

KATHLEEN MULCAHY Natural Forces

In the early 1970s some very enthusiastic and curious art students managed to create a primitive glass studio at Kean College. At that time, energy, determination and naïveté may have been their most outstanding talents. Heavy bricks and burners were donated and hauled by the students and assembled into a functional gas furnace. Among this highly motivated group, captured by the moment, Kathleen Mulcahy had her first experience with hot glass. That original studio was located in the same area where today the Kean University Art Gallery features Mulcahy's current exhibition titled *Natural Forces*, on view March 28th through May 7th 2007. In 1972, the young artist went on to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree at the School of Art and Design at Alfred University, still known as one of the most prestigious glass programs in the United States. That is where I first became aware of Kathleen Mulcahy, since I also was an art student there at that time. This exhibition celebrates the achievements of this honored alumna at mid-career.

For Kathleen Mulcahy, her glass works embody characteristics of nature. While forces of nature govern the environment we live in, movement of water, wind, and repeated shifts of temperature over time, shape the landscape we often take for granted. Likewise, the artworks in this installation have been transformed by intense heat. In order to soften and melt glass, a furnace must reach white-hot temperatures exceeding 2300 degrees Fahrenheit. Mulcahy uses traditional glass blowing techniques to make the lung shaped vessel forms in the *Vapor Series*.

Because working with glass is physically demanding, I am constantly aware of my body and my breath as I create a form. I must be fully engaged in the process – even a second in glass is important because things change in the heat in a moment. The skin of a blown glass form moves slowly as it begins to soften. I want to still these moments.

Other wall pieces start with large sheets of commercial glass, up to four feet wide, which have been slowly heated to alter their shape. Together, heat and gravity slump sheet glass to new life. Later they are etched and mounted on corroded steel frames. These works require a mastery of material and a focused aesthetic vision.

In the 1980s Kathleen Mulcahy directed glass programs at Bowling Green State University and Carnegie Mellon University. Since then she has worked independently outside of Pittsburgh, focusing her energy on her own artwork. As I approached the property of Kathleen Mulcahy I knew I had encountered an artist's environment. The spacious studio and angular home rest on a hillside surrounded by fruit trees, berry bushes, beautiful flowers and random objects of art. Mulcahy insists that it had been a piece of land nobody wanted, but for the past twenty-five years she and her husband have made it their own creative paradise. To work in glass you need space, big equipment and furnaces. Every kind of grinder, torch, cutter and kiln you can imagine lies waiting to assist the artist in the birthing process of her next artworks – when materials transform – from the *idea stage* to the *must exist stage*. Strewn about the studio are works-in-progress, unfinished pieces of glass and steel. It is an inspired clutter.

Kathleen Mulcahy has won many fellowships, honors and awards including the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and a Fulbright to Italy. Her work is in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City. Additionally, she was an invited participant at the World Crafts Council, in Kyoto and was an artist in residence at the Cité Internationale des Arts, in Paris. Kathleen Mulcahy has a deep devotion to building better communities through exposure to the arts. She and her husband Ron Desmett co-founded the Pittsburgh Glass Center, which opened in 2001. It is a fabulous facility for people of all levels of interest in glass art. Through public programs, exhibitions, classes, workshops and visiting artists, the Pittsburgh Glass Center demonstrates the power of art in the Pittsburgh community.

There is something in my work that asks you to pay attention to the small things and to find the expressive point that connects that deep sense of wonder in the human experience...[that connects us] to each other.

I want to thank Kathleen Mulcahy for coming back to her alma mater and making this exhibition possible. Her return visit represents a collaborative effort among diverse areas of the Kean University community. Thank you to Douglas Nelson at the Kean University Foundation, Wendy Lee from the Alumni Association and the Provost, Dr. Vinton Thompson who oversees the Quality First Initiative program. Professors Jen Crupi and Alec Nicolescu organized the Mulcahy workshop and lecture titled Bending and Etching Glass for Sculptors. For the installation of this show we depended on the essential work of the Facilities staff and several Kean University students, in particular graduate assistants Norman Chow and Spencer Frohwrith. Special thanks to the President of Kean University, Dr. Dawood Farahi, and the Dean of the School of Visual and Performing Arts, Dr. Carole Shaffer-Koros. We appreciate their support for the growing exhibition program and the opportunity to investigate the work and career of Kathleen Mulcahy. Together we have an extraordinary opportunity to witness how this outstanding student blossomed into a remarkable creative artist that we can all be proud of.

Professor Neil Tetkowski
Director of University Galleries



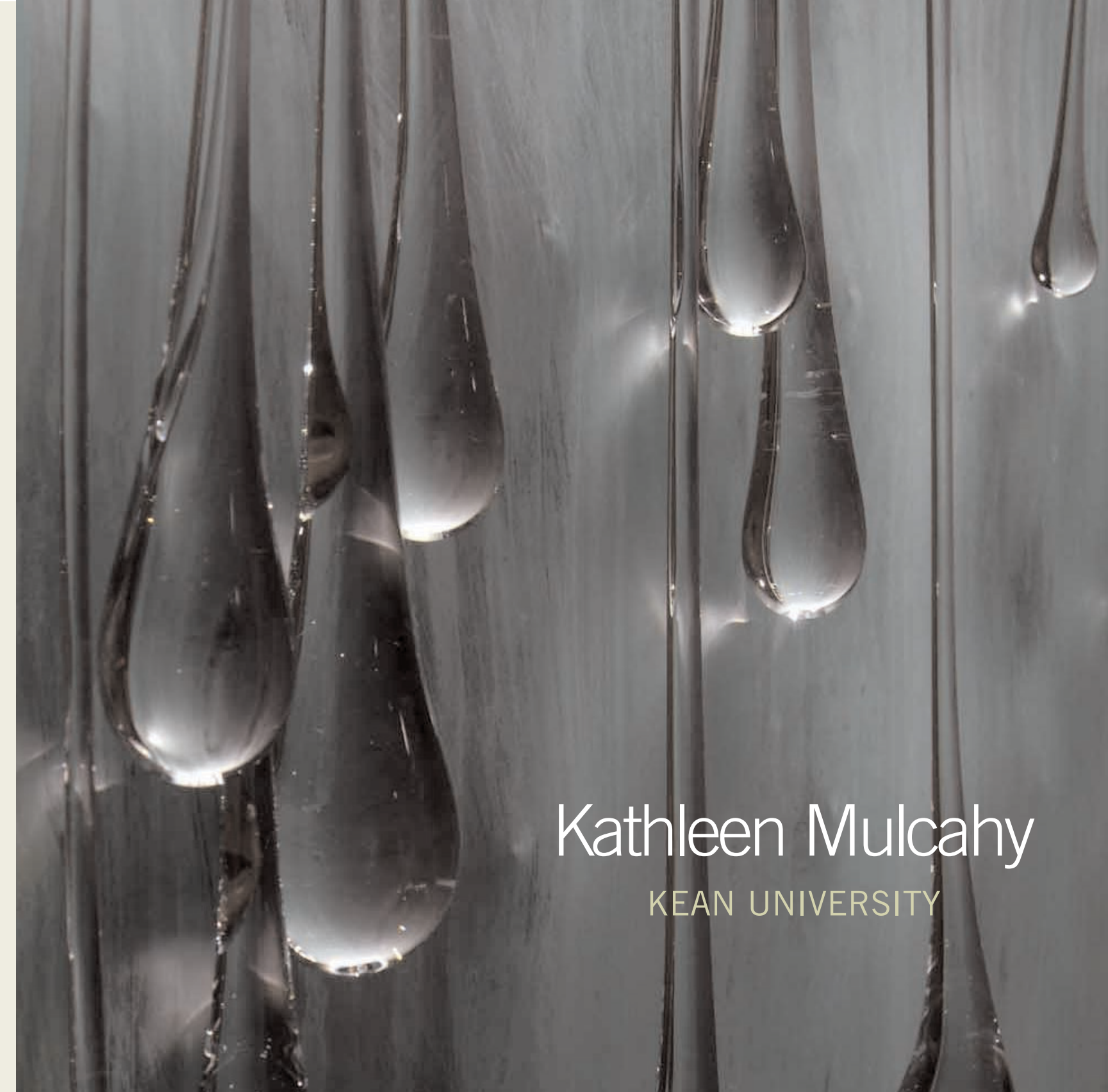
Kathleen Mulcahy



Penumbra 48" x 48" x 9"

cover: *Susquehanna* 48" x 48" x 3"

photo credits: Richard Kelly



Kathleen Mulcahy
KEAN UNIVERSITY

THE ARTWORK OF KATHLEEN MULCAHY

Kathleen Mulcahy's glass sculptures celebrate the sensuous nature of vision. The recent work presented in this exhibition takes full advantage of the tactile appeal of her medium. Though made of glass, these sculptures

have no shard-like forms, no hard-edged crystals, no crisp-bordered shapes. Instead, everything is rounded, swollen, and curved, imitating the look of liquid forms in nature that are drawn out by gravity. Like many artists of her generation who have rejected the neo-conceptual games of much of the art of the last twenty-five years, Mulcahy unabashedly embraces the visual pleasure elicited through her sensual manipulation of the glass medium.

When critic Dave Hickey, re-introduced the concept of beauty into the discussion of contemporary art in the early 1990s it set off a fire-storm of controversy. Since at least the mid-1960s, with the rise of the austere style of

Minimalism, progressive artists had been on a mission to prove the serious intent of their work by eschewing any formal element that might be pleasurable. This Cartesian, puritanical approach equated beauty with being merely decorative and, in protest, spawned work that was visually humble, abject, and even openly ugly. Mulcahy has turned this logic on its head by using a medium traditionally considered entirely decorative and outside of the field of fine art and encouraging its pleasing qualities. This approach

resonates with what Hickey concludes about the best contemporary art, that its appeal to beauty is a more effective conceptual tool expressly because it is so seductive, after all, you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

These seductive qualities can be traced in the varied formats of Mulcahy's work. The artist is known for her blown glass series of *Spinners*. These large, singular forms have varied colored patterns that swirl around pointed volumes. They look like supersized children's spinning tops and are drawn from Mulcahy's childhood memories of growing up in her parents' toy store in Orange, New Jersey. Though no longer functional and now virtuoso in execution, the *Spinners* demonstrate the artist's devotion to small things. She has called up a common and appealing form, a child's toy, divorced it from its original scale, material, and function, and produced a beautiful, and now conceptual, sculpture.

A similar transformation occurs in the *Persuasion Series*. Here, another small and familiar form, an ornate perfume bottle, has been scaled up and abstracted. The blown glass bottle shape in *Languorous*, for example, is now thirty-five inches tall. It is all about visual seduction and, hence, the allusion to a woman's use of perfume in the mating dance is appropriate. The intense cobalt blue of the vessel's body is deep and mesmerizing. The ornamental flourish on the stopper begs to be caressed and lifted. Even the work's title is etched in fanciful script across the base making plain the promise of dreamy sensuality under the spell of the bottle's contents, an apt metaphor for the sculpture's effect on the viewer. A more ambiguous form that also implies bodily interaction was created for the *Vapor Series*. Large blown glass vessels are attached vertically to the wall with transparent pipes at the bottom that seem to curve toward the viewer's mouth. The swollen receptacle above is etched a cloudy white, implying the presence of a gas or trapped breath. The evocative form calls to mind some strange alchemical device that promises transformation, perhaps an allusion to the material transformation that occurs in the glass-making process itself.

A form that has both man-made and natural associations is the inspiration for the piece, *Building Bridges on the Molecular Level*. It is part of the most-recent series that involves wall-mounted two-dimensional works, made of flame-worked glass shapes over slumped and etched plate glass on a fabricated



Vapor I 30" x 9" x 4"
Vapor II 30" x 9" x 4"
photo credit: Jim Judkis

steel sheet. The glass is acid etched with a paintbrush allowing the surface to have a brushed look that is still semi-transparent, revealing the surface below. In a quest for perfect proportions, the artist settled on dimensions of 48 inches high by 30 inches wide, giving the work a substantial presence.

In *Building Bridges*, Mulcahy has literally fashioned a string of triangular glass elements that cross over the glass sheet below. Especially because the glass construction is ultimately affixed to a base of slightly rusted steel, the piece calls to mind the city of Pittsburgh, the artist's home, with its many bridges crossing three rivers and the history of steel production there. Of course, the bridge also calls to mind a schematic of a molecular structure — as if the artist is picturing the underlying natural bridges that, delicate and tenuous as they may be, connect us all.

This idea of expressing connectivity through a sensuous glass bridge is restated in a similar piece from this series called *Trace*. Here, two strings of glass beads cut an irregular path across the



Penumbra
48" x 48" x 9"
photo credit: Richard Kelly

surface of the etched glass plate. Beautiful reflections are cast as light passes through the beads and is mirrored in the watery surface of glass and down to the rusted metal sheet below. The result is an appealing abstract form that has many organic associations. For the artist, the impetus for the piece was the observation several years ago of freshly-laid frog eggs strung across a pond. All of Mulcahy's work is drawn from such similarly closely-observed small forms that fascinate, get stored in memory, and one day are called forth in the production of a work that invites the viewer to enter into a similar visual reverie.

A final piece from this series, *West Branch of the Susquehanna*, is also drawn from an experience of paying close attention to a natural phenomenon. The work is a tour-de-force of the artist's technical skills. Irregular clear glass drops are hung over the vertical glass and steel surface in imitation of the experience the artist had of a summer rain on the Susquehanna River during a canoe trip. The pendulous drops are luscious to behold. The sensual experience the artist had that day on the river has been carefully abstracted and represented, allowing the viewer to bring their own associations to the piece.

Kathleen Mulcahy's glass sculptures entice the viewer with shapes that captivate and allow for reflection. For the careful observer, the experience is transformative and sends one back into the world with new eyes carefully attuned to the connective forms glimpsed in small things. As the artist concludes, *...the forms stand as a unique statement about nature, time, distance, memory and connections. All lead to a pondering about the world, what it is made of — people, animals, nature, things and how we all fall into place — in the romance of living.*

Professor Kristina Olson
West Virginia University



detail: *Trace*
48" x 30" x 4"
photo credit: Jim Judkis