to learn more through classes, private instruction, and endless experimentation. What started simply as an interest quickly became an overwhelming passion. Within months, I bought a large kiln and dedicated a large part of my photography studio to glass.

I believe my glass and photography have a lot in common.

Both are highly influenced by my modern minimalist perspective and rely heavily on my desire to create work that communicates.

2012



*Ekomia, American Craft Magazine, Feature Article.*

2014



*Untitled No. 494, le Journal Du Design, Francilly, France, Feature Article.*

2016



*Euclid Alone, Glass Art—  
112 Contemporary Artists,  
Schiffer Boks, Featured Artist.*

## EARLY INFLUENCES...

I was born and raised in Stamford, Connecticut. Starting when I was eight years old and continuing into my early teens, my mother and I would hop on the New Haven Railroad commuter train at dawn in the early spring and fall and spend a long day in New York City. Walking through museums and art galleries was always a highlight. The more abstract work usually drew my attention. Staring at Mark Rothko's floating rectangle paintings was a calming, but altering experience. After I moved to Washington, DC, I was captivated by the work of Richard Diebenkorn and Hans Hofmann and many of the color field painters like Helen Frankenthaler. At the time I didn't know if I was reacting more to the shifting color, the lack of defined subject matter, or something more mysterious. But, I knew



the canvases had the power to alter or intensify my mood. Many years later, I began a formal study of color theory including the psychological and emotional reactions humans have to color and shape.

As I began experimenting with mineral pigments, blending and creating my own colors, I questioned whether it was possible to imbue the mystery and emotion I felt so long ago into this new work with optical glass. In the ensuing years my experiments led me to this new body of work. Like the abstract art I admire, my sculptures encourage interaction, stimulate imagination and often trigger emotional responses.

The immense satisfaction I get from working all day in the studio is still what gets me up in the morning. In truth, I still think it's all magic.

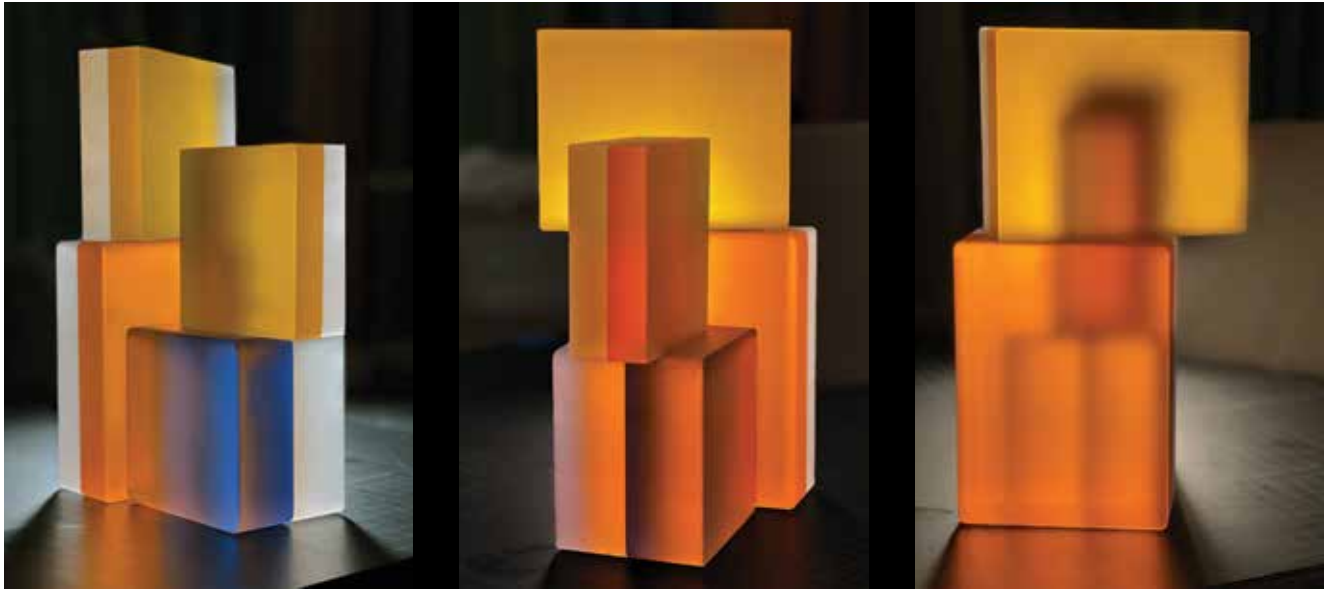
**Rhoda Baer**  
**June 2023**



“ART HAS TO MOVE  
YOU AND  
DESIGN DOES NOT,  
UNLESS IT IS  
A DESIGN  
FOR A BUS.”

David Hockney





*Wolf Moon Rising*, 2021. 10.25 in. h x 5.5 in. w x 8 in. d.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With special thanks to:

Jack Rasmussen  
Director & Curator  
American University Museum

With gratitude for their support and assistance:

Adam Auel, Diane Charnov, Nikki O'Neill, Mike Marion,  
Tony Marino, The National Capital Area Art Glass Guild,  
and Anthony Wilder Design Build.

The entire staff at the American University Museum including:  
Rebecca Adams, Beth Bright, Kayla Conklin, Patricia Edwine-Poku,  
Samantha Hamilton, Deborah Hanselman, Kristin Howard, Grace  
McCormick, Peri Munter, Hillary Rochon, Kevin Runyon, Matthew  
Russo, Alexandra Schuman, Claudia Watts and all of the wonderful  
contractors, art handlers, and student gallery assistants who helped  
make this exhibition possible.



[www.RhodaBaerGlass.com](http://www.RhodaBaerGlass.com)  
[www.RhodaBaerPhotography.com](http://www.RhodaBaerPhotography.com)

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First published in conjunction with the exhibition

*View From Within*

June 17-August 13, 2023

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[www.american.edu/cas/museum](http://www.american.edu/cas/museum)

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Exhibition essay by Diane J. Charnov, "View from Within: Rhoda Baer"

Design by Lloyd Greenberg Design, LLC

Vida Russell and Lloyd Greenberg, *Designers*

Photographed by Adam Auel and Rhoda Baer

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ISBN: 979-8-9866153-9-4

Front cover: *Waiting for Nightfall*, 2019. 17 in. h x 5.5 in. w x 5.25 in. d. From the Collection of Motoko Shimizu & Henri Lezec.

Inside front cover: *And The Cardinal Whistled*, 2019. 17.25 in. h x 6.5 in. w x 4.5 in. d.

Page 2: *Snow Hawk At Dawn* (detail), 2022. 14 in. h x 5.25 in. w x 4.5 in. d.

Page 6: *Everyone Should Whistle* (detail), 2022. 19 in. h x 7 in. w x 6.25 in. d.

Page 16: *Pulled Threads* (detail), 2021. 9.5 in. h x 5.5 in. w x 6.25 in. d.

Page 22: *And The Cardinal Whistled* (detail), 2019. 17.25 in. h x 6.5 in. w x 4.5 in. d.

Page 32: *The Paradox of Contradictory Conclusions* (detail) 2023. 19 in. h x 5 in. .5w x 5 in. d.

Back cover: *The Butterfly That Kissed the Sun*, 2019. 18.5 in. h x 6 in. w x 5 in. d.

ALPER  
INITIATIVE for  
WASHINGTON  
ART

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM • WASHINGTON, DC





# FOR WASHINGTON ART

## MISSION STATEMENT

The Alper Initiative for Washington Art promotes an understanding and appreciation of the art and artists of the Washington Metropolitan Area. We provide and staff a dedicated space located within the American University Museum, to present exhibitions, programs, and resources for the study and encouragement of our creative community.

