

She Bends: Neon as Soulcraft seeks to illuminate the profound impact manual trade skills have on our connection to the material world through the art of neon bending, a craft that demands not only intense physical engagement, but also a diverse knowledge base spanning physics, chemistry, and spatial abilities.

Borrowing its title from Matthew Crawford's book, "Shop Class as Soulcraft," this exhibition echoes Crawford's argument that manual labor can be highly rewarding, fostering both personal fulfillment and social responsibility. Neon is perhaps particularly well-suited to promote these benefits due to its history and processes. For over 120 years, neon-benders have engaged hands-on with their medium in a choreography of body and breath, to shape glass tubes sound enough to be filled with noble gas and successfully illuminated.

It is worth noting that the materials used in neon are recyclable and inert; the gasses are naturally present in our air, and the vessels are made of glass. *She Bends* advocates for recognizing manual labor as a foundational element of a balanced and sustainable society. By elevating the significance of this work, the exhibition cultivates a culture of mindful consumption and ethical work practices. Creating and maintaining a handmade object, like neon, positions the maker in service to the

material, contrasting with a culture of convenience and disposability. This ideology suggests that we, as members of society, bear responsibility for the materials we use and acquire. This message is particularly relevant in the Bay Area, the birthplace of emerging technologies that can often distance us from making and understanding the materials we use.

At its core, *Neon as Soulcraft* champions the accessibility of vocational trades within our educational system. In an effort to expand opportunities for teaching this craft, She Bends used this curatorial opportunity to create three neon residencies across the United States. This exhibition showcases artworks created during those residencies, and through these works, invites us to consider how exposure to such skills can foster innovative approaches to sustainability, social responsibility, and nurture creative problem-solving.

She Bends: Neon as Soulcraft is guest curated by She Bends. Founded to support historically marginalized craftspeople in the neon trade, She Bends is dedicated to building a more equitable future for neon art through public education, curatorial projects, and artist programs that foster diversity and sustainability. These programs push the boundaries of the neon medium beyond

commercial signage into the realm of fine art.

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RESIDENCIES

What might shop class look like in a more equitable and accessible future? For *Neon as Soulcraft*, teaching artists were paired with emerging student artists through a community-driven selection process in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Seattle for a two-month residency. These residencies provided a platform for teaching artists to refine their pedagogy and for student artists to explore neon, addressing the scarcity of resources available for cooperative learning environments in this trade. With few neon studios remaining in the United States, and even fewer equipped to teach the craft, these residencies aimed not only to impart vocational skills but also to invigorate the field, and convey the value of working with one's hands in a trade that may seem bygone or largely forgotten. The resulting artworks, seen here for the first time, span textual, gestural, and sculptural work in neon.

The Student Artist Selection Committee for Neon as Soulcraft included She Bends curators Kelsey Issel and Meryl Pataky, Museum of Craft and Design's Curatorial Director Ariel Zaccheo, Headlands Center for the Arts' Executive Director Mari Robles, and Studio Ahead's Principal Designer Homan Rajai. Teachers and students were paired as follows:

Los Angeles, CA

Teaching artist: Leticia Maldonado

Student artist: Mayra Zambrano

Philadelphia, PA

Teaching artist: Victoria Ahmadizadeh Melendez

Student artist: Christen Baker

Seattle, WA

Teaching artist: Dani Kaes

Student artist: Melissa Jean Golberg

NEON "QUILT"

In honor of the learning journey of neon bending, participating artists gathered remnants and discarded glass pieces from their residencies. She Bends transforms these artifacts into a large site-specific "quilt," revealing the hidden labor and dedication inherent in working with this material. By doing so, the exhibition showcases the beauty and intricacy of neon art while highlighting the profound impact of craft skills on personal development and societal well-being. As teaching artist Dani Kaes summarizes her residency experience: "It was always more about the doing, learning about each other, and building a space together as two people who started as strangers."

Philadelphia

About the Artwork

Victoria Ahmadizadeh Melendez and Christen Baker

You are here, 2024

Neon

Victoria Ahmadizadeh Melendez and Christen Baker set out jointly to make a “mind map,” referencing the creative process, the format and intimacy of the artist’s sketchbook, and the history of text in neon light. Starting with two signs reading “you are here,” one made by Ahmadizadeh and the other made by Baker, webs of words expand across the wall as the two artists’ sentiments interconnect. Each word is a different font, color, and shape inside. Reflective lines link the different word clouds and colors of light, drawing relationships between them. Manuel Lima’s book, “Visual Complexity: Mapping Patterns of Information” served as a resource for observing how the mind map can be used in endless iterations to visually organize both empirical and emotional data.

About the Residency

Victoria Ahmadizadeh Melendez has been involved in teaching almost as long as she has been working with glass and neon, and enjoys seeing the impact that new

skills and knowledge can have on students. She says, “Passing down techniques, cultivating thoughtfulness about why we work with neon light, and holding space for self-exploration while also building mutual respect and community are some of my core goals as an educator.”

Christen Baker has had ten years of experience making visual art, but is fairly new to the world of neon. In her proposal for the residency, she cites, “This opportunity stands as a pivotal moment in my artistic career, promising to be not only transformative but also affirming of my dedication to the craft of neon.” During the residency, Baker wanted to learn how to make text, a crucial component of neon sign making. Although we may immediately think of text when we think of neon, bending words and text can be challenging.

Creating words and letters out of glass tubes starts with impeccable pattern making and sequencing. Understanding patterns and how text has to be manipulated in order to make a legible neon sign is among the first projects in a more traditional neon apprenticeship. After some initial frustration, Baker noticed a leap in progress after practicing through the first few weeks.

Ahmadizadeh also noticed improvement in her ability to explain concepts in neon, and to problem-solve larger

projects made up of many units of neon. The exploration of font, scale, and color created a sampler of fabrication experiences, with challenges and valuable opportunities for learning in each piece of the mind map.

Teaching Artist

Victoria Ahmadizadeh Melendez combines poetry, mixed media, glass objects, and neon light to create objects and installations that draw inspiration from her Puerto Rican and Persian heritage. She has been awarded residencies at Pilchuck Glass School, MASS MoCA, and the Studio of the Corning Museum of Glass, among others. Her work has been shown in dozens of museums and galleries in the US and abroad including Heller Gallery, Traver Gallery, Glasmuseet Ebeltoft, Corning Museum of Glass and the Tacoma Museum of Glass. Her sculptures are included in the Corning Museum of Glass *New Glass Review* #33, #38 and #42, annual journals documenting innovative artworks in glass. Victoria is passionate about being an educator and was previously the Director of The Bead Project at UrbanGlass, a program geared towards diversifying glass and supporting womxn as they learn how to work with the material. She is an Adjunct Associate Professor at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, PA, from which she also received her BFA. She received an MFA in Craft/Material Studies from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2016.

Student Artist

Christen Baker is a multidisciplinary artist whose work explores the complex relationship between attention, desire, and the economy that emerges from it. Baker's interest in the intersection of technology, new media, and visual art has led her to work in a variety of media, including glass, neon, sculpture, photography, and 3D scanning. Baker currently lives and works in Philadelphia, PA, where she continues to investigate the geographies of public spaces and objects, real and imagined. Baker earned a BFA in Ceramics from the Kansas City Art Institute and an MFA from Tyler School of Art and Architecture.

Los Angeles

About the Artwork

Leticia Maldonado and Mayra Zambrano

Care for Creatures, 2024

Neon

In celebration of their California roots, Leticia Maldonado and Mayra Zambrano advocate for the local flora and fauna affected by climate change. Zambrano's previous art background utilizes environmental art and activism, so the duo built off that, using this new skill set to create a series of native Californian species out of neon. Parts of the installation are sculptural and three-dimensional, using the neon tube as a line to contour the shapes of creatures great and small. Maldonado says of the work, "I'm lucky that the concept Mayra wanted to work on is similar to a lot of the work I create outside this residency. I'm interested in biological shapes, plants and flowers."

Among their creations are a California Sunflower; Summer Lupine, a native perennial herb; and the California Poppy, all of which grow from northern California in the US to Baja California in Mexico. The California Poppy became the official state flower in 1903. Also included in the installation are a set of butterflies that may represent any number of native species; the Dog Face Butterfly,

the California Tortoiseshell, or the California Sister, are all native and display a similar deep orange coloring. A symbol of strength and independence, and the centerpiece of California's flag, a grizzly bear appears here glowing in blue—perhaps a nod to its extinction.

About the Residency

Leticia Maldonado was supported by the encouragement of her community to begin teaching single-day intensives at The Museum of Neon Art in Glendale, CA in January 2023. Humbled and invigorated by the experience, she is now proud to further seed neon as a craft beyond her own practice. She says of this opportunity, “My favorite part of the residency was getting to spend a prolonged period of time with one student—watching her skill set develop and all the concepts add up into her work.”

In her proposal, Mayra Zambrano wrote, “Neon is a bright and attractive form of art and I'd love to use it to spread loud messages (activism). This residency will allow me to learn the skills to bend neon and create some glowing plants!” Her goal achieved, she feels empowered to continue working with neon and hopes to use the skills honed with Maldonado in an ongoing art practice. She says of the residency, “One of my favorite parts about the residency was hanging out with Tiza, but the second part was seeing everything add up, tubing by tubing, and then

welding them together so that they all add together into this bigger unit.”

Teaching Artist

Leticia Maldonado was born in West Covina, California and raised in Las Vegas, Nevada. She grew up surrounded by the bright, eye-catching signs atop famous casinos. For the past few years, she has been mentored by well-known neon artist Michael Flechtner. Under his tutelage, Maldonado has swiftly emerged as a rising star. Maldonado's neon sculpture work—primarily floral motifs delicately arranged, burning with seductive allure—ranges from small to large scale. In 2022, Maldonado's first-ever museum solo exhibition was at the Museum of Neon Art in Glendale, California. The artist lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

Student Artist

Mayra Zambrano was born and raised in the Inland Empire (a metropolitan area inland of coastal Southern California, centering around the cities of San Bernardino and Riverside.) She recently graduated from California State University, San Bernardino with her BFA. She is a Chicanx artist who works with glass, ceramics, painting, sculpture, and wood. Zambrano feels that mixing media is significant to her biculturalism, as she believes that being an artist connects with her artisan lineage and ancestry.

Zambrano noticed an absence of representation of her culture in the arts and is motivated to be a role model for people like her. Zambrano is currently focused on creating art with a call to action to advocate for the environment. Her concern for climate change and global warming has caused her great anguish and art has been the outlet for her to express her concerns. She hopes to create change in communities through art.

Seattle/Tacoma

About the Artwork

Dani Kaes and Melissa Jean Golberg

The process of building a safe space, 2024

Neon

Co-authored by Dani Kaes and student artist Melissa Jean Golberg, the title of this installation, *The process of building a safe space*, refers in equal parts to a protective learning environment and to the bias against women in the field.

In historically male-dominated fields like glassblowing and neon bending, the lack of shared experience can become a barrier for women. Kaes can recall “so many times in my apprenticeship days where I was shut out or taken advantage of... my goal is to make it easier for women to thrive and have access in the medium.” Kaes’ uses her studio to intentionally center women’s voices, with open access to resources and knowledge-sharing.

In both the residency and the artwork, Kaes and Golberg worked together to encourage experimentation, mistakes, and growth by removing the pressure around creating a perfect finished product. Golberg reflects, “This work leans heavily on the act of making it rather than the final result,

as Dani was able to give me a safe and accepting place to learn neon.”

About the Residency

Dani Kaes has been involved with youth glass education for the past ten years. She mentions, “Traditionally, glass is a highly gate-kept medium, with limited voices and points of views. Creating opportunities for access such as this is the only way to dismantle the barriers and hierarchies in the glass world.” Kaes began her practice in hot glass, and is accustomed to steering hot glass artists towards bending, which is a truly unique form. Among the differences, neon is more tactile than hot glass—the bender has their hands directly on the cool parts of the glass tube at all times. Though the raw material (silica) is the same, almost everything about the way it is manipulated is different.

Melissa Jean Golberg came to the residency with a pre-existing practice of using glass, photography, language, and performance. Of her goal for the residency, she wrote, “With guidance from local neon artists, the Neon as Soulcraft residency can help me understand a new way of communicating through glass, while also giving me the opportunity to advance my conceptual ideas of identity, language, and femininity.” However, the short residency period did not feel like enough time to learn

and synthesize a century-old craft. Interestingly, neon can feel fairly inaccessible in relation to hot glass. There are a greater number of shared hot glass studios across the country, and resource sharing within a fragmented network of neon benders can be tough. But the neon community is growing, as Golberg reflects: “One of the things I enjoy most about glass is the community, and I felt it grow in the neon shop with Dani as she was happy to answer any questions I had and let me take the time I needed to build my skills and understanding of the medium.”

Teaching Artist

Dani Kaes is a light artist and educator based in Seattle, WA. Starting as a traditional glassblower as part of the Hilltop Artist program in 2012, she transitioned into neon after apprenticing as a commercial neon bender in a prominent Seattle sign shop. She has continued to work in neon independently and commercially, often citing its inherently temporary nature as its most valuable and intriguing feature. Interested in the innate humor found in nihilism and the absurd, her work plays with scale, brash color choices, animation, and repeating simple shapes to explore the idea of what has the potential to become art rather than setting out to make art itself. She often describes her work as “nothing she would ever want in her house” because it is “big, bright, and always flashing”.

Student Artist

Melissa Jean Golberg is an interdisciplinary emerging artist, with a focus in glass and photography. Originally from Iowa, she studied Sculpture and Social Practice at the Kansas City Art Institute in pursuit of her BFA, transferring to the University of Washington in Seattle for her BA. She is currently majoring in the Interdisciplinary Visual Arts program and minoring in Environmental Studies. Melissa Jean is best known for using photography and glass as materials to convey freezing moments in time. As she feels connected to the earth through the memories she shares with it, she additionally explores themes of identity, belonging, environmental psychology, and the memories we leave in places. Her current body of work is exploring concepts of feminism and the objectification and commodification of women, using language and glass as materials.