

SLOG

VISUAL ART

How Lauren Grossman Turned Glass into Ghostwriting

by [Jen Graves](#) • Sep 29, 2014 at 11:15 am

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This glass bubble with copper letters suspended inside it is a sculpture you turn with your hands so that you can read the text, which says, "IT IS FINISHED." Those were the last words of Christ on the cross, and this piece, *Double Done*, was the last one Seattle artist Lauren Grossman made in the new series *Ghost Variations*, now at Platform Gallery.

Pilchuck Glass School is a major institution in the world of glass art, a hippieish little gem hidden in the woods of the Northwest. But Pilchuck's function outside glass art is one of the best things about it: Pilchuck brings non-glass artists from around the world to

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Totally Gay Sing Along at Central Cinema

Thurs June 25.
VHS, Health Problems, Bad Future, and Private Room at Black Lodge

Thurs June 25, 6-8 pm.
History on the Rocks: The Rise of Craft Distilleries at Museum of History & Industry (MOHAI)

Thurs June 25 at 6 pm.
Noise Yoga Presents FHTAGN at Frye Art Museum

Thurs June 25 at 7:30 pm, Fri June 26 at 7:30 and 10 pm.
Jay Pharaoh at The Parlor Billiards and Spirits

do residencies here, during which they're introduced to the material of glass, and, being artists, they **experiment like mad**. It's one of the reasons glass has moved beyond fine craft in the last 40 years, creeping into museums alongside any other material rather than always contained in its own galleries, and it's also one of the ways the medium's potential has been tested and expanded. The all-star list of artists who've come through includes Maya Lin, Kiki Smith, Nick Cave, Ann Hamilton, Judy Chicago, Buster Simpson, Lynda Benglis, Xu Bing, Jim Hodges, Charles Le Dray, Tony Oursler, Miriam Schapiro, Lorna Simpson, and Fred Wilson, according to Pilchuck spokesman Carlos Esparza. He added that Pilchuck is opening **an exhibition space in Pioneer Square** starting this Thursday.

The latest non-glass resident to come out of Pilchuck with an inspired new body of work is **Lauren Grossman**, who spent three weeks in those woods in summer 2013. The master glassblowers assigned to work with her had to get used to the fact that she didn't want them to **waste their breath making her blown pieces perfect**, she told me. She wanted, instead, imperfect bubbles, lumps, and "snot balls." Like many artists, she not only accepted technical mistakes and failures, she cherished them. They became some of her best ghosts.

Grossman's lumpen glass idiosyncrasies are now **on display at Platform Gallery** in an exhibition called **Ghost Variations**. It's made up of 13 sculptures in glass and metal, and two series of intaglio prints made on glass plates, and these are among the oddest and most alluring things the Seattle artist has ever made. Grossman usually works in hard metal: iron, steel. She's forged sculptures—usually mixing the shapes of **words, animals, and/or body parts**—that light on fire (via gas jets with all their heavy equipment on display like an IV station next to a hospital bed), or that are attached to tubes or scaffoldings resembling torture devices or iron-lung-age life-support systems. **Her work has always been plenty weird**, but the new pieces are weirder and warmer.



Lacunae, by Lauren Grossman.

Several of the sculptures are bubbles of blown glass with text embedded in the walls—suffused with breath the way spoken words are. And like spoken words, these drift upward in their ghostly bubbles, anticipating dissipating, or just becoming stretched and unreadable. The words themselves are from the Bible, which Grossman has been irreverently stealing from for years (I loved Peter Gaucys's review of her 2006 work, on the "**pleasures and perils of the literal**").

The puns and metaphors in Grossman's works are tight and tidy, but she puts them up against material perversity, and that's when they come alive. She just has a funny way of using materials and textures, shapes and surfaces.

Upshot, for instance, is a glass ghost shooting upward. It's tethered like a balloon to a steel stand that has the wide-hipped, unflagging stance of the Eiffel Tower (and four legs) but is actually an adjustable stand. Moving this piece of glass feels like a delicate proposition. The stand, in addition to its extreme strength compared to the thin blown glass, brings to mind science or industry, and there's that promise of science-like or business-like clarity in the title—*Upshot*—but the letters are scrambly and out of control. There is no upshot. There was once an actual sentence in there—each sculpture contains a real phrase, not jumbles, Grossman said—but it's been lost. The promise and the wish of the upshot remains, but the thing itself has gone up in smoke.

The red coloring of the letters was a happy accident, Grossman told me—the result of a chemical interaction between the copper and a certain type of glass Pilchuck uses. Getting the letters to stick to the molten glass did not go so smoothly. They wouldn't stick by simply **rolling the ball of hot glass** over them. Desperate at one point, Grossman found herself maniacally throwing letters at a glass bubble, everybody in the hotshop laughing. They eventually figured out a system for mashing the letters into the surface of the hot glass using tweezers—exactly the kind of thing that happens when a non-glass artist experiments in glass. Now there's a new system for anyone to use. In the finished sculptures, there are layers of glass between layers of letters, so they could overlap without touching. Visually, they read as being all inside the same surface; the glass layers are invisible.

Two wall pieces resembling lighting fixtures are called *Blow Up* in part because in the process of blowing them tore apart the webs of letters Grossman had carefully formed and tried to embed in the glass. Pushing breath into the letters obliterated the language. Those letters had been made of copper, but were smaller, and more delicate, and couldn't survive. The meaning blew up.

There's so much great sculptural perversity in this show, it almost veers into fetish territory: wearable glass head gear called *Capture*; a pair of **blue glass lungs and a long red rubber spinal cord** mounted on a weeble-wobble base with a glass bubble at the top. You push the red rubber hose and the whole thing shakes, all frailty and charm. There's also a goofy, lumpy whale and a goofy, lumpy toy on a string; they remind me of Jenny Heishman's similar capacity for **just the right kind of not-taking-itself-too-seriously misshapeliness**.



JG

Those swirling things at the bottom are the silhouettes of dead moths. The mountain is made of words taken from the book of Isaiah about the holy mountain, where every person will find a feast.

I also love the intaglio prints, but with a caveat: I love them more after learning from Grossman that the "swirly masses of desperation" at the bottom of each print are in fact **marks made by actual dead moths**. Originally I thought they were abstract blobs, which I found precious. But piles of silhouetted dead things feel right in line with all the other sorry ghosts in the gallery. The moths hover underground in the prints, beneath mountain shapes above them that are built out of stacks of large words taken from the Book of Isaiah (about the **feast waiting for every person in the holy mountain**).

While Grossman was at Pilchuck, there was a mass moth die-off. She'd take a break, go get a cup of coffee, and return to the studio to find multiple dead moths on her drawings. Another gift from Pilchuck.

Anyway, Grossman, whose father died a few years ago, is not feeling so immortal anymore. You hand-revolve her tabletop sculpture *Double Done*, which looks like a fortune teller's ball, to read the clearest sentiment in the show: "IT IS FINISHED." Those were the last words of Christ, and this was the last piece she made for the show. Everybody gets the same fortune; here comes death!

The show closes October 11 (images [here](#)).

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