



Blown Away

by Drew Martin

I had intended on going for a midday walk yesterday to a promenade along the Hudson River. I wanted to clear my mind and forget about things; neither bad nor complicated. I just wanted to stop thinking for awhile because I ponder too much for my own good, especially about art. Halfway to the river's eastern bank, however, I seem to have gotten off track and found myself in the [Maccarone](#) gallery at 630 Greenwich Street in the West Village. I frequent this gallery and I always wanted to write something about their shows but my thoughts usually wander away from my intentions. So if I end up posting this, it will be quite an accomplishment for me.

I have to say that I am very glad I waited. This is my favorite show to date at Maccarone. An initial glance into the space from the street was enough to draw me in to spend some time there. The show "*This is the last place I could hide*" by the northwesterner Eli Hansen seems entirely experimental because his work looks the part: beakers, iron armatures, steel tables, an electric hot plate, tubes passing bubbling water into pails and a dangling extension cord. Hansen's glass art objects are hand blown so there is a broad material familiarity that stretches from early 17th century Jamestown craftsmanship to today's toker bong displays at head shops.



The apparatus first reads as scientific but quickly reveals itself as a rigged joke, at best...at worst, a middle America crystal meth lab. Reconsidering the show's name and works with titles such as *We used to get so high*, the gallery takes on a dubious and illegal tone. It's actually a good feeling because even the most shocking and pornographic art these days feels safe and approved of in a gallery setting. Hansen's work, however, is beautifully suspect. The glass bulbs are colorful and fluid looking but there is an odd tension, like a mad scientist or a junkie lab tech might catch you snooping around his place and either shoot you on the spot with a sawed-off shotgun or throw you down a dry well in his basement in a *Silence of the Lambs* way. At least, this is how I felt in one of the rooms. The other room is much more formal and about display.

A third area, a tiny, low-ceiling walk-in room lined with tar paper, is the most curious space. From the outside you see only white sheetrock walls and a glassy eye; an over-sized peep hole shaped by Hansen.

You expect to go in and have a secret view of the gallery but once inside, you feel like the blinded Polyphemus or at least a cyclops with severe glaucoma because Hansen's lens is purposefully imperfect and it's hard to make sense of what you *can* see. You are then left to examine the contents of the black room: articulated metal funnels in a glass orb on a low table, wall-mounted tin boxes: one with *Factory Seconds* printed on the lid and the other labeled *Special Value Panatellas* with the handwritten words *Rubber* on the former and *Electronics* on the latter. For a moment the dubious feeling returned, however, this time I did not feel like a wayward but innocent Goldilocks. I felt like Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, in his backwoods shack.

Fortunately, this unpleasant sensation quickly lifted with cheerful memories of studying installation art at my university two decades ago, when it was a more popular art form. This little room made me realize how much I like and miss this kind of art, especially since I studied for two years with one of the most influential installation artists, Ann Hamilton. When you are surrounded by such work, you lose focus on a specific object; a lone painting or sculpture. Certain barriers are eliminated and you surrender yourself to the space.

I made a reference earlier to Jamestown because I first saw glass being blown at a young age by a historical interpreter in Virginia. The fact that Hansen places his handmade glass vessels on simple wooden shelves, deepens the reference. By putting them in the same room as his edgier pieces, the mood reminded me of the unfortunate fate of America's first glass blowers.



The initial British "adventurers" here weren't very skillful. Even the task of making the protective palisades at Jamestown was left to the sailors before leaving the dandies behind for England. Germans and Poles were imported as glass blowers and pitch makers to kick start such trades. When Jamestown fell into the starving period early on, the continental Europeans, abandoned the settlement project, which had been established to find gold, and went to live with Pocahontas and the other Algonquians. They filled their bellies with fresh venison and were much better off than their emaciated English counterparts but when supply ships finally arrived with an impressive new leader for the swampy pre-colonial disaster, chief Powhatan feared they would switch sides again so he ordered to have all of their heads smashed with rocks, which is indeed what happened. Needless to say, the first efforts in glass making were thwarted.

Four hundred years later, Hansen is here to remind us that glass blowing is alive and well in America and has its place in contemporary art. Unfortunately, what is missing is the beauty of the process, but he seems to want to usher us beyond the knowns of glass and explore its hidden, emotional qualities.