

# April Surgent

## Fusing Art and Science through Cameo Engraving



*April Surgent, Long Way Home,  
cameo engraved glass,  
17" x 14.375" x 2.25", 2009.*

by Shawn Waggoner

A viewer can look into a black-and-white photograph and be transported not only to a particular place, but to the emotional world of what it feels like to *be* in that place. Like a photograph, April Surgent's landscapes and portraits in glass pack the same powerful punch, but with the added elements of dimension, texture, and translucent light. Her fused and cameo engraved glasswork puts a modern spin on the ancient techniques used to create them.

The recipient of the Neddy Fellowship through the Behnke Foundation, an Urban Glass New Talent Award, and the 2016 USA Fellowship, Surgent earned her BFA from The Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, graduating with honors. In 2003, she changed her focus from blown to engraved glass after studying under master Czech engraver Jiří Hrcuba at the Pilchuck glass school, where she has served as a school trustee since 2012.

Surgent exhibits, teaches, and lectures internationally. Her work can be found in notable collections including the Toledo Museum of

Art, the Chrysler Museum of Art, and the Ulster Museum, among others. Interested in the dialogue between art and science, Surgent is presently engaged in collaborations with research scientists to inform her work, focusing on remote conservation fieldwork and anthropogenic impact on vulnerable species and ecosystems. In 2013, the artist traveled to Antarctica with the National Science Foundation's Antarctic Artist and Writers Program.

Surgent is currently working with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Hawaiian Monk Seal Research Program. In October 2017 at Traver Gallery in Seattle, Washington, the artist will exhibit engravings, a video installation, and a marine debris installation based on her research conducted in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. In November, in an art event hosted by the monk seal program, Surgent will work with the public on an interactive marine debris installation in Honolulu, Hawaii.

## Early History

Surgent grew up in Kenmore, Washington, about 30 minutes north of Seattle, the daughter of parents who worked as finish carpenters running their own millwork installation business. A trip to Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, at age 14 introduced her to the seductive process of glassblowing, and not long after she signed up for her first class.

During Surgent's senior year of high school, she started talking to local glass artists about education and was encouraged to attend art school. Though she received a full scholarship to the College for Creative Studies in Detroit, Michigan, after one year wanderlust got the better of her and she transferred to Australia National University (ANU), Canberra. The ANU faculty, which included Jane Bruce and Richard Whiteley, encouraged developing a strong conceptual basis for well-made pieces of art, an important goal for a traditionalist like Surgent.

"Because my work at that time was about place and human interaction with place, I absolutely loved living in Australia. Being out of my home country made me focus on the issues to which my work spoke. The glass community there was a lot smaller, but very strong because of that. They had a distinctive visual aesthetic that I appreciated very much."

## From Blowing to Engraving

As a glassblower, Surgent found herself frustrated with the material, because she was unable to connect her ideas to the process. In 2003, she attended a Herculite workshop at Pilchuck and discovered the possibilities of engraving. The Czech master's portraits that were cut into glass helped the young artist realize that engraving could provide a vehicle for taking her ideas off of the paper and onto glass.

Lani McGregor, director of Bullseye Projects and the executive director of the Bullseye Gallery, bought a piece from Surgent's inaugural series of engraved glass at the 2004 Seattle Glass Art Society student exhibition. This sparked a significant and pivotal relationship between Surgent and Bullseye Glass Co.

"When I graduated from ANU, the Bullseye Gallery asked if I wanted to participate in SOFA Chicago 2005. Because I was moving back to the States, I didn't have anywhere to make new work. It was then that I was offered a five-week residency at the Bullseye Glass Co."

*April Surgent, The Passenger, cameo engraved glass, 17" x 19.25" x 2", 2009.*





While there, Surgent continued cutting figurative images into glass panels and focused on pushing the work compositionally. "It was an amazing experience being in the factory where the glass is made. I was provided with accommodations and all of the materials and technical assistance they could provide." Going straight into a residency from school made it possible for the artist to continue producing a body of work after graduation.

In 2005, Bullseye offered Surgent her first solo exhibition, *A Meandering Tale*. The show featured engraved panels inspired by the artist's travels in Europe and produced at the Bullseye studio, including *Flight Away from You*. Featuring the portrait of a woman in Venice surrounded by a flock of birds just taking flight, the piece shined a light for Surgent on the possibilities of larger, multipan-eled work.

## Every Picture Tells a Story

A few years ago, Surgent moved with her husband from Seattle out to the Olympic Peninsula and established her studio there on five acres. The artist makes all of her work in two small kilns, a Paragon 20 x 20 and a slightly larger Skutt kiln. She engraves on a portable Merker lathe that can travel with her when needed.

The artist uses her photography as compositional studies for the work. "It's not necessarily a great photo that would make a great engraving. For me, a lot of my decisions into what sort of imagery I'll use have to do with my personal experience of the place, how I felt when I was there, the light, the atmosphere. When I'm engraving, I try to think about where I was and the experience of being there."

The time-consuming nature of the process itself infuses Surgent's images with emotion. Every mark made by her hand contributes to the sensation that one is in the presence of something rare and fine, inspiring viewers to conjure their own stories. Surgent titles are important in that they convey her piece of this relationship by hinting at what the work means to her.

Surgent's research is as important to the outcome as her labor intensive process. Using photographs, drawings, and sketches, she narrows down what she is looking for in a specific subject before projecting it onto the wall as a full-scale image. She prints out smaller images on paper. "I try to get the compositional study down before I work with glass, because the glass is so expensive and time-consuming."

*April Surgent, Half Five, cameo engraved glass,  
28.75" x 22", 2010.*



Surgent fuses three layers of Bullseye glass—white on top, lighter transparent in the middle, and darker transparent on the back. Because she has a difficult time seeing the composition through too much color, the artist opts instead for a muted palette and has only recently begun to introduce a splash of color here and there.

Once fused into a panel, the artist marks the glass for working on the cutting lathe, which is much like a metalsmith's grinder. She takes the glass panel up to the spinning diamond wheel with water feed and starts removing the top layer of white glass.

Cameo engraving is historically a method used to carve objects such as gems, jewelry, or vessels. It nearly always features a raised (positive) relief image contrasted with intaglio, which has a negative image. In Surgent's case, though photographs don't do it justice, her work is rich with texture including high, raised areas and low, carved sections.

What kind of a personality does it take to be interested in the engraving process? "When I discovered engraving through Jiří, the process really spoke to me because I'm kind of a hermit. I appreciate quiet time and like to work alone. Many other processes in glass are team oriented. Engraving just doesn't have that same sex appeal. You're draped in an apron, hearing protection, respirator, eye protection, by yourself, performing a cold, loud, dirty, gritty process."

Surgent describes Harcuba as the "Johnny Appleseed of Engraving." When the Czech master saw the classic technique he loved so much losing favor, he went on a personal campaign to recruit young artists like Surgent into the technique. Harcuba began teaching enthusiastically and is responsible for an engraving revival.

## Antarctica

In 2013, Surgent traveled to Antarctica with the National Science Foundation's Antarctic Artist and Writers Program, fulfilling a lifelong dream. There, for the first time, she saw conservation fieldwork in action. Her goal was to explore 21st-century Antarctica and reveal in her artwork how it has changed since the days of Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton. As a polar explorer, Shackleton led three British expeditions to the Antarctic and is one of the principal figures of the period known as the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration.

"I was becoming increasingly concerned with the environment and what's happening with climate change. I was surrounded by scientists doing such valuable work to shed light on these issues and wondered how my work can bring value to the world. I actually began to wonder if I'd chosen the right career path." Surgent, however, soon realized the power of art to inform people. The question posed by her work transformed from how environments impact people to how people impact environments.



April Surgent, *Portrait of an Iceberg*, cameo engraved glass, 18.875" x 29.125" x 0.75", 2015.

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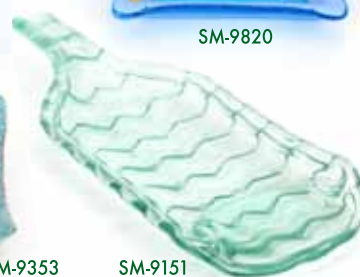
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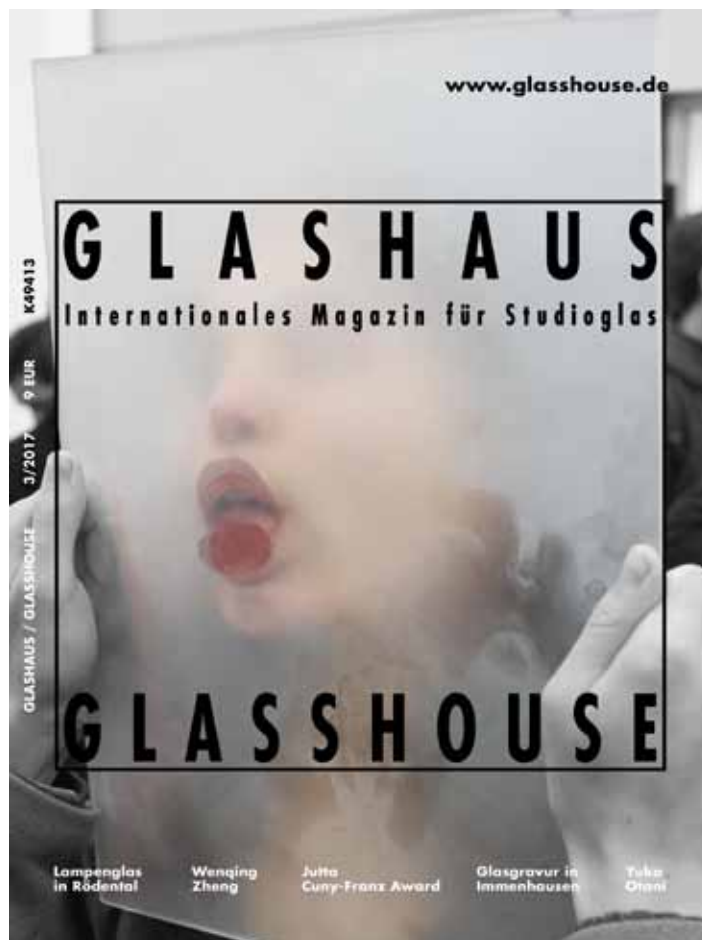
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In customary fashion, Surgent began this body of work by taking photographs, this time shooting with a long exposure pinhole camera introduced to her by Seattle photographer Janet Neuhauser. Using an Altoid tin with a pinhole and low ISO photographic paper, Surgent captured what 21st-century Antarctic landscape looks like through the lens of light. The stunning glass panels were exhibited in 2014 at Traver Gallery in Seattle and 2015 at Heller Gallery in New York City.

## NOAA Hawaiian Monk Seal

### Research Program

While in Antarctica, Surgent began looking for other opportunities to work with conservation research scientists, only this time she wanted to participate in the research. She approached the head scientist of the NOAA Hawaiian Monk Seal Research Program and pitched the idea of working as a volunteer artist in residence. The program provides research and recovery for the highly endangered Hawaiian monk seal. Only 1,300 seals remain, living only in the Hawaiian island archipelago, in the Northwestern Hawaiian islands of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

Photographing, drawing and journaling, Surgent worked with two other women as a field biologist on a 45-acre treeless island 10 feet above sea level. Living at the Pearl and Hermes Atoll 1,200 miles northwest of Honolulu, the three women were seven days away from anything. Their primary goal was Hawaiian monk seal population assessment, traveling between islets to observe, tag pups, and disentangle and treat injured seals.

On the island for four and a half months, Surgent is currently making the work that will portray what life there was like with the goal of



*April Surgent, Torgersen's Adelies, cameo engraved glass, 17.875" x 26.875" x 2", 2014.*



*April Surgent, Neumayer, cameo engraved glass, 17" x 40", 2015.*

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helping viewers connect to nature. "I hope the work will help people understand the impact we're having on the environment and what scientists are doing to help mitigate those changes. The marine debris that covers low-lying islands is a huge problem. And big ocean problems such as pollution and debris are really everyone's concern."

Opening on October 5, 2017, Surgent's upcoming *Sea and Sky* exhibition at Traver Gallery will include new engravings plus a collaborative video installation produced with Scott Morrison, projected inside one of the wall tents used on the island. Marine debris, including an array of disposable lighters, will also be on view. In November 2017, in an art event hosted by the monk seal program, Surgent will work with the public on an interactive marine debris installation in Honolulu.

Surgent endeavors to develop a platform between artists and scientists to help facilitate collaboration. "Artist and scientists are basically trying to do the same thing, trying to learn about the world. We have different approaches, and so much can be gained from dialogue about that."

In an interesting dichotomy of using ancient technique to express modern day issues, Surgent's engraving records how we treat our planet and attempts to inspire people to care about what happens to it. "We store everything in clouds these days, but an engraving in glass is a tangible object people can connect to. I'm engraving because I'm looking at places that are experiencing tremendous change. The Northwest Hawaiian Islands may be gone by the end of this century. A cameo engraving is a valuable, archival record of a specific place in time."

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**April Surgent**  
[www.aprilsurgent.com](http://www.aprilsurgent.com)

From June 9 through September 2018, the Wichita Art Museum will present a survey of Surgent's work along with that of fellow artist, Charlotte Potter.

April Surgent was recently a guest on Glass Art magazine's Talking Out Your Glass podcast. Subscribe on iTunes or Stitcher to hear this and many more fascinating interviews with glass artists by visiting the "Talking Out Your Glass Podcast" link under "What's New" at [www.glassartmagazine.com](http://www.glassartmagazine.com).

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