

Support System



*Glass artists
Nancy Callan and
Katherine Gray's
kinship – in art and life –
has stood the test of time
and distance.*

STORY BY
Liz Logan
PORTRAIT BY
Will Foster

LEFT:
Glass artists **Nancy Callan** (left) and **Katherine Gray** in Callan's Seattle studio. The duo forged a friendship in the hot shop that has seen them through thick and thin.

ABOVE:
Although they live in different cities, Callan and Gray still find a way to collaborate on pieces such as 2016's *Untitled (Sad Plaid)*.

NANCY CALLAN ARRIVED IN Seattle in the mid-1990s, with a dream to make it as an artist and glassblower. More specifically, she wanted to be like Katherine Gray.

Other glassblowers would discuss Gray's talent in reverent tones. She was an assistant to glass artists Sonja Blomdahl and Janusz Pozniak. She made stunning Venetian-style vessels and mixed-media pieces and had gallery shows in the works. "I was totally impressed by her," recalls Callan, who herself had a gig as an assistant to maestro Lino Tagliapietra. "Kathy was a real presence in the Seattle glass world."

Over the next few years, Callan worked hard to catch up with Gray skillwise. They had met, but their paths didn't cross much until 2002, when they found themselves working side-by-side as assistants on a six-month project.

They immediately hit it off. "It was kind of like the heavens parted," Gray recalls. Callan adds, "We both had friends, and friends who were glassblowers, but I knew very quickly that Kathy was a true friend who had my best interests at heart at all times. I hadn't felt that way before."

Over the next two decades, their careers have diverged, but they still turn to each other for support, advice, and creative input.

The two remain utterly in sync, though their beginnings were different. Gray, a Toronto native, earned her undergraduate degree at Ontario College of Art and her MFA at Rhode Island School of Design. Callan worked in graphic design at a silkscreening factory for eight years after high school and then headed to Massachusetts College of Art and Design in her late 20s. She was studying graphic design, but, she says, "I already knew I was more drawn to working with my hands and in 3D than on the

computer." She was taking ceramics when she walked by the glass studio, and, she says, "It was love at first sight."

After graduating in 1996, she took a class with Tagliapietra at the Corning Glass Studio; he offered her a spot on his glassblowing team in Seattle and recommended her for a job at Manifesto, a lighting design studio. She continued working for Tagliapietra until 2016, when she retired from the team.

The immersive experience that cemented the artists' friendship was working for Flora Mace and Joey Kirkpatrick (whom they affectionately call "FloJo"). The two are known for their glass-powder paintings of birds in clear glass. Kirkpatrick would spend up to 12 hours arranging powders to essentially create an intricate drawing, after which a glass bubble had to be flopped onto the powders to capture the image.

It was a delicate, nerve-racking process, and under those intense conditions, they formed a bond. "There was a lot that could go wrong, and the stakes were high," Gray recalls. "Honestly, it felt like being in a crucible." Yet, Callan recalls, "Kathy was so poised. She never got flustered. I was in awe of that, and I tried to emulate her calmness."

On their days off, they helped each other with their own artwork and commiserated about the ups and downs of their romantic relationships. They'd often hang out together at art openings or shoot pool at places like the Garage in Capitol Hill.

Their friendship was tested early, however. Later that year, Gray moved to Los Angeles to teach at California State University-San Bernardino, where she's now a tenured professor. Callan stayed in Seattle, working for Tagliapietra intermittently while developing a robust studio practice. "Kathy and I did not have

Nancy Callan cuddles **The Flame** (2014), part of her Bees & Stingers series. Katherine Gray describes Callan as "a self-sustaining, independent artist, in the trenches."



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enough time together in Seattle," she says wistfully.

Meanwhile, each was finding her own artistic voice. Callan developed her signature technique of canework patterning. Gray began making large-scale installations, such as *Here Comes That Sinking Feeling* (2007), a meditation on global warming in which a block of melting ice dripped onto a collection of her Venetian-style goblets. Around the same time, they also both settled into happy long-term relationships – Gray with artist Eric Huebsch and Callan with artist Julia Ricketts.



OPPOSITE, COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Moondance Orb, 2016, 17.5 in. dia.

Salome Cloud, 2017, 14 x 18.5 x 9 in.

JuJuBe Top, 2016, 21.5 x 13 in. dia.

Sunshine Droplet, 2017, 21 x 18 in. dia.

Dahlia Droplet, 2017, 21.5 x 17 in. dia.

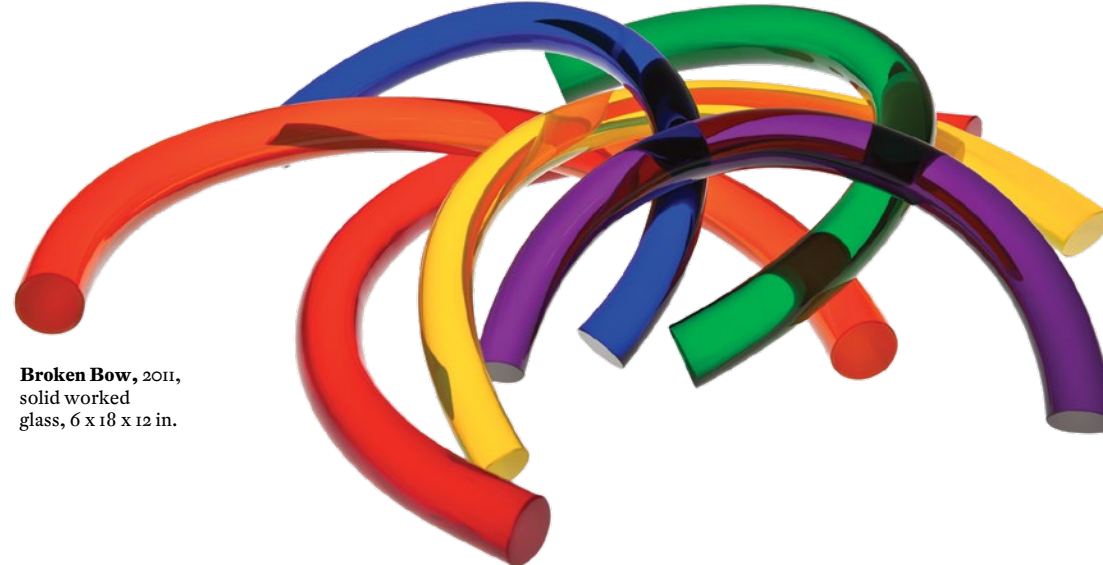
Bengal Paloma, 2016, 26.5 x 12.5 x 8 in.

Overleaf (Sad Plaid photo): Fredrik Nilsen / Other photos: Russell Johnson

TOP:
Forest Glass, 2009,
 pre-existing glass,
 mixed-media shelving,
 10 ft. tall (largest tree)

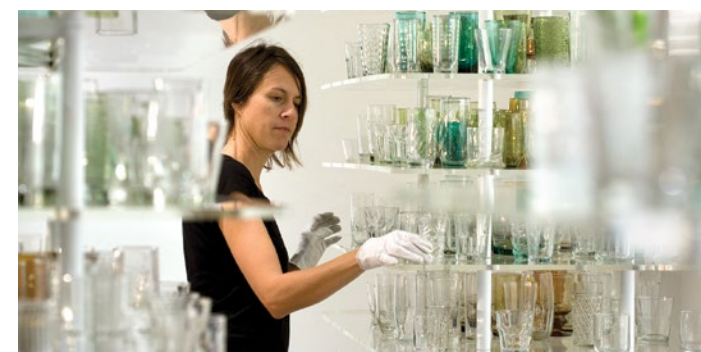
CENTER:
A Rainbow Like You
 (detail), 2015, blown
 glass, acrylic table, light-
 ing, 3.75 x 4.5 x 2.75 ft.

BOTTOM:
Tabletopiaries,
 2008, blown glass,
 17 – 23 in. tall



Broken Bow, 2011,
 solid worked
 glass, 6 x 18 x 12 in.

OPPOSITE:
 Katherine Gray install-
 ing **Forest Glass**. The
 Southern California
 artist is known for her
 large, concept-driven
 installations. “Working
 with her,” Callan says,
 “makes me think more.”



Katherine Gray draws on her deep knowledge of historical glass forms, combined with meditations on nature.

They discovered a less positive parallel as they bumped up against the art world’s insidious sexism. Callan was the only woman on Manifesto’s production glassblowing team, and, by default, she often ended up with the chore of cleaning studio bathrooms. “I couldn’t sit around and yuk it up like the boys,” she says. “I felt I had to work twice as hard to gain the same respect.” She also traveled with Tagliapietra to hot shops where no woman had ever worked as a glassblower, such as the Seguso factory in Brazil.

At the university, Gray discovered she was significantly

underpaid compared with her male colleagues. Both women struggled to find gallery representation, and they were frustrated by tokenism. “Sometimes we found ourselves in all-women shows,” Callan observes, “whereas, when it’s all men in a show, it’s not called an ‘all-men’ show.”

As they compared notes, they realized this was a structural issue and not a reflection on their worth as artists. “We don’t like to think of ourselves as ‘women glassblowers,’” Callan says, “but, on the other hand, it was really nice and empowering to have a gal pal.”

Deciding how to price their work was another challenge. “I know I could ask for higher prices if I was a guy,” says Callan; Gray says Callan often chides her that her own pricing is too low.

Working together as collaborators was a salve. Within years of Gray’s move, they were teaching workshops together and applying for the same residencies so they could spend time together. One summer, they taught together at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine. Gray had been blowing a lot of mushroom forms, and Callan had the idea to combine these forms with her cane techniques. “Kathy was wearing these plaid shorts, so I said, ‘Hey, how about we put the pattern of your shorts on these mushrooms?’” she recalls with a laugh. The resulting artwork, *Plaid Mushroom* (2008), is prominently displayed in Callan’s living room. Three years ago, they traveled to Europe and gave demonstrations together in Denmark, Finland, and Germany.

Now they are collaborating on a series of cane-patterned panels with images of clowns, which they apply using sandblasting and enameling techniques. The series was originally inspired by Italy’s *commedia dell’arte* figurines,

“which have, over time, devolved into really kitschy things that are not well made,” Gray observes. One piece uses a paint-by-number image, which, she says, started as “a commentary on the de-skilling of painting. And then, after the 2016 election, the project took on new resonance as a commentary on our government.”

Their skill sets complement each other. Callan is “a self-sustaining, independent artist, in the trenches,” as Gray puts it, spending more time in the studio honing her glassblowing chops. “Nancy is by far the better glassblower,” Gray says. “She’s pulled more cane in a day than I ever will in my life.”

Gray’s strengths are storytelling and her deep knowledge of glass history. “She’s a very conceptual artist, whereas I think of myself more as an object maker,” Callan says. “Working with her makes me think more.” Both, however, are quick to note that the other is no slouch in any department.

In May, the two will give a demonstration at the Glass Art Society’s conference in Murano, Italy – a place Callan calls “the land of the male glassblowers.” (Historically, this has been true.) “It’s the only place that I’d be nervous to blow glass,” she says. To which Gray responds: “Well, if you’re going to be nervous, then I’m going to be a wreck!”

Even after 20 years of friendship, the two disagree about almost nothing. “I think Nancy should have knee-replacement surgery, and of course she doesn’t want to hear that,” Gray says. “Otherwise, our main difference is that she likes girls, and I like guys.”

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katherine-gray.com

Liz Logan is a writer in Brooklyn. Katherine Gray has a solo show at CAFAM, May 27 – Sep. 9. Nancy Callan has a show at Duane Reed Gallery, Sep. 13 – Oct. 6.

Forest photos (2): Courtesy of the Chrysler Museum of Art

Tabletopiaries photo: PJ Cybuiski / Other photos: Fredrik Nilsen