

SVATOPLUK KASALY

The Sensuality of Glass



Patrick R. Benesh-Liu

An interesting aspect of jewelry is its connection to sensuality—it is a funny thing, both attractive and potentially dangerous, with the root of this buried in its magnetic effects. Seductive and terribly enticing to behold, some cannot keep their gaze off a sensuous object, while others feel the need to abjure and reject it with all the rigor of a monk's vigil. To them, surrender and abdication to the senses can be a form of annihilation, and thus its siren call must be resisted. However, without the senses, we are bereft of interaction with the world around us. It is only through this interplay between elements and souls that the joyous energy of life is truly realized.

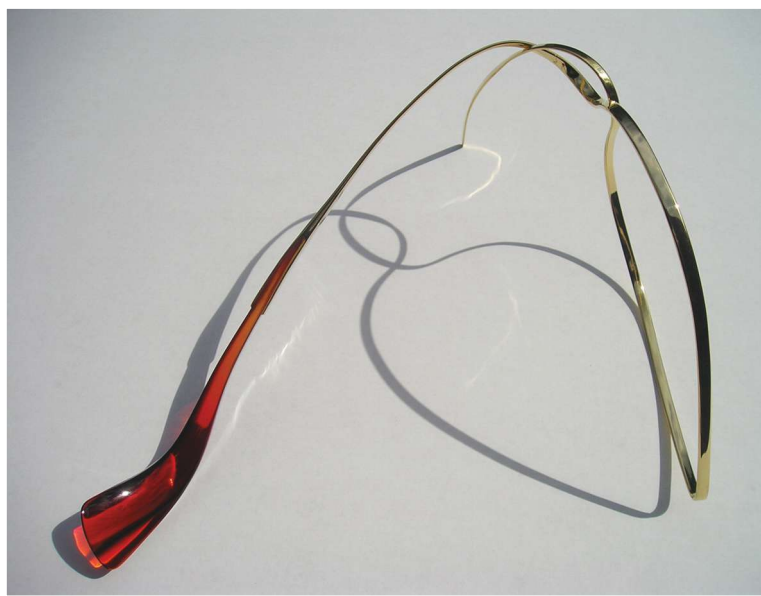
It is this latter aspect of sensuality that jewelry artist Svatopluk Kasalý finds perfection in expression. The curve is one major aspect of sensuousness, and Kasalý delights in the abundance of these in the female form, with no hint of bashfulness. Indeed, his exuberance and celebration of it permeates every piece of jewelry he manufactures.

He makes a pendant to rest just at the point above and between a woman's breasts; he nurtures one leading edge of a torque into a bend that mirrors the dip found between neck, collarbone and shoulder. He sees how the neck itself is round, and gives joy to it, curling a projection of metal and softened glass to embrace it.

However, the beauty of Kasalý's work is that it is not limited to the architecture, as one might call it, of his designs. In the glass itself, so vital yet nothing without the protective grasp of the metal, he focuses on making ripples and dips and hollow spots that fracture light and make something which is supposedly see-through, opaque and physical. And in this way he makes glass like water, and seeing that, in material form upon the human being, is magic.

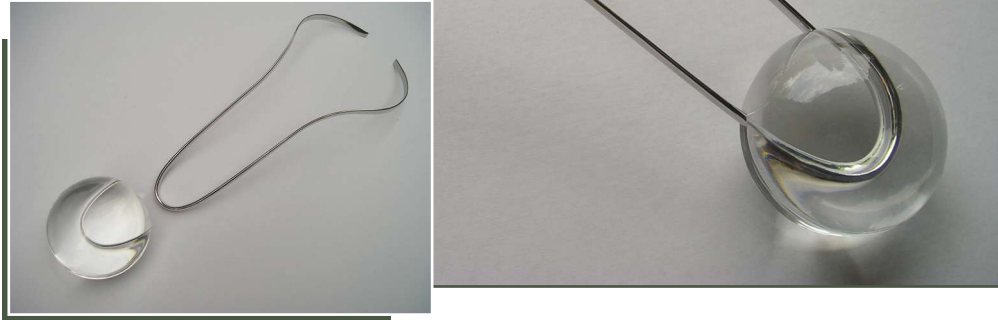
Light is as integral a component of Kasalý's oeuvre as the solids of glass and metal. Reflections, refraction, diffraction, dispersion; the scattering of light, and sight, is a third dimension of Kasalý's jewelry. It transforms what could be considered a mundane substance into otherworldly beauty. The fluidity of the glass casts shadows and occlusions which warp and reveal in profound complexity. Now you see it, now you do not. This artistic sorcery is magnified, literally and figuratively, upon the human canvas.

Kasalý was born in Pelhřimov in 1944, and grew up under the communist regime of post World War II Czechoslovakia. Now the Czech Republic, the country is



NECKLACE FOR THE BACK of ground glass, brass and gold plating, 25 x 15 x 15 centimeters, 1995. STINGRAY NECKLACE of ground glass, brass and rhodium plating, 35 x 15 x 15 centimeters, 2012. NECKLACE of ground glass, brass and gold plating, 22 x 12 centimeters, 1998. Photographs by Svatopluk Kasalý except where noted. Opposite page: RINGS of ground Umalex, 1980. Photograph by Tasas Kušcynskyj.

NECKLACE of ground Umaplex, brass and rhodium plating, 24 x 12 centimeters, 1972.



known for its rich history of artistic culture, from grand murals by Alphonse Mucha to its predilection for beautiful glasswork. It is in this latter revered tradition that Kasalý found his voice, not through the creation of glass itself (although he has hotworked glass), but in its subtle manipulation and shaping through lapidary techniques suited to only the finest gemstones. But instead, the gem is the glass itself.

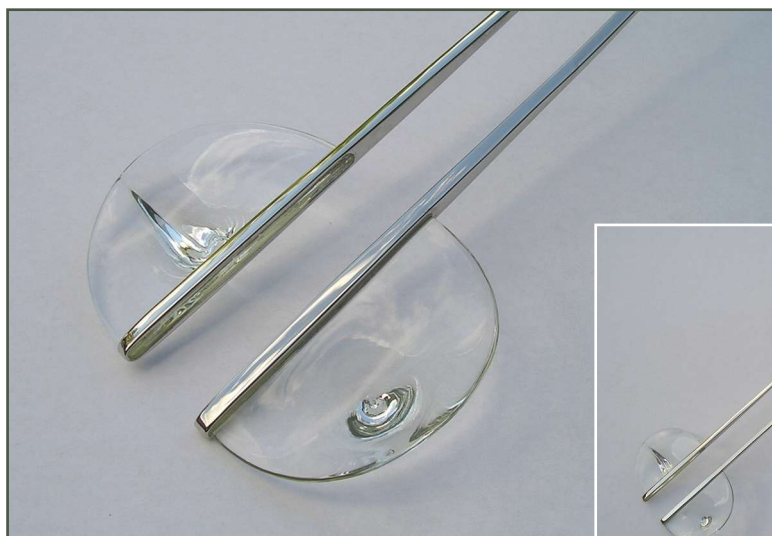
The process begins with broken shards. Kasalý orders various pieces of colored glass from a factory in the Czech Republic, which are then shattered into several smaller, but still sizeable, portions. He examines each piece carefully, speculatively, before selecting one in which he can see the shape of the pendant waiting to be born. His aim is to carve from this larger element the seed of the form he observes within. After finding the right piece, he will make a sketch or a painting—this is the dream, the imagined shape, which Kasalý has in his

mind, waiting to be translated into physical existence—and it precludes every work.

The sketch does not necessarily occur first, as the artist also wields his pen to delineate on the surface of the glass the lines in which to break out the emergent jewel. It is all part of a totality, a vortex where the steps flow together and become one, with no clear-cut order or equation to be followed.

After the shape of the glass has been decided, Kasalý goes to the diamond saw to tease the form forth. Water flows down a tube onto the circular blade, to ensure that the glass dust created in the process of abrasion is washed away. The artist slowly proceeds to carve into the piece of glass along fault lines until the full extent of the cut has been made. Then snap! One piece of glass becomes two, divided in hand between left and right.

The grind wheel is in many ways the Czech artist's most valuable tool. After the diamond saw is used to cut



NECKLACE of ground glass, brass and rhodium plating, 45 x 13 centimeters, 1980.



and divide the glass, the wheel is utilized in its shaping and polishing. He utilizes slip, a muddy substance which is an abrasive, with water to hew off the rough edges by repeated applications against the grind stone. Again, the water is vital for health and safety, as otherwise the tiny glass fragments could be breathed in. Finer grits of grind wheels allow for fine-tuning and buffing the glass to a lustrous, translucent sheen.

As this measured manipulation proceeds, Kasalý takes the time to step back and gauge the work in context—on the human body. In past years, his wife Eva Kasalá frequently stood as the work of art he sought to embellish, and after getting the glass to a certain point, Kasalý would hold the pendant-to-be up to his wife's chest, seeking to ascertain the right angle and shape to create a perfect match. This interruption is vital to the creative process, as it removes the object from the realm of fantasy and immerses it firmly in the grounding of reality.

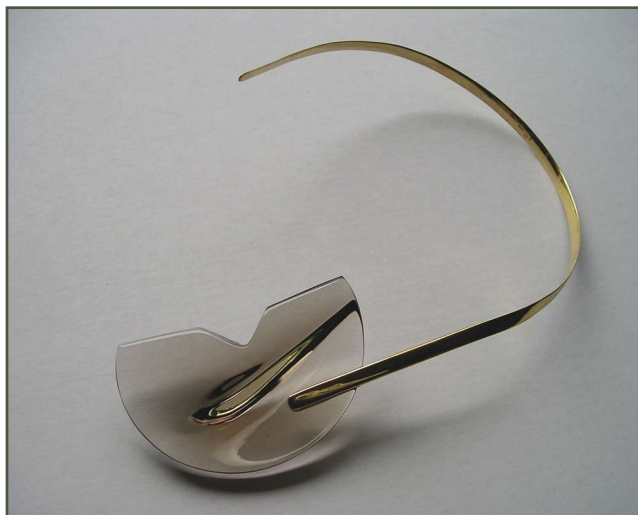
At this stage, the finished product reveals itself. The central point of interest, the glass jewel, has been set within the matrix of space, and now what remains is the vital connection between it and the wearer. This is achieved through gold or rhodium-plated brass, and is as important an element of the whole as the glass itself.

Kasalý uses the metal portion of his necklaces and bracelets to impart geometric curves that accentuate, highlight and embolden the natural human physique. It is in this elaboration of the body that Kasalý's jewelry finds a sophistication beyond its component materials and even techniques. Its brilliance is derived from the limitations of creative thought that have been surpassed. Many jewelers have created aesthetics within the jewelry's framework that are endlessly varied. Reaching beyond the jewelry itself however is difficult, because it requires grounding on the body. It requires acting as a sculptor not for the jewelry proper, but rather the neck, the shoulder, the chest, the arm, and the hand. Sculpting the body is difficult, but that is the goal of Kasalý's work which helps elevate it to a level of exquisiteness.

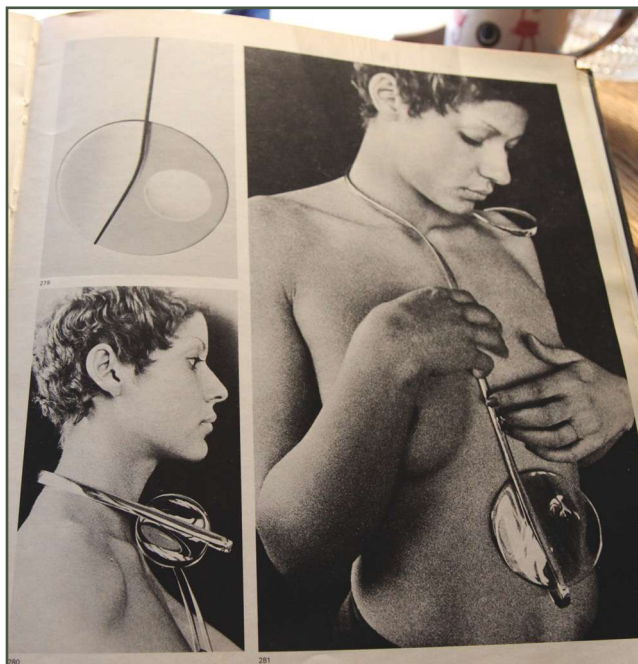
The straight and short of it is that there is a frank primordial sensual pleasure to his jewelry. The long and wide view is how they almost transcend the human figure, being not simply decorative objects, like a pin placed upon the front of someone's lapel, but an organic shape which seems to meld with the body yet also extend it.

These qualities come in part from simplicity in design and exacting execution. Kasalý makes sure to burnish the metal of his torques and chokers to a sheen of mirror-like reflection and subtle curvature. This comes from a combination of time invested and knowing how to apply the right tools to achieve a certain result. A quick job with little attention will reveal itself in imperfections and blemishes. The opposite, gleaming,

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NECKLACE of ground glass, brass and rhodium plating, 26 x 13 centimeters, 2002.



PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE BOOK *CONTEMPORARY JEWELRY: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT 1945-1975*, showing Svatopluk Kasalý's work. Photograph by Patrick R. Benesh-Liu.



GRIND WHEELS OF VARIOUS GRITS AND SIZES. GLASS CUTTERS LATHE found in Kasalý's workshop. Note the water spout above the cutting wheel to carry away ground glass particles. Below: KASALY IN A SEPARATE WORKSHOP where he and Eva Kasalá make mosaic glass. Here he is holding two designs of glass murals. KASALY'S STUDIO. Photographs by Patrick R. Benesh-Liu.

subtle manifestation of the majesty of space-time, is the result of Kasalý's efforts.

Transparent glass, which when penetrated by light shines colored shadow upon the resting surface, whether white paper or human skin, seamlessly merges with the metal to produce a construct which appears to be all one thing, even though it is formed from separate parts.

He is not the only purveyor of art within the house. Kasalá lives with his wife in Třešt'. Kasalá is a glass artist who has collaborated on projects with Kasalý, as well as creating her own work, when time, and the interest of customers, allows. Both are sculptors, but while Kasalý

drifts towards the (relatively) small in wearable form, Kasalá finds pleasure in larger-scale sculptural abstraction in vessels. When working together, they become adorners of buildings. Glass mosaic wall sculptures, often of grand design and scope, are their principle calling. In churches, stained glass windows are one such demonstration of their skills, while schools, baths, hospitals, and apartments have all found themselves graced with their work.

Their glass murals have three designs which the couple have developed. One backs the glass mosaic with a sheet of metal, as reinforcement and to make it opaque. Another embeds a wire lattice into clear glass which is adhered to the mosaic, also providing structure and security while allowing light to pass through. Finally, there is a two-sided variation where one side is glass mosaic, the other a sand-blasted design, and a wood divider between the two sheets keeps them separated, running around the edge so as not to obscure the transparency of the frosted glass.

All this is part and parcel of a life in which craft, and creation, play their integral role. Svatopluk and Eva's cooperation in their art finds itself employed in the beautification of structures throughout the Czech Republic, and close to home as well. Their ancestral home adjoins a refurbished hotel. The hotel's restaurant, bar, central stairway and lobby have been decorated by the services of Kasalý and Kasalá. In tiny alcoves within the restaurant and bar, several pieces of Kasalý's jewelry reside. The windows field mosaic glass insets of brilliant colors that cast multi-hued illumination across the patrons at their tables. A seven-paned light fixture of frosted sea-green glass stands erect in the hotel's lobby, the same design that appears in Kasalý's own studio. Their work in glass installations is a continuum of Kasalý's



occupation as a jeweler. The decorative arts are the same whether the subject is a building or a human being.

Craft and art are two things as one: the ornamentation and elaboration of the world. One ventures into the three-dimensional as the other is often rooted in the two-dimensional, but both take the ephemerality of time, and converts it into the physical and the material.

But the cycle does not end—physical objects serve to inspire our thinking and our imagination. Seeing a painting may provoke an individual to view a concept differently, or elicit an emotional response never before experienced. Seeing and proximity to creative works is stimulating in that they cause us to come up with our own notions for creation. Whatever the medium—music, movies, theater, dance, poetry, jewelry—ideas cannot help but come bubbling out, to be translated by hand and mouth into works of art and entertainment. It is within this circle of life and creation that Kasalý and Kasalá joyfully participate. From season to season, from year to year, one inspires the next, as past feeds the future. That they have found their niche within this sublime process may be their most beautiful work. ☞



SVATOPLUK KASALÝ AND EVA KASALÁ. Photograph by Patrick R. Benesh-Liu.

The improvisational interview that took place with Svatopluk Kasalý and his beautiful wife Eva Kasalá was a most enjoyable experience. Also present was Michaela Nechvátalová, their friend, Eva's English tutor, and translator to our conversation. Svatopluk spoke little English, and we needed an interpreter to conduct our conversation. Even so, I found his mastery of the few words he appeared to know quite peculiar. We were seated at a table, and Svatopluk fetched a catalog which featured him and several of his works. I flipped through and examined it, curious about the age and the years that had passed by and now imbued this volume with history, and laid it aside. I cannot quite remember what precipitated it; perhaps it could have been a comment from Eva. With an expansive gesture, halfway between a shrug and a bow, with the humility of complete self-assuredness, Svatopluk put on a face and said, "I am the best." That spontaneous expression of humanity will forever be remembered. And it was obvious from how Michaela bantered with Eva, consistently if gently admonishing her trepidation in using English, and the way Eva would look flustered and retreat to the kitchen, that they were comfortable with each other. They were all simply people. Not perfect, no matter how much Kasalý might aspire to perfection, definitely flawed, and totally wonderful.

SUGGESTED READING

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- Meilach, Dona Z. *Art Jewelry Today*. Philadelphia: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2003.
- Liu, Robert K. "Svatopluk Kasalý: Czechoslovakian Glass Artist." *Ornament* 8 (4): 16-21, 1985.
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NECKLACE of ground glass, brass and gold plating, 22 x 14 centimeters, 2012. ARM BRACELET of ground glass, brass and rhodium plating, 8 x 7 centimeters, 2003.