

art and cake

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Jane Brucker. Judson Studios. Photographer Kyle Mickelson.

Fragile Thoughts on Care and Clarity: Jane Brucker at Judson Studios

JANUARY 22, 2019 by Evan Senn *Exhibition on view at Judson Studios through January 31, 2019

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Chairs have been a part of our human history for thousands of years, and unlike many other inventions that we have made as a species, chairs have not evolved much since their inception; they have however, taken on greater conceptual weight and a variety of meanings. We can see chairs in many different ways, as expressions of design, as decoration, as utility for humans, and as symbols for the human experience. Los Angeles-based artist Jane Brucker has created a poignant and evocative installation involving delicate and detailed chairs she has altered and assembled, infusing glass elements and historical details. These chairs, however, are not for sitting. The seven chairs on display in this minimal installation emanate an energy toward one another, as if they are conversing with one another, each sitting with the power of a person or a memory, silently chatting back and forth, without human intervention. The installation of Brucker's seven chairs, titled *Fragile Thoughts*, was originally a part of her retrospective exhibition at the Long Beach Museum of Art, but is currently on view on its own at Judson Studios in Pasadena through January 31, 2019.

Brucker's chairs are inspired by history, bringing our collaborative human history and evolution with help from a specific few people into focus. *Fragile Thoughts* is predominantly inspired by a woman name Elizabeth Milbank Anderson, an early twentieth

century philanthropist who championed healthcare, education, women's issues, and the arts. Milbank is well known for her work in helping eradicate diphtheria and for her support in providing care for those suffering from tuberculosis. Milbank also funded The Milbank Public Baths which provided individual warm-water bathing that replaced the unsanitary floating baths used by residents of New York's overcrowded cold-water facilities.

Knowing that the word "glass" in English is derived from the Old French *charité*, from older *charitet*, from Latin *caritas* (gen. *caritatis*) (OED) meaning "to care," brings more clarity and compassion to this installation, as Brucker is utilizing a delicate and caring material to express thoughts and emotions about a woman who made a difference in our world by caring.

In two of Brucker's chairs, "Milbank Pubic Bath-Girl 1" and "Milbank Public Bath-Girl 2," we see a single girl painted onto a red glass panel on the back of the chair. The actual chairs belonged to Brucker's grandparents, and in the installation of the chairs, these two girls, barefoot and gazing straight out at the viewers or at each other, as they are positioned in such a way that they look as though they are talking with one another from across the circle.

In another chair, "Medal of Honor," we can see a hand-drawn portrait of Milbank that has been fused onto a glass oval that then acts as a kind of necklace or medallion as it hangs from the back of the chair with hand-dyed ribbon. This chair gives us a face to put with the palpable energy in this circle of power and also references that Milbank was awarded a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor by the French government. In another chair, "Through a Glass Darkly," we see Brucker exercising her technical knowledge gained by her time with the Judson Studios artists. In this straight-backed chair, Brucker created a leaded glass grid of hand-painted glass samples in various styles and textures. According to the artist, this chair references a quote from 1 Corinthians 13:12 King James Version (KJV), "For now we see through a glass, darkly..."

"This quote is usually translated as referring to glass, though the real meaning is ambiguous," the artist stated, "possibly referring to a mirror or lens where actual clarity of sight is obscured. Historically, this Biblical passage has been of interest to artists, posing the difficulties in representing what we do not see."



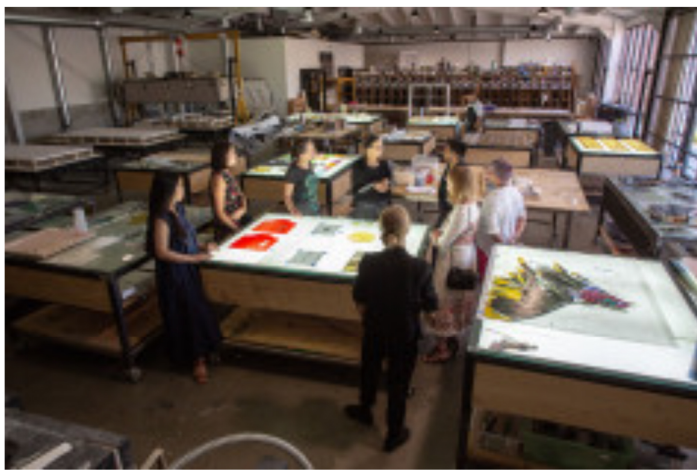
(At left: Chair 6 Medal of Honor. Jane Brucker. Photographer Kyle Mickelson.)

Each chair has multiple stories; the story of the design and art object, and then the story of how it was created. All of the chairs were created in collaboration with Judson Studios, thanks in part to a grant Brucker received from the Pasadena Art Alliance. Judson Studios is a fascinating organization that has specialized in designing and fabricating traditional and contemporary stained, leaded, faceted, and fused glass for over one hundred years. They have been the leading stained-glass fabricator in the United States since 1897, and

continue to help businesses, churches, home owners, and artists create the highest quality of stained, painted, and fused glass. Today, Judson is the oldest family-run stained glass studio in America, still proudly offering an exquisite, handcrafted product made by local artisans, including the largest fused glass window in the world. In the last couple of years, Judson Studios has pushed to collaborate with contemporary artists more and more, opening their historic and meticulous processes up to the

contemporary art world, expanding the reach and use for glass in art. They have collaborated with artists such as Laurie Frick, James Jean, Amir H. Fallah, David Flores, and more.

Brucker was mentored by Judson artists for the glass components in the Fragile Thoughts installation, including artists Indre McCraw and Quentin Blackman, and also worked with Martin Valencia and Matt Phillips. Brucker made multiple glass elements with their help using various techniques in glass—from traditional painted or leaded glass, to fused glass. Glass is a particularly fascinating material to work with as it is incredibly difficult to manipulate and can be very sensitive, cracking or breaking under the slightest misuse, but it is also a material that will stand the test of time, lasting for hundreds of years if kept properly. You can melt it, mold it, paint it, imbed it—glass stands as a representation of the human spirit in some cases. Utilizing glass in this way reflects Brucker’s ongoing obsession with the fragility of life, love, care, and loss in her art practice. Using the symbolism associated with glass, Brucker’s thoughtful glass elements deepen the installation’s conceptual power and provide a more nuanced experience for the viewers.



(Photographs by Kyle Mickelson and Judson Studios judsonstudios.com)



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