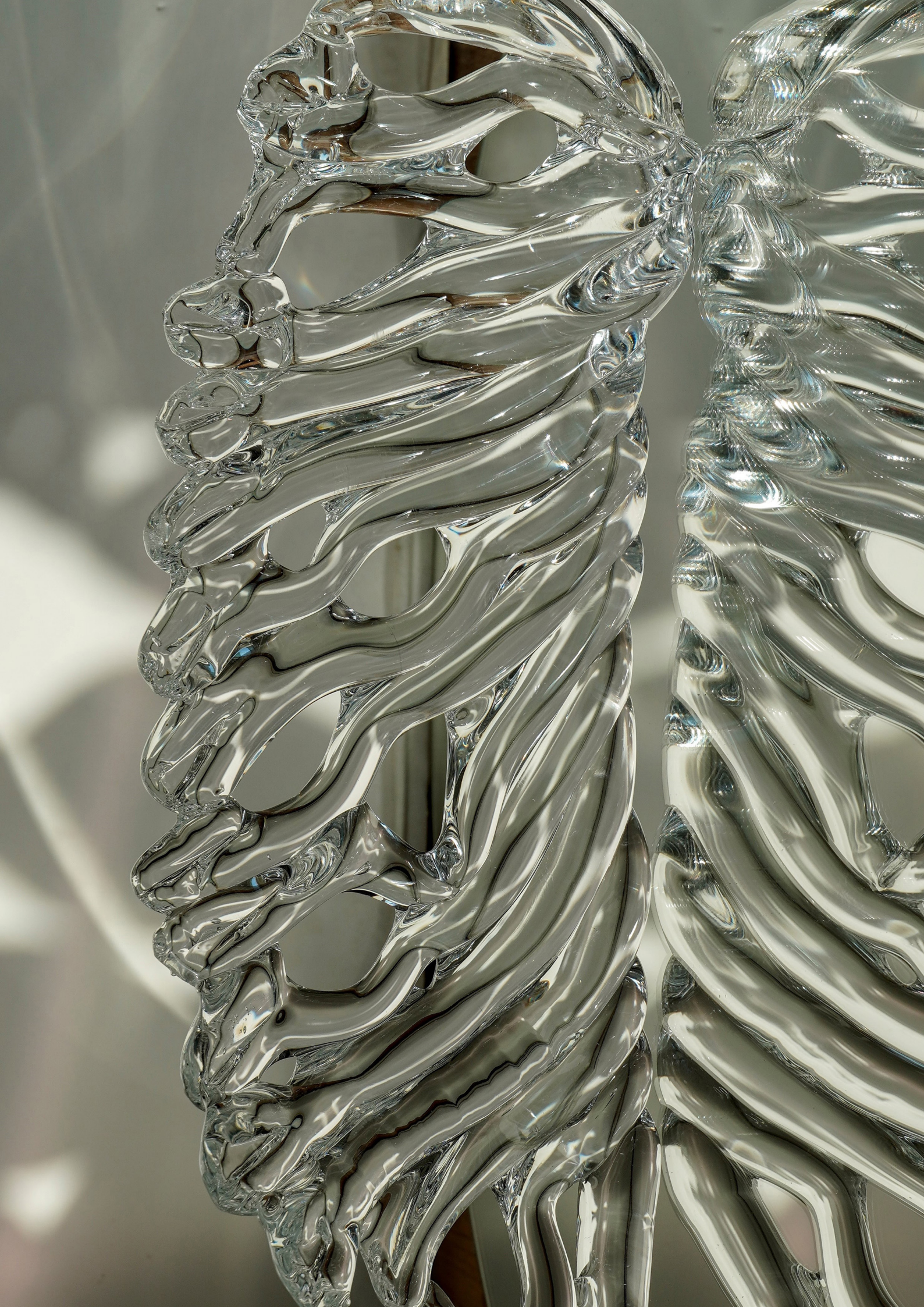






Asking Intimate
Questions About
Our Bodies

with

Manon Hillereau

*Manon Hillereau photographed by Kirstine Autzen
Page 51; Remains, 2024, glass, 40 x 15 cm*



Hi Manon, let's start our conversation with a look into the past. Do you remember the first time you got in touch with visual art?

I don't have a clear recollection of the first time I got in touch with visual art, but I do have a memory about the day I discovered glassblowing. After finishing a Baccalauréate specializing in literature in France, I took a year off to think about what I wanted to do. I was quite lost at this period and the only thing I was convinced of was that I wanted to work with my hands. I was 19 years old when I visited a glass studio on the west coast of France. My eyes teared up when I saw melted glass for the first time. I instantly got attracted to this magical and surreal scene and I deeply knew that I wanted to learn how to blow glass. I remember when I saw the glassblower blowing into the pipe, adding his own air in a glass sphere, I told myself "does this mean that the glass will encapsulate his oxygen, and keep it forever?" This idea of catching air in a piece blew my mind.

Later on, in 2017, you started to blow glass in an industrial teaching school in France. Then, after an apprenticeship of 3 years, you decided to study at the Royal Danish Academy. How did that come about?

When I first started to blow glass, I got obsessed with the technique. I wanted to learn everything about Venetian and Traditional techniques and it made me forget about the material itself and its qualities. After studying for 3 years in an industrial school, I wanted to open my mind regarding my practice. I started a Bachelor at the Royal Danish Academy specialized in Glass and Ceramics on the island of Bornholm. The school has the unique specificity of being open 24h/24 7/7 which was unbelievable to me. There, I was mostly surrounded by nature and glass. Being in this atmosphere almost felt like being in a retreat. At the beginning I didn't leave the island for almost 2 years, which is a bit crazy when you're thinking about how isolated and tiny the island is. I was spending my days at school developing a new relationship with glass and by

extent with myself and my practice. Also being in an international school, surrounded by different people with different backgrounds and experiences, it opened my mind in so many ways. All this combined created a very special and intimate environment where I could only focus on my practice.

Your practice revolves around the human body and its beauty and complexity...

I like to compare my work to a dissection. I tend to represent parts of us that we cannot see. My work is navigating around different themes such as intimacy, pregnancy, sexuality, deconstruction, evolution and death. The body is the connection between all these themes. It's my canvas to express and transcribe my curiosity, fascination and interrogations as a woman. I've been fascinated for many years by how the body functions and the relationship we develop with it. Pink and red are the colors that I frequently use in my work, for me it's the hidden color that we all have under our skins. Vessels. Cells. Muscles. Fluids. Blood. Organs. Flesh. It's everywhere, living in us, making us alive and in movement. I strive to highlight parts of us that we don't usually look at or pay attention to and turn into poetry what used to be forgotten or common in a way. I always wondered what's left, when you start to remove the different layers of that body. What's really hiding beneath our skin, our envelope? I also try to see what's printed into our flesh on a more metaphorical level. Our fears, our vulnerability, our desires, and I see a lot of beauty in this hidden meaning that I try to transcribe and express with glass.

"The body is the material that allows us to cope in a general way, it is the one that supports us, it is the one that hurts, it is the one that is constantly evolving."

The body keeps the traumas, the wounds, and the passing of time. It is also what we have not chosen. Something that

we have to accept and bear, in our intimacy but also in society. I often associate the body as a merging point where all our senses are exacerbated, and when you start looking at it in detail, it opens a broad source of amazement. When I started to reflect on the Human Body, I got really frustrated by the fact that we are only able to see the body from an outside view.

"There is a taboo with the intimate parts of ourselves, our insides, and I was curious to imagine the hidden universe under the skin."

I find glassblowing very interesting and beautiful, but it's not a very common technique in contemporary visual art. What do you treasure about working with glass and what does it offer you from an artistic point of view ?

I've been amazed by the properties of glass for 8 years. This is such an alive material that can bring so many different expressions. Possibilities with glass are endless. In the process of blowing glass, you don't have the space to think much about where you want to bring the piece. You cannot "pause" the process, and think about changing this or that. Glass has a memory, which means that every time you touch a part of your piece during the process, the piece is gonna keep it as an internal tension and you're not really gonna be able to fix or change it. There's no do-overs with Glass. If you make one mistake in the process, you have to carry that mistake until the end. It doesn't always visually appear, but it will change the structure of the material and increase the possibilities of breaking the piece.

This means that, while blowing glass, you have two choices: either having a precise scenario of the piece that you want to make; you have to think about every part of the process beforehand, internalize it, prepare it, organize it and apply it like a choreography. Or, you play with the spontaneity of the material and follow it through unexpected events. This is what I tend to do in my work. Instead of having a clear idea of the final piece before start-

ing it, I instead try to embrace this spontaneity, own the mistakes, the unexpected, and compose and create with it. It took me years to accept and adopt this spontaneous way of creating and following the material instead of going against it with a specific idea, it also goes against the traditional knowledge I'd been taught when I started. Glass is a material that shows aliveness both in the process and in the final pieces.

“Melted glass takes all the space in a room. It captures your focus and your entire attention. It also captures your entire body.”

Heated at 1200 degrees, you cannot avoid the intense warmth of the material. Glassblowing takes all your senses and puts it in a timeline where you have to be fully present. This is what I love the most about this practice. It's almost like meditating or dancing with the most appealing material. I am fascinated by the fact that glass will last for ages. I have pink glass pieces in every corner of my house. This may sound a bit crazy. But I love it so much. It catches all the different light intensities during the day and creates this unique atmosphere where I feel good and surrounded by vividness and aliveness. Spoiler alert, glass also breaks, and when you are as clumsy as I am, it can be a bit problematic.

Creating your pieces must be such a hands-on experiences. Would you mind sharing some of your creative process with us ?

The Anatomical drawings from Renaissance by André Vésale and Leonardo da Vinci are often the starting point of my projects. I usually find realistic representations of anatomy that I can find in books such as The Anatomical Venus from Joanna Ebenstein. These drawings are in black in white, here I start to imagine them in colors, in a live body. I am often going back and forth between drawing and glassmaking. I always have my drawings around me before starting a piece, but I systematically reach a point

where I stop following the drawing and follow the spontaneity of the material. The second part of my process takes place in the cold shop. This is where I cut the glass pieces in different parts to discover the hidden patterns of my pieces. I like to call this part the glass dissection. From there a long process of grinding and polishing begins to create transparent and shiny windows to the inside.

Are there any fellow glass artists you'd like to recommend?

Over the last years I had the chance to work with many talented people such as Marie Breyen, Andréa Berthet and Magdalena Koebe, three inspiring Artists and glassmakers. If you have the curiosity to see how they excel with glass, you can find their work on Instagram under their names.

Let's look a bit behind the scenes now...what have you been interested and inspired by lately?

People. In general. This would be my first spontaneous answer to that question. I have a curiosity towards people. I like asking questions. Random questions. Personal questions. I like to ask people about their relationship to their body and their intimacy and this is inspiring me for my work.

I live observing people, in detail. It can be birthmarks, wrinkles, moles, stretch marks, the porosity of the skin, face expressions, what makes them unique, in a way.

And more artistically speaking, who or what are some of your references ?

I have been deeply marked and inspired by the sculptures from Gian Lorenzo Bernini. I remember standing in the Cornaro Chapel of the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, facing the “Ecstasy of Saint Teresa” for an endless time and asking myself how such a piece of Art could

exist. I love sculptures and how they can catch an expression or a movement. Bernini encapsulates the beautiful, ephemeral moment in which the saint is caught between heaven and earth, matter and spirit. I also take most of my inspiration from Francis Bacon and Hyman Bloom. I love the roughness of their works.

Are you currently working on something you'd like to share with our readers ?

I am currently working on a new project with clear glass. It's the first time in years that I am exploring glass with-

out pink colors. I see it as a way to go back to the essence of the material. It has so much to offer. For this new project I am taking inspiration from human bones. At this stage of my research and process, it almost has the shape of archaeological remains.

And last question, what are your hopes for the future, especially for the rest of this year?

My hope for the future is to keep nurturing my curiosity and my passion, deciphering the beauty of the human body and keep telling its stories through glass.

Get in touch with Manon on
Instagram: @manonhillereau



Intimacy, 2023
Glassblowing, 14 x 10 cm



Both works: Exposed, 2024, flameworking

Page 58, up: Diverse pieces, 2023, glassblowing (Photo by Kirstine Autzen)

Down: Process picture, 2023 (Photo by Kirstine Autzen)

Page 59: 2023, glassblowing, 15x18 cm (Photo by Kirstine Autzen)



