

Nancy Gong

Exploring Emerging Technologies in an Artistic Environment

by Colleen Bryan

Nancy Gong, artist/owner of Gong Glass Works studio in Rochester, New York, is the epitome of a hungry artist. Not a financially starving artist, but one whose endless curiosity makes her yearn to test boundaries, to move each project beyond what she knows well or has done before. For the past 10 years or so, the veteran artist has felt this need especially keenly. “I haven’t left my roots. I have been aggressively pushing to expand my technical options while also expanding my artistic vocabulary.”

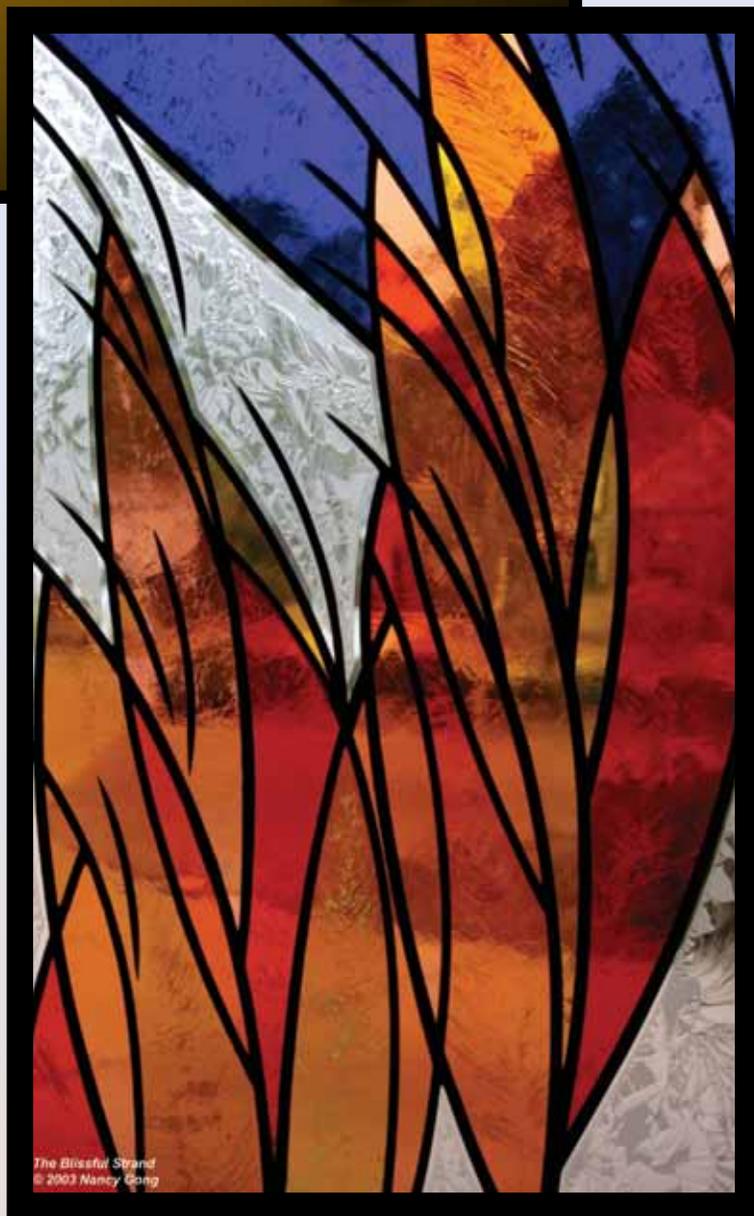
For Gong, the creative process involves identifying an artistic problem and choosing a medium and approach to best advance its solution. The artist discussed the technologies she has found useful to date, key challenges and opportunities with respect to each, and the way she evaluates emerging technologies in an ever changing artistic environment.

Laminating

Gong began her glass career, like many of her colleagues, with leaded stained glass. She soon began to explore architectural lamination, already well established in Europe and a growing trend in the United States. She was attracted to the use of transparent mouth-blown sheet glass in colored architectural art glass lamination. The process is similar in design, cutting, and preparation to that used for a leaded glass window, even while it speaks with a contemporary voice.

“The first laminating project I did was *Femata Rapture*, a vivid contemporary abstract designed to evoke diverse cultural gestures in music without musical notes.” The piece consists of four panels set in windows and an entryway in two perpendicular walls of the client’s residence. The panels are comprised of tempered and hand cut blown sheet glass that is painted, etched, and laminated. “My artistic vocabulary uses large elements that pose particular challenges in cutting and firing the uneven blown glass. I faced both with fearlessness.

“*Femata Rapture* was interesting to me because of its size, scope, and use of bold, saturated colors. I was able to employ some processes that I knew combined well with new ones. The piece was tricky, because I was still learning the boundaries of working with the lamination process. I found them, conquered them, and now have one very expensive sample to show potential clients. The clients for that project still send me e-mails to let me know how much they love living with the color—seeing it every day and in all seasons and times of the day. It adds a positive dimension to their lives and makes them smile. That is why I love doing what I do.”



Nancy Gong, *Blissful Strand (detail)*, etched and chipped glass with lead extensions, 6' 8" x 6', 2003. Design for a home near the Intercoastal Waterway. Photo by Nancy Gong.

Gong’s next lamination project was an installation outside the Rochester Museum and Science Center. That design was part of a campus-wide infrastructure greening project. The project exhibits examples of storm water management combined with the installation of pervious pavement that soaks up water and slowly filters it rather than channeling polluted runoff to storm drains. A pavilion at the site features two large glass panels with regional geographic imagery showing the phases of the water cycle—where the water comes from and where it goes.



Nancy Gong, War Bride, 20" x 22", 2012. Designed for an invitational, Art Reflected at the Memorial Art Gallery. The partial repeal of the U.S. Immigration's Chinese Exclusion Act of 1950 provides the background story of this war bride, the artist's mother, of her life in the East, travels to the West, and life in the West. Three layers of laminated glass and the choice of dichroic laminated film plus what appears to be faded photographs is etched to create a sense of depth that refers to times past. Meanwhile, vitreous paint brings the viewer closer to the present. Photo by Christopher Maggio.

This project brought its own set of challenges. "I chose Lamberts glass, which is mouth blown. The installation was going outside, so it needed to withstand extreme temperature variations. I wanted the glass to be water jet cut for design reasons. I have had blown sheet glass water jet cut before, but we had not cut such large pieces of out of mouth-blown sheet glass. There was breakage. The problem was resolved after meticulously leveling the glass surface. The finished glass fits together like a puzzle and looks fabulous."

Gong finds lamination to be a temperamental and meticulous process. "I was *forced* to install air conditioning in my studio," she all but chortles, "to achieve the control over temperature and humidity that lamination requires."

Fusing

After working in glass for 37 years, Gong feels comfortable reaching for new technologies and mediums to better express herself on a given project. Her first fused glass project was made for patrons who had already accepted a 54-foot by 10-foot etched and chipped glass wall from the artist. They wanted another smaller wall and were thinking of more of the same, but with a conceptual design approach. Gong suggested introducing color into the smaller project.

"I worked with fellow artists who have an incredible knowledge of fusing. They sold me materials, rented me kiln time, and fired the piece for me. I made a sample that the client loved, so I completed the panel and it turned out beautifully.

"The final product was a five-layer panel with two layers of color and one layer of vitreous paint fused together. My fusing friend thought it was beginner's luck, but I felt familiar enough working with the materials to be confident that I could learn new ones. After that project, I started to learn more about fusing and am now firing works on my own, with testing as needed."

An aspect of working with frit and fusing that Gong most appreciates is that it allows her to be more conceptual and spontaneous. "All of the other work I do is *so* planned out that there is little room for spontaneity beyond the drawing, painting, and etching phases. Frit leaves room for spontaneity. A lot of the geometric work I've done is a bit more playful and animated in fused glass."



*Nancy Gong, Tibetan Prayer Flags, 16" x 24", 2010.
The artist learning the language of andamento in
her first smalti mosaic. Photo by Nancy Gong.*

Smalti Mosaic

When Gong first started to explore mosaic as a means of expression, early examples she saw were not very inspiring. “The objects seemed contrived, like a bunch of flashy, colored glasses thrown together to resemble rather rudimentary painting. The process didn’t sing for me.” But then Gong saw an example of smalti mosaic and quickly became excited.

Smalti glass is traditional to basilica windows throughout Europe, and old recipes for it are still used for restoration. It is melted in a furnace and poured hot from a ladle onto a steel table, where it spreads into a round shape. The smalti round is actually called a pizza in Italy and a tortilla in Mexico. Handmade smalti varies in thickness, incorporates tiny air bubbles, and is manipulated with a tool suggestive of a pizza paddle. After annealing, the rounds are cut into standard sizes. In the studio, the artist splits it further with a hammer and hardie (anvil).

All of the surfaces except the bottom of the smalti are textured and useable. “Where the glass breaks, the cuts produce tiny oysters that catch the light in different ways. Smalti mosaics are assembled without grout. I appreciate that when you walk past a smalti mosaic it doesn’t scream at you.”

Along with the different material, Gong notes that classic mosaic making has its own language. One key concept, *andamento*, refers to the flow of the tesserae in the design. “The flow carries your eye in a particular direction chosen by the artist. It is the quality that keeps the image from being just an assemblage of broken pieces arrayed on a flat two-dimensional drawing. *Andamento* is critical to the lifeblood of the design and is what makes the finished mosaic a joy to look at. It’s the brush stroke in the artwork. It’s the soul.”

At the time Gong first encountered smalti in 2010, few artists in the United States were working with it. “I had a gap in my schedule that allowed me to delve into the material, but there were no classes scheduled in the U.S. during that window of time. So I went to Venice and studied at the Orsoni School. That school was started by Lucio Orsoni, and his 30-year protégé taught the class. Orsoni came into the studio a couple of times over the period to critique our work and talked to the students about what we were doing with our projects.”

Her initial foray to select smalti material was less than inspiring. “Smalti is opaque and very heavy, and I had been trying to avoid those properties for most of my career! I was accustomed to working with transparent material. It was disheartening to realize that this new form was going to take even longer than the approaches I already used. I heard my inner voice chastising me: ‘Couldn’t you have found something simpler?’”

Indeed, in Gong’s experience, smalti does always take longer to complete, with a commensurate increase in cost. She has a flood of ideas about how to integrate smalti with other glass techniques and is actively seeking commissions that will open up those opportunities. “Clients who have seen enough of my previous work to trust me to explore materials often provide the opening to push my creative work in directions I haven’t gone before. I’m looking for such a client to use smalti again.”

From Gong's perspective, the challenge with glass as a creative material stems from the same quality that attracts people to it. "Artists are drawn to glass for its characteristic ability to catch and reflect light. There is a fine line between what works and what doesn't with regard to its reflective properties. I love seeing light transmitted through glass, but I don't want to be blinded by it. I want to be able to see the design in the artwork, and too much reflection can detract from that."

One of the properties Gong most appreciates about smalti is that it is not total glitz. "It shimmers subtly on the wall. I don't think glass needs to scream to be compelling."

Technology

While Gong has confidence in the solid combination of processes and approaches that are now in her toolbox, she is always itching to experiment with new concepts, techniques, and placement. "Right now I am eager to explore the technical and design challenges involved with placing glass outside in freestanding pieces." So she is particularly attuned to prospective commissions or public art projects that will make that possible.

Using different techniques gives Gong an array of options for making really good artwork. Competence with a range of artistic processes lets her offer different options to address her clients' needs in both budget and aesthetic terms. Even as she is receptive to new technologies, though, Gong retains a critical stance. "I have seen some good applications but many bad applications of printed technologies—laminating on film, decals, and such. But over time they may improve, so I keep an eye open. Bill Destler, President of the Rochester Institute of Technology, put it nicely. 'Technology is nothing without the gift.'"

While new technology can be a welcome addition to an artist's toolbox, it should not be used just because it is available. Its novelty value is only one factor to consider in choosing an approach. The context of a project and the environment it will eventually occupy should ultimately drive the artist's choice of methods, techniques, and materials. This goes beyond simply employing favored techniques in all circumstances.

"Art Femenella is a nationwide consultant for historic architectural stained glass. I remember once disparaging a window we were looking at by remarking, 'Oh, it is cold painted.' He responded, 'I've seen a lot of cold painting that has survived for 100 years. Generally cold paint will hold up if it is not in prolonged direct sunlight.'"

On the other hand, one of the reasons Gong learned vitreous painting and laminating was to find an approach that can endure ultraviolet sunlight. It opens exciting possibilities and solutions for landmark structures, sculptures, and other work beyond simple curtain walls. "I've chosen techniques that allow me to place artwork outdoors in northern climates. That brings color to places where there is not a lot of color, especially during the wintertime."

At the Center of Change

Materials and processes, though, are almost certain to undergo change. Gong believes that leaded glass will continue as a medium for restoration and conservation work, but she is less optimistic that contemporary leaded work will continue to thrive. "In Germany, they are already migrating to laminated colored or painted glass. I'm not sure how I feel about the painted glass or about the removal of individual cut pieces, but I suspect that laminated glass will continue to grow for modern and contemporary work."



*Nancy Gong, Our Special Place, etched, chipped and cold painted glass, 4' 6" x 12', 2011.
An interpretation of Letchworth State Park for a private residence to provide privacy, daylight, and a view.
Photo by Christopher Maggio.*



Nancy Gong, *TeloMeMitoWho*, blown sheet glass, vitreous paint, dichroic film, fused glass, and gold leaf, 30" x 18", 2016. The design takes an abstract microscopic view of various types of cells and the structures within them. Photo by Nancy Gong.

Although new technologies make replication relatively cheap and easy, Gong still emphasizes uniqueness in her designs for two reasons. First, she is easily bored and would tire of producing similar work again and again, and from a market perspective, uniqueness adds value. "People who commission me to make artwork don't want to see their pieces someplace else."

Additionally, artists must address the question of durability in a disposable era. Their answer will significantly influence their choice of tools, techniques, and materials. Gong observes: "Even major public spaces now are only designed for 15 to 20 years of serviceable life. As artists we must decide if we simply design for that life span or focus on making really good art that can extend for hundreds of years like the reservoir of artwork and history that fed our own artistic sensibilities. I have chosen the latter." Every artist in every prospective project makes that same choice anew.

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Reaching Out to New Possibilities

At this point in her career, with her studio on solid footing, Gong feels that she can take more risks in reaching out and expanding her world of possibilities in glass. “I like to attend conferences and intensive workshops where I share, learn, and interact with other artists. That way, I am exposed to new materials and techniques as a way of keeping my work fresh.”

In spring 2016, Gong attended the first Transatlantic Stained Glass Symposium hosted by Bendheim and Lamberts Glass. Attendees met in Germany and traveled around Munich and Prague, Czechoslovakia. They saw fabulous examples of architectural and other colored glass artwork, visited the Lamberts glass factory in Waldsassen, and listened to a variety of speakers in the glass field. “The goal of the symposium was to encourage designers to work with colored glass in different ways. I had already been on that track, so the experience affirmed and fueled the direction in which I was heading.”

Gong is a member of the Glass Art Society, the Stained Glass Association of America, an Affiliate member of Rochester AIA, and an on-again, off-again member of the Society of American Mosaic Artists. While she values the opportunity such organizations provide to talk to her peers about day-to-day issues, she acknowledges the reality that her hungry, curious nibbling at the edge of what has been known or tried before contrasts with how many artists seek to define themselves through specialized techniques, approaches, or expertise. “I think differently. I often find myself not completely understood even within a group of other artists.”

As a member, the artist is energized by the opportunities that the American Glass Guild presents to exhibit work. The Guild hosts an annual conference and, as part of that, the *American Glass Now* juried exhibit. In 2015, the juried exhibition was staged at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. “It is such a perfect place to feature an exhibit of leaded glasswork! This juried exhibit provides a catalyst for me to make the time to create independent work. It is all about keeping things fresh.” One of the Guild’s missions is education and awareness, not only for people who are designing artwork, but also for the public. “That awareness is crucial if we artists and studios are to continue what we do.”



Nancy Gong, ABVI Donor Wall, *smalti and UltraGlas*®, 5' 6" x 12' 6", 2011. A *smalti* mosaic adds life to a donor wall for the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Photo by Christopher Maggio.

Finding Joy in Deeper Understanding

Gong created an architectural art glass prototype design she dubbed *TeloMeMitoWho* for a hospital competition. The design explores intricate cellular life and the breadth of information carried within each cell to promote the health of the whole. The perspective is the abstract microscopic view of cellular detail. She loves that the project gave her an opportunity to extend her understanding of life at a cellular level, beyond any artistic or technological challenges it presented.

“Learning about structural elements such as mitochondria, the main energy source of a cell, and how vital that is—telomeres as protectors of chromosomes and their role as indicators of health—DNA and ribosomes—they sparked my fascination with the orchestrated flow of how all the parts function within and for the whole of the cell.” She lost the competition but gained a renewed sense of the profound beauty of life at its most elemental level.

Gong submitted her glass prototype for *TeloMeMitoWho* to The *American Glass Now* exhibit at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., for the summer 2015 exhibition. She feels that the leaded glass profession as a whole benefits from more opportunities for artists to do independent work that shows more of who they are as individuals and artists beyond what they produce in response to bids or for mass distribution. She also encourages glass artists who work in two-dimensional leaded and stained glass to submit to broader audiences.

Gong is on the board of the Guild serving as marketing chair and was the 2017 conference and program chair. “Being involved in this way allows me to see what everybody is doing across the industry by scouting out who might be good presenters to make it a fabulous conference. I get to meet a lot of incredibly talented people. That’s a lot of fun.”

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