

Michael Abatemarco | The New Mexican

MATERIALS WORLD

THE INTUITIVE ART OF
JUDY TUWALETSTIWA



Photograph of *Trinity/Ashes* (2000), glass. In a description of the piece in *Glass* (Radius, 2016), Judy Tuwaletstiwa simply states, "A hand, a palm, a black sphere representing the amount of plutonium used to destroy Nagasaki." Images courtesy Center for Contemporary Arts and Judy Tuwaletstiwa, unless otherwise noted.

IT'S AN ODD SORT OF IRONY, but artist Judy Tuwaletstiwa defies our expectations of what glass art is because she uses the medium almost like a weaver would use fiber or a painter would use paint.

In sculptural works such as her *Song* series, which she began in 2013, the glass frits (glass in its granulated, unprocessed form) are barely fused together. The forms she makes are fragile, not hard. Rather than being clear or translucent, they're full of deep, rich earth tones like ochres and umbers. Instead of being smooth to the touch, their texture is rough, like sandpaper. Her work from 2000, when she first started working with glass, is different in that it actually looks like glass. But over the years, she's evolved her practice, exploring more unique ways of working with the material.

White-haired, with glasses, and plainly dressed in comfortable cotton clothing, she walks through the Center for Contemporary Arts' cavernous Tank Garage Gallery, enthusiastically describing the process and motivations behind each of the 14 works on view in *The Dream Life of Objects*. It seems like more; the majority are composed of separate components, from diptychs and triptychs to grids and multi-paneled works that run the length of the walls.

"It's so important to me that materials speak of what they come from — their sources," said Tuwaletstiwa, whose name is pronounced like "two-wallets-stee-wa." "That's why I use the glass this way. It's close to the sand while still holding together."

That idea is part of what makes Tuwaletstiwa's solo exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Arts so thought-provoking. The work isn't fully resolved when she begins but is the result of ceaseless experimentation. For a process-oriented artist like Tuwaletstiwa, the exhibition stands as a testament to her ability to let go while in the studio.

Born Judy Averbuck in Los Angeles in 1941, she studied English literature at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Harvard in the early '60s. She started making art at the age of 29, after seeing an exhibition of the paintings of Vincent van Gogh. (They broke her heart, she said, adding, "I didn't have a clue that I was a visual artist until then.") Tuwaletstiwa has painted and worked with fiber for most of her career. But glass has been her primary focus since 2012, when she completed a residency at the Bullseye Glass Resource Center in Santa Fe.

"She wanted to explore and push and learn," said gallery owner and art advisor Ylise Kessler, a former director of William Siegal Gallery who represented Tuwaletstiwa in Santa Fe. "The glass morphed into what I think might be among her strongest works. She really took it and ran with it."

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The Dream Life of Objects, which runs through Sept. 15 and includes work from 1987 to 2019, is not a late-career retrospective per se. All of the work was selected by Tuwaletstiwa and her co-curator, David Chickey, based on how the pieces speak to each other. Although the exhibit contains examples of her well-known works, like *The Crow* and *Trinity/Ashes*, much of the work on view has never been seen before.

At first, Tuwaletstiwa planned to call the exhibit *The Weight of the Soul*. Then she found an old pair of boots that belonged to her son Robert when he was 4 years old and wanted to use them in a new piece. (Tuwaletstiwa often uses found objects in her work.) She was sifting glass powder over the boots, which were passed down to her other sons, when she realized that a lifetime's worth of memories was contained in them.

"I wouldn't have thought, 50 years ago, that I'd be using these," she said. "Then the show became about the dream life of objects. They dream us in a different way."

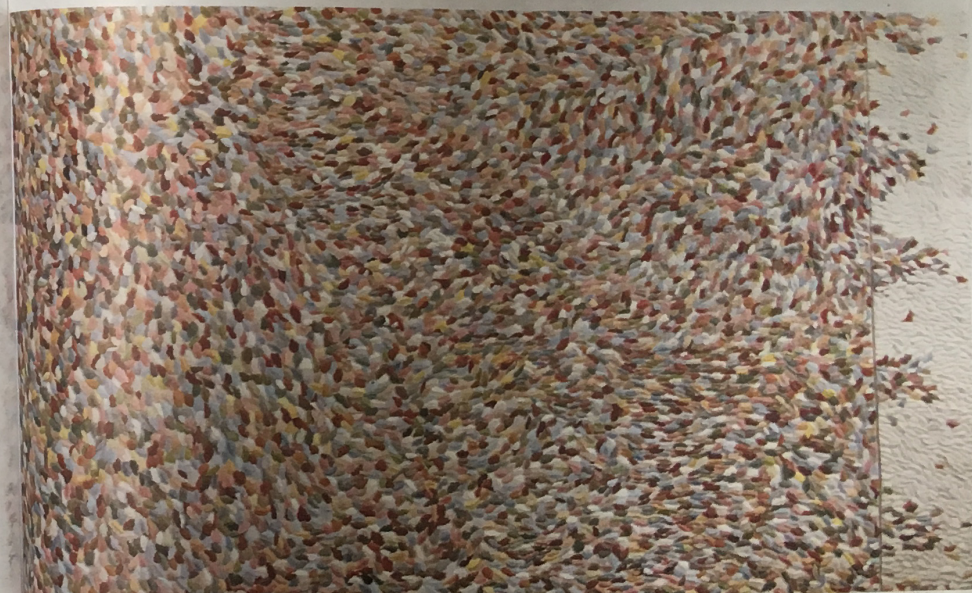
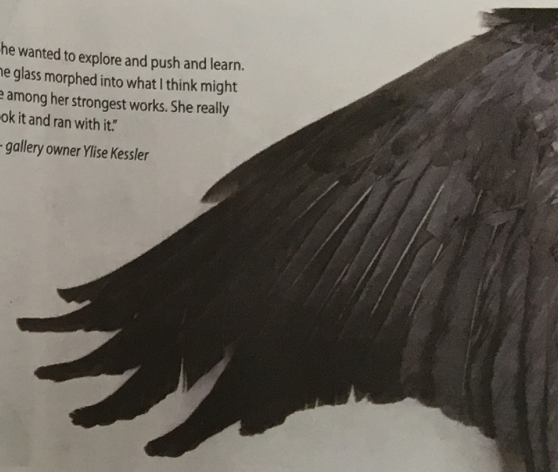
The Dream Life of Objects is more than a glass show. And one work — a solid red painting from 1987 — speaks eloquently to her process and what the exhibit is all about. For her, it's the journey, not the destination, as they say. In fact, Tuwaletstiwa might say there is no end to the journey

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top: Judy Tuwaletstiwa, photo Diana Gaston; right, *The Crow* (2006), detail; bottom: *Shard I* (2018), kiln-fired glass, adhesive on canvas



Das Buch der Fragen (detail) (2007-2013), Japanese paper, beeswax, thread, llama saddle, bamboo sticks on canvas; right and page opposite, *The Dream Life of Objects*, installation view, photo John Vokoun

Judy Tuwaletstiwa, continued from Page 38

because the process continues in the mind of the viewer, and the objects never stop changing with time — that's the dreaming.

The red painting, called *Continuing Painting 3* (1987), is one of a series of three canvasses that she made in the mid-1980s. Each went through a radical series of changes before reaching its final iteration. Each is a minimalist composition of one solid color — white, black, or red. She documented the changes the work took, from beginning to end, in 72 photographs.

"I knew from the beginning it would be one color at the end," she said, explaining that the painting wasn't meant to be seen by the public as it was being created. "It was just for me, to learn about the process of painting."

In an atypical arrangement, Tuwaletstiwa and Chickey displayed each of the 24-by-16-inch photographs at right angles to the wall, facing to the side rather than flat against it. The images, which are arranged



chronologically throughout the exhibition, show the painting at various stages of its development, and each one depicts a fascinating abstraction evocative of the early work of Jackson Pollock, perhaps, or something more primal.

"You follow the train of it all the way through the exhibition, and when you get to the end, the painting that's hanging there is the painting that these are the images of," said Chickey, publisher of Radius Books. He has collaborated with Tuwaletstiwa on two of her monographs, *Mapping Water* (2007) and *Glass* (2016). "It brings up all kinds of ideas about an artistic process. On the back of all of [the photographs], Judy went through and wrote phrases and words. So you can experience it one way, visually, and the other way, through the text."

"A pathway," one reads. "Through pain," goes another. "Its own life." She wasn't just documenting the process of painting in the photographs, but documenting memories of the painting experience, all of which are buried under thick gobs of red paint in the final composition.

Text is an important component of *The Dream Life of Objects* — in part, because Tuwaletstiwa is a writer as well as an artist. There are stories behind some of the works that the viewer would never glean without some explanation, but they're stories she likes to share in text panels. Some of them are loosely connected thoughts inspired by the work itself, and others explain in detail what inspired the work or how it was created.

"If you don't know the stories behind this work, it's not as powerful," Chickey said. "The show has a combination of didactic and poetic kinds of text. You can dig as deep as you want to, but you don't have to."

Sometimes — in *The Crow*, for instance — the text is both poetic and didactic. Tuwaletstiwa took the bones and feathers and beak, as well as the tongue and heart, of an actual crow and arranged them in abstract patterns on 25 separate panels. One snippet of text reads, "The beautiful songs and elusive spirits of birds touch us daily. They hold time before memory." Another says, plainly, "I found a dead crow on Highway 41 in New Mexico. I felt compelled to commemorate its beauty."

Tuwaletstiwa, who lives in Galisteo, made *The Crow* in 2006, when she was living on the Hopi Reservation. After organizing the feathers into types and bleaching the bones in the sun, she made one panel per day over a 25-day period.



"At the end is the heart and the tongue, and I really debated whether I would use its heart or bury it. But that lyrical line was so beautiful," she said, pointing to the line dividing the heart's chambers or, perhaps, the long, thin artery branching from its top.

The Crow touches on another irony, one at play in the studio practice of all visual artists but somehow explicit in the work of Tuwaletstiwa: Destruction is a necessary part of creation.

Take *Trinity/Ashes*, for example. Composed of three glass spheres, each three inches in diameter, the work was the result of a residency at Pilchuck Glass School in 2000. She completed the residency with the help of Karen Willenbrink-Johnsen, who led her through the glass-blowing process. The idea was to do a project that deals with New Mexico's atomic legacy and the World War II bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

They made the spheres using only three basic materials: glass, gold leaf, and carbon from a lightning-struck tree. But a remarkable thing happened while the glass was being blown. In one crystal-clear sphere, the gold leaf and carbon combined to form a shape suggesting a mushroom-shaped cloud, like the kind formed after an atomic bomb blast.

"We weren't trying to do this," she said. "We were just using those primal materials. 'I could never be that literal, but the glass was.'"

In a second sphere, the form at the center resembled a chrysalis, a symbol of metamorphosis and of impending rebirth — which is at odds, it seems, with the destructive power symbolized by the mushroom cloud. It's as though *Trinity/Ashes* embodies, on its small scale, the whole history of the universe from its fiery beginning to its cataclysmic end.

A final thought occurs while walking through a show so focused on the elemental: An artist can never really add anything but can only transform what's already there.

"It's not easy to get used to that," Tuwaletstiwa said. "You only have so many ways you can move. You do this and something gets destroyed. Something also gets created." ◀

details

- ▼ Judy Tuwaletstiwa: *The Dream Life of Objects*
- ▼ Center for Contemporary Arts, 1050 Old Pecos Trail, 505-982-1338, ccasantafe.org
- ▼ General admission \$5 with discounts available; through Sept. 15

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