

If Hollow Forms Could Speak



By Dima Srouji

The magic of our landscapes and traditions is so embedded in our psyche that no matter what we make, as designers, this spirit will always somehow be manifested in our work.

After 15 years of being away (I left at the age of 12), I returned to Palestine with a craving to interact with this energy that I knew existed here. By creating the Hollow Forms Project, I aimed to celebrate that spirit and use that energy to reactivate a dying industry.

In architecture school, incredible mentors such as Peter Eisenman, Greg Lynn, Nate Hume, and Mark Foster Gage taught us that objects are not blank, hollow shells; rather they have an inherent power that can draw people in and alter perceptions. I was interested in finding a way to create objects that could be perceived as living, speaking creatures. As an experiment, I worked with contemporary form, initially using computer software, 3D printing techniques, and formats that translated my ideas and designs directly into physical forms. But there was something about this translation process that was too sterile, too scientific, and left the objects silent. Thus, on the quest to get the objects to

speak, I began to explore the creation of such forms by using more hands-on techniques such as plaster casting and clay molding.

This continuing search returned with me to Palestine, where I began to collaborate with Riwaq – a center for architectural conservation, to which I am indebted for introducing me to the beauty of the villages in rural Palestine. Being exposed to this landscape for the first time triggered something inside me.

While on a visit to Jaba', a village that Riwaq is currently renovating, I met two glassblowers who have a tiny workshop on the roof of their home. To get to Marwan and Ali's workspace, I was led through their front door. The well-decorated salon on the right was

An exploration of the invention of glass leads us to the small Na'mein River just south of the city of Acre.ⁱ Here, according to legend, magical sands would come in on one end of the shore and come out as liquid glass on the other. Many classical writers refer to the river, known then as the Belus River, as a long-time source of silica for glassmakers along the entire eastern Mediterranean coast. The river was muddy and unwholesome to drink from, but it was regarded for centuries as holy for ritual purposes.ⁱⁱ





cluttered with silver-plated glass vases that held blooming plastic flowers, portraits of family members framed in gold, and three or four rugs that covered the terrazzo underneath. On the left was a storage space with hundreds of stacked dusty glass tubes, broken machines, miles of bubble wrap, and a small boy in the corner popping the bubbles. Up ahead was the concrete stairway leading up to the roof, which contained a small torch studio where all their pieces are produced.

Marwan and Ali were working on a chemistry set when I first visited. It was clear to me that they have an ability to produce the strangest forms I could imagine. Each beaker was standing there like a little alien. The beakers reminded me of the 3D-printed forms that failed to speak at Yale. Here, these objects had much to say. It may have been the sound of the goats outside, the unfinished concrete folly we were sitting in as we looked out to the 3,000-year-old historic village, or the fire that was forming the item, but something was giving life to that object, and I wanted to be part of the process.

This power of strange forms, I realized later, could be used to revive an ancient craft. Hebron is known for its glassblowing, but the industry has suffered in recent years. It may be due to export policies imposed on us by the Israeli government, it may be the dated forms used by the glassblowers, or it may be the dwindling numbers of tourists who come into the country. I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if Hebron's glassblowers were to experiment with contemporary form. Unfortunately, none of them was willing to work with me on a new collection. On the other hand, there is



something comforting about the forms that have been produced for centuries in the same Hebron factories, and a part of me didn't want to disturb it; so, I continued to work with Marwan and Ali in Jaba'. There, our collections were created. The first was for Amman Design Week, supported by Her Majesty Queen Rania. The project gained so much Western media attention, including coverage by magazines such as *Dezeen*, *Frame*, *Domus*, etc., that it was picked up again for a second collection with Dubai Design Week the next month. During that month, I pushed the forms further to speak. These objects started to look like spiky goats, transparent cacti, and giant millipedes. They tried not only to tell the story of where they come from but also to imagine what a future Palestine looks like. There is a sense of utopia that emanates from the forms, though this may just be my naive perception of the spirit of Palestine represented in glass.

The aim, getting things to speak, was only possible by crossing boundaries, looking back to move forward. Understanding the history of glassblowing in the region, realizing that the first glass furnaces were built right here, is crucial to creating contemporary glass forms in Jaba' today. By considering archeological



findings in the region, I discovered that tens of Byzantine glass workshops, clustered around our side of the Mediterranean, had thrived for centuries. In the middle of Bisan, a vibrant Byzantine city at the time, a large glass workshop and furnace were excavated in 1994. This indicates the status of glass in the economy of a flourishing Byzantine city. Glass played a central role in the local industry and, to a certain extent, still does today. This continuity of tradition is fascinating, as most physical things disintegrate, and oral histories are sometimes forgotten; but a craft can last a long time. The techniques and materials may change, but the spirit of the glass itself still lingers. Perhaps these objects are trying to say, "It feels good to be back."

Dima Srouji is a Palestinian architect and artist who works in the expanded context of interdisciplinary research projects concerned with politics and place. She recently received a master of architecture from Yale University.

¹ Yael Gorin-Rosen, *The Ancient Glass Industry in Israel: Summary of the Finds and New Discoveries*. (Yael Rosen has been head of the Glass Department at the Israel Antiquities Authority which has historically represented Zionist narratives. I would take this reference with caution and an awareness that the language used could be of a specific narrative.)

² Seth C. Rasmussen, *How Glass Changed the World: The History and Chemistry of Glass from Antiquity to the 13th Century*, Springer, 2012.