

SLATE GROVE: EVERYDAY HEROES

by Grace Meils



Slate Grove, *Zippers and Hems*, 2013, Sculpted and flameworked glass, 10 h x 10 w x 2 d

Slate Grove completed his MFA at Illinois State University, Normal in 2013, and work from his impressive thesis exhibition, *Everyday Heroes*, has since garnered quite a bit of attention. Throughout the past year, Grove's work has been shown as part of Habatat Gallery's emerging artist exhibition, *eXpose*, and was included in *Shattered: Contemporary Sculpture in Glass* at the prestigious ArtPrize event in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was also selected as a "Rising Star" at Wheaton Village's Glass Weekend last summer and was recently nominated for the prestigious Louis Comfort Tiffany Award.

For the exhibition *Everyday Heroes*, Grove painstakingly recreated the tools of the trade for a variety of blue-collar pastimes and professions in clear glass.

His ghostly knitting needles, spools of yarn and thread, sewing pins, a spray bottle and feather duster, oil cans, a punching bag and boxing gloves, and a tool box full of hammers, wrenches, and screwdrivers were presented as a selection of precious artifacts, carefully placed and precisely lit, in a gesture of honor for the people who would have used them.

Grove grew up in Fort Dodge, Iowa, a town where most people worked in gypsum mills, limestone quarries, meat packing plants, factories and trucking companies. Representing tools in an entirely transparent medium and without their users, the artist raises questions about social, economic, and class issues surrounding the idea of work, calling attention to the invisibility of certain

jobs and at the same time, suggesting that some types of work may be literally disappearing. "Many in my family were displaced when Hormel closed its Fort Dodge plant in the 1980s," says Grove in his artist statement, "and more recently, when Electrolux decided to move their Iowa operation to a facility in Mexico."

Beyond its societal implications, Grove's tools connect with viewers on an individual level. Standing in for people themselves, these objects remind us of the importance of work as a source of personal identity and pride. The work we do is often a large part of how we define ourselves as individuals, providing us with a sense of purpose and the feeling that we are contributing something positive to our communities and the world.

In many cases, work affects us physically as well. Skilled craftspeople and technicians, anyone who works with their hands, often repeat certain motions throughout their careers, with increasingly effective results. Over time, they develop an intuitive physical sense of their material, their environment, and themselves. Working with glass requires this sort of intimate knowledge, making it a fitting material to convey this idea.

Grove's journey toward his own intuitive knowledge of glass started with earning his BFA at Cleveland Institute of Art in 2006. He originally enrolled with the idea that he would major in industrial design, but changed his mind halfway through his first semester in a glass class. As an undergraduate, he was enamored with the qualities of the material and primarily dedicated to developing technical skills. Brent Kee Young, Grove's instructor at CIA, encouraged him to think of glass as a tool, rather than an end point, and pushed him to explore the medium's expressive qualities.

After completing his BFA, Grove lived and worked in New York for two years, teaching classes at UrbanGlass in

Brooklyn, and serving as the shipping, receiving and installation manager at the world renowned Heller Gallery. He then moved to Penland, North Carolina, where he was the Glass Studio Coordinator at Penland School of Crafts from 2008 to 2010, an experience he describes as being immensely beneficial to his development. "I can't really quantify the importance of having had access to and exposure to artists like Mark Peiser and Richard Ritter," both of whom live in the Penland area.

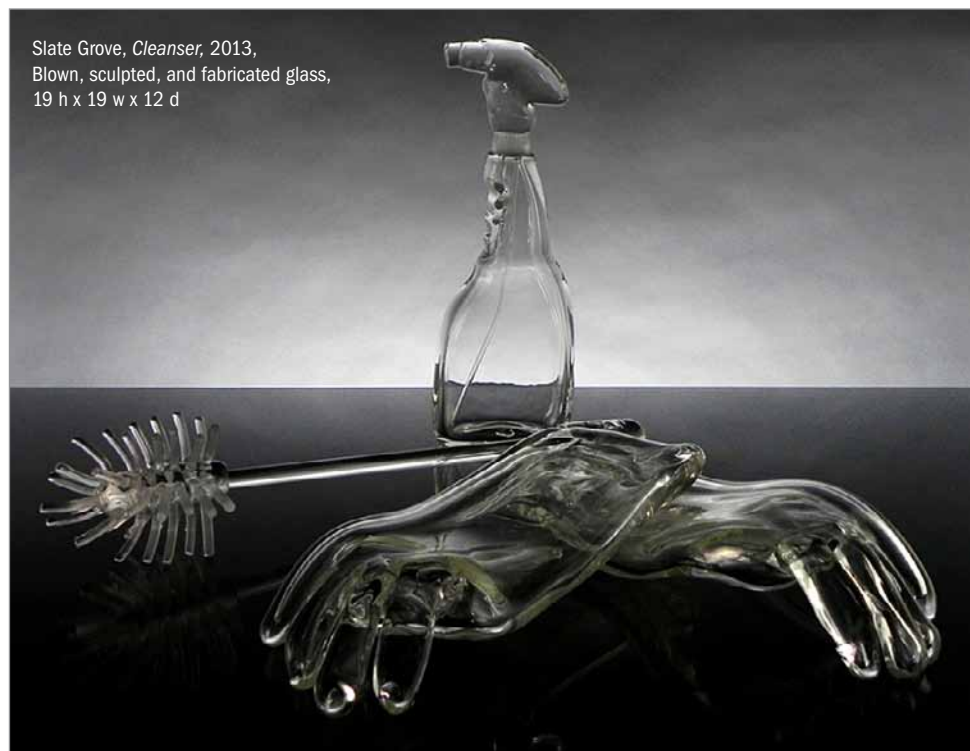
Grove selected the MFA program at Illinois State University, in part because of the reputation of department head John Miller, but also because as a large university, it offered access to fields outside of the arena of art. He spent time with professors in other fields, and was especially interested in sociology. Rather than getting overly involved in conceptual art discussions, he wanted to make work that viewers didn't need advanced degrees to understand. "I wanted to make art for people like me," he says. His experience at Illinois State allowed him to explore more fully what that really meant, and resulted

in his stepping more solidly into his own identity as an artist and as a person.

The work Grove presented in *Everyday Heroes* is interesting in that while it successfully explores broad, intellectual concepts such as society, class and identity, it is also deeply personal. The care and attention to detail with which these objects were created makes them seem like intimate, nostalgic portraits of specific loved ones, ghostly memories of characters from the past. Clear glass, instilled with light, conveys the warmth and affection Grove feels for these people, while the inherent qualities of glass stand in for their strength, vulnerability, simplicity, resiliency, and silence.

Since completing his MFA in Illinois, Grove has returned to New York and to UrbanGlass, where he now serves as the Glass Studio Manager.

Grace Meils is an artist marketing and career development consultant, as well as an independent writer specializing in glass.



Slate Grove, *Cleanser*, 2013,
Blown, sculpted, and fabricated glass,
19 h x 19 w x 12 d

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