Invisibly Visible: Alan Glass’s Gnosopoetics

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The Canadian-Mexican artist Alan Glass’s early work *Ouverture prochaine* (1962; Fig. 1) is deceptively simple in its construction, comprising a black wooden box glazed and sealed with red wax. The glass pane has been painted white with clearly visible circular motions, creating the appearance of turbulent clouds, swirling winds, or an intricately adorned curtain about to part, as though confirming the titular promise that something is on the cusp of opening. This tantalizing promise of revelation aside, the box remains opaque, its suggested mysteries safeguarded for more than 60 years. Visually, *Ouverture prochaine* is an atypical work for Glass, yet, the box is telling for the sense of secrecy and mystery surrounding his vast oeuvre. Although none of his other boxed assemblages veil their contents in such a literal way, their intricate arrangements of found objects and quotes from or allusions to art, poetry, and a wide range of spiritual ideas appear to be cryptograms without anything like a preconceived solution or interpretation. Like so many of Glass’s works, *Ouverture prochaine* suggests a search for gnosis in the sense of knowledge that cannot be discursively articulated but instead achieved through an experiential transgression of conventional reason.

In the following pages, I provide an overview of Glass’s early artistic production and then suggest that his works is characterized by gnosopoetics, or a search for suprarational knowledge through the making of surrealist art. I then focus on discussing Glass’s treatment of death in his mid-1960s production and his late work. His many depictions of death extend his gnosopoetics to the realm of thanatognosis, as his artworks attempt to exalt death, decipher its mysteries, and probe it for secrets of transformation.

Gnosopoetics in Two and Three Dimensions

Born in 1932 in Canada, Alan Glass is best known for his boxed assemblages, which he created from the early 1960s until he passed away in January 2023.¹ His three-dimensional art forms part of the history of the surrealist object, as explored by such artists as Man Ray, Salvador Dalí, Claude Cahun, and Joan Miró; more specifically, Glass’s assemblages and objects share affinities with the art of Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Cornell, and Adrien Dax, as well as his Canadian friends Mimi Parent and Jean Benoît.² Complex, playful, and often esoteric at one and the same time, Glass’s boxes are constructed out of found objects and imagery, including fragments of old advertisements or pieces of product packaging, toys, feathers, seeds, dried mushrooms, honeycomb, dolls, clocks, and matchboxes. His juxtapositions of disparate objects conjure up the latent poetic properties of the material world. As mysterious and humorous, they transform everyday materials into enchanted objects by combining their constituent parts according to the ludic analogical logic of surrealist poetics. Before he turned to the medium of assemblage, however, Glass developed an equally original two-dimensional practice.

Having studied art in Montréal and Paris in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Glass worked in drawing, painting, and occasionally engraving throughout the 1950s. Arriving in Paris in June 1952 and drawn to surrealism, Glass set out on a fervent search for new means of expression. His discovery of the then-newly launched ballpoint pen in 1954 provided him with a new means to explore automatic drawing.³ Almost as soon

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Fig. 1 Ouverture prochaine (1962), mixed media, 30 × 30 × 12 cm. © Carlos de Laborde.

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as Glass picked up his first Bic pen, he started using the modest, mass-produced instrument to call forth protean shapes in mostly blue, but sometimes green or purple, ink. Teeming with detail, his alternately lush and crowded ballpoint pen drawings evoke and blur the line between vegetable, mineral, and animal shapes, biomorphism mutating into lithomorphism (Fig. 2). In the early period of Glass’s automatic drawing, organic-looking caves, egg-like shapes, beehives, birds growing out of living rocks, and the odd hieratic woman emerge out of his unpremeditated wielding of the ballpoint pen. Toward the end of the 1950s, his drawings became denser and increasingly abstract. Some of them evince a sense of spiritual claustrophobia, their scratchy thickets of ink in marked contrast to the delicate, sometimes lace-like patterns in so many of his earlier drawings.

Several of Glass’s closest friends in Paris were drawn to surrealism, including the Chilean poet and mime Alejandro Jodorowsky, later a well-known film director, and fellow Canadians Benoît and Parent. Glass got in touch with the surrealist group around André Breton in 1955, after Glass left his address in the guest book at the surrealist Galerie de l’étoile scellée during an exhibition of the Swedish artist Max Walter Svanberg. The young surrealist poet Jacques Sennelier visited Glass in his small maid’s room at 5 rue Manuel. After seeing the drawings pinned to his walls, Sennelier introduced Glass to Breton. Impressed with Glass’s employment of the ballpoint pen as an inventive automatist tool, Breton and Benjamin Péret organized a show of his works. In early 1958, Glass showed a selection of his ballpoint pen drawings at his first solo exhibition at Galerie le Terrain Vague, accompanied by a pamphlet featuring an essay by Jodorowsky (Nonaka 2012, 37–38).

In many of these early drawings, it is as though Glass, aided by the humble Bic pen, peers through the surface of reality, trespassing into domains not ordinarily accessible to human perception. We can think of this practice as an embryonic gnosopoetics, characterized by a penetrating gaze detecting and depicting swirls of something mind-like or spiritual in the depths of matter. There are parallels between Glass’s gnosopoetics and esoteric strands in the surrealist reception of art during this period. In the mid-1950s, Breton wrote that Jean Degottex’s abstract paintings allow passage into a blossoming universe where the “spirit of things reveals itself” (Breton 2002, 341, emphasis original). Glass’s earlier drawings, too, present blossoming images on the verge of germinating or sprouting new forms. But there is also a palpable sense of anxious perturbation in some of these works. These unsettling qualities bring to mind Glass’s sense of affinity with the Welsh writer and occultist Arthur Machen. Glass frequently cited Machen’s stance, expressed in his 1902 essay Hieroglyphics, that: “I am strangely inclined to think that all the quintessence of art is distilled from the subconscious and not from the conscious self; or, in other words, that the artificer seldom or never understands the ends and designs and spirit of the artist” (Machen 1960, 120). The notion that creativity stems from a place beyond conscious control or intention is, of course, a fundamental surrealist stance. In Machen’s statement, there is also an intimation that the subconscious functions as a harbinger of gnosis, an elusive knowledge that the conscious self is not able to grasp or articulate but can only channel when directed by the creative spirit.

Glass did not discover Machen’s writings until the 1960s, when he came across one of his books at a flea market in Mexico City.4 Still, it seems to me that already Glass’s early drawings evince a shared sensibility with Machen’s descriptions of an invisible dimension of reality, glimpsed by characters entering visionary states. Glass shared Machen’s predilection for these moments, simultaneously enchanting and frightening, when nature reveals itself to be profoundly alive with mysterious energies. When the protagonist Lucian Taylor in Machen’s novel The Hill of Dreams (1907) enters deep into the forest above the village in which he lives, he discovers a primordial sense of life. Gazing at the vegetation, he is overwhelmed by its shifting appearance as it transforms before his eyes. Lucian’s sense that “the wood was alive” can be understood as a moment of gnosis; rather than the result of reasoning, it is an experiential insight (Machen 2019, 19). Glass’s drawings evince a familiarity with such states of heightened perception, which show the world to be teeming in ways disavowed by the modern materialist view of matter as mute mechanism.5

Fig. 2 Untitled (ca. 1956), blue pen on paper, 25.6 × 17 cm. © Carlos de Laborde
Starting in the early 1960s, Glass developed his gnosophetics further in an extended series of watercolors and oil paintings on paper and parchment. More figurative than his ballpoint pen drawings, these works depict spectral figures in a state of transition or transformation (Fig. 3). Set in natural environments, many of them appear to be on the verge of metamorphosis, shifting between human and animal appearances. The forests, glades, or giant mushrooms in these images are alive with an inner light, contrasting with the nocturnal atmosphere enshrouding many of the works. Sometimes redolent of William Blake’s gnostic visions, these works are gnosophetic conjurations, visualizations of the secrets hiding in the invisible, sprawling apparitions on the cusp of emanating into the physical world. With their ghostly forms placed among trees and plants, the watercolors are eerily similar to Lucian Taylor’s visionary moment alone in the woods:

Not a branch was straight, not one was free, but all were interlaced and grew one about another; and just above ground, there were forms that imitated the human shape, and faces and twining limbs that amazed him. Green mosses were hair, and tresses were stark in grey lichen; a twisted root swelled into a limb; in the hollows of the rotted bark he saw the masks of men. His eyes were fixed and fascinated by the simulacra of the wood (Machen 2019, 18–19).

Much like Machen, Glass unites fascination and fear in his watercolors. Another word for such a coincidentia oppositorum is the sacred. That seems like an apt description of Glass’s gnosophetics, seemingly shuddering with horror and trembling with delight in the face of the world’s hidden mysteries. For Glass, the fear occasioned by the uncertainties of what hides in the invisible tends to be an agent of transformation. The ghostlike beings animate his paintings and drawings with a Romantic sense that nature is enchanted (Nonaka 2012, 258–59). A series of watercolors on goose and chicken eggs mounted in boxes emphasizes the transformative potential of these fleeting figures emanating from an invisible realm; as an organic Athanor, the egg harbors the potential for transmutation of matter into a marvelous new life (Fig. 4).

Around the same time as he embarked on his ghostly watercolors and oil paintings, Glass started developing his idiosyncratic assemblage practice. His earliest three-dimensional works include constructions with few constituent parts, such as the secretive Ouverture prochaine or La Piège (1964), consisting of a doll equipped with majestic, colorful insect wings caught in a mouse trap mounted on a piece of wood. But, he also made elaborate pieces with a hieratic atmosphere, such as Nouvelle Rosée, Nouveau Miel (1963), with a found portrait of Queen Elizabeth I flanked by eggs and placed above a piece of honeycomb strewn with bees. The first in a series of works incorporating portraits of queens, the latter box bears the promise of rebirth and magical nourishment under the sign of sacred matriarchy.

Across his six decades of making objects and boxed assemblages, Glass displayed a heightened sensitivity to analogical associations as well as to the latent, occult qualities of seemingly unassuming objects. As evidenced by his art as well as his readings, Glass had wide-ranging spiritual interests, which included Gnosticism, alchemy, mediumism, ancient Egyptian

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Fig. 3 Untitled (1963), oil on paper, 85 × 55 cm. © Carlos de Laborde
religion, Mexican syncretism, and tantric Buddhism. Some of his artworks feature overt esoteric allusions. References to ancient Egypt, the ostensible site of magic and associated with a cult of death and rebirth, recur in many of his artworks, and overtly so in *Egyptian Box* (1973), a double box with four sides. One of the faces displays a series of four sarcophagi with shifting appearances, possibly depicting the transformations of spirit and matter following the advent of death. Radical transformation is arguably the most prominent theme across Glass’s oeuvre. The title of his 1996 box *Agriculture céleste* (Fig. 5) references alchemy, sometimes called “celestial agriculture” (Fulcanelli 1984, 91). The box includes small objects resembling plows, a miniature sheaf of corn, and a hollowed-out clock equipped with a star map and gold foil attached to the rim. *Agriculture céleste* depicts an alchemical process of transmutation, but it is not simply an illustration of the art; rather, the box is a poetic interpretation, through analogical-associative combinations of found and manipulated objects, of the secrets of celestial agriculture.

Many of Glass’s assemblages enact similar transmutations of base matter in the form of found objects into imagery, alluding to various forms of higher knowledge. In line with the esoteric philosopher Henry Corbin, one of Glass’s most treasured writers, and his notion that images are potent vehicles of higher knowledge, these works can be conceived of as revelatory images aspiring to gnosis (Corbin 1997, 233–34). As suggested earlier, they can be described as gnosopoetic, a concept intended to designate attempts in art and poetry to arrive at, or at least conjure up the prospect of, gnosis.

The term gnosis has long been used to signify a wide range of pursuits of suprarational knowledge, from the ancient Gnostics to the Romantic, surrealist, and occultist belief that dreams, the unconscious, and altered states of knowledge are potent means for achieving insights about the nature of the divine, a higher self, or the constitution of the world (Hanegraaff 2016, 382–3, 387–9). Surrealist affinities with gnosis have been traced back to Breton’s statement in the second surrealist manifesto that surrealism seeks a sublime or supreme point in which antinomies cease to be perceived as contradictions (Breton 1972, 123–24; Nenzén 2019, 29–64). Such a point in the mind supersedes the reign of logic and what Breton would later refer to as “reasoning reason,” thereby intimating possibilities for attaining forms of transformative, suprarational knowledge (Breton 1972,
mean “molt and severed head,” suggesting that death might not be the end, but rather the shedding of skin and shifting into a new state. Similarly, the severed head can be taken to allude to gnostic possibilities afforded by the decapitation of ordinary forms of reason. Among the other works in the exhibition was The Indifferent Dwarf, a boxed assemblage, now lost, which Glass described as being coated in deerskin and featuring a compartment filled with marbles; below the box was a drawer with germinated wheat which flowed out “like a cascade of green water.”

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Exalting Death, or Thanatognosis

Glass’s first solo exhibition of assemblages took place at Galerie du Siècle in Montréal in 1965. Called Mue et tête tranchée, the exhibition also featured a selection of his ghostly, gnosopoetic watercolors. The centerpiece, however, was the recently completed La Rose des vents (1965) (Lasnier 1965, 43; Fig. 6). Encased in a vitrine, four Mexican sugar skulls with ornate decorations are placed upon black plinths, with a weatherwane in the center; silver letters—N, E, S, O—mark the plinths with the French abbreviations for the four cardinal points. By this point, Glass had long been attracted to the sugar skulls that are a fixture of the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead in early November each year. According to an oft-repeated story, he first saw such a Mexican calavera in the studio of his friend Aube Breton-Élléouët in Paris in the late 1950s and immediately experienced a jolt of profound attraction to its depiction of saccharine death (Nonaka 2012, 42). The four sugar skulls in La Rose des vents are adorned with colorful decorations, but their eye sockets have transfixed and hypnotic stares. Constructed out of relatively few parts, the assemblage’s apparent simplicity belies its thematic complexity, as it speaks to issues of orientation and transformation, bone transmuted into sugar. Death is in all directions, but this version of death is fraught with humor and the otherwise forbidden pleasures of feasting on the sweetness of decay.

The very title of the exhibition places the entire show under the sign of the mysteries of death. Mue et tête tranchée

Fig. 6 La Rose des vents (1965), mixed media, 48 × 51.5 × 51.5 cm. © Carlos de Laborde

300). As Niklas Nenzén argues, the enigmatic imagery of surrealism is well suited for artistic explorations of gnosticism, which by definition cannot be expressed in rational terms but rather relies on metaphorical or otherwise figurative imagery (Nenzén 2019, 38). In the context of a post-war surrealism immersed in occult currents, Breton concludes his 1955 essay “On Surrealism in Its Living Works” by claiming that the search for gnosticism is even a central surrealist preoccupation. Only “poetic intuition,” he writes, “can put us back on the road of Gnosis as knowledge of supransensible Reality, ‘invisibly visible in an eternal mystery’” (Breton 1972, 304).

The gnostic images created through poetic intuition can be visual or verbal; in the case of Glass’s art, they appear in two- or three-dimensional visual constructions. Whereas Breton posits gnosticism to be an outcome of poetic intuition, Glass’s gnosopoetics couples surrealist poetics of intuition, chance, and analogical associations with references to a host of spiritual paths. In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on his gnosopoetic treatment of death in a series of assemblages from the mid-1960s before concluding with a discussion of a work from 2020, which demonstrates a persistent engagement with thanatognosis.
Thanatos and Eros, decay and intimations of new life commingle in these solemn-yet-sumptuous boxes. In Glass’s hands, the reliquary turns into a breathless exaltation of death, to the point where it appears to give way to the prospect of rebirth. These works extend the evocation of the mysteries of death in La Rose des vents into a thanatognosis, a poetic probing of death as a state of transition charged with transformative potential, including that of rebirth or resurrection.

Like so much of Glass’s art, his reliquaries are allusive. In an untitled 1965 box, a small reproduction of Thomas Cole’s 1833 painting The Titan’s Goblet has been placed in a compartment. Almost covered by fine chicken wire and honeycomb littered with dead bees, the Grail-like goblet appears to offer up a revitalizing elixir, like the chalice overflowing with the honey of the Goddess in Glass’s friend Leonora Carrington’s novel The Hearing Trumpet (Carrington 2005, 156–57). Another prominent example of Glass’s treatment of death is Reina Isabel con escarabajos (1966; Fig. 7). Yet another work incorporating a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, the box also encompasses allusions to Egyptian mythology. In the box, Glass has mounted a reproduction of the so-called Armada portrait of the queen, with a black-and-white negative placed upside down beneath the color version of the portrait. The doubled images are bordered by strips of lace with painted eggs upon which sit scarabs, symbols in ancient Egypt of the “ceaseless power of regeneration” (Assmann 2005, 372). The two versions of the portrait are connected with numerous delicate threads, suggesting that the diurnal world of light and color and the nocturnal world of darkness and inverted hues coexist. Night and day, conscious and unconscious, life and death are not so much opposed as interdependent. This dynamic speaks to surrealism’s gnostic pursuit of the supreme point, “at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions” (Breton 1972, 123). In Reina Isabel con escarabajos, the colorful world above is nurtured by the lower realm of death and the unconscious. The box’s evocation of a cyclical relationship between life and death places it in a lineage in Glass’s art of treatments of death less as an end than a molting or temporary retreat into a pupa.

Glass’s approach to death recalls the doctor and occultist Pierre Mabille’s definition of the marvelous, that central surrealist concept designating the experience of a higher reality in which mind and matter interpenetrate, as predicated on a torturous personal transformation. For Mabille, to truly encounter the marvelous is to undergo a symbolic death and rebirth, an ordeal that is tantamount to an initiation (Mabille 1998). Shattering the person, such an experience transgresses conventional understandings of death. Piecing oneself back together and making sense of the experience entails evading common sense and conventional knowledge in favor of a thanatognostic insight into the dialectical interplay of death and rebirth as well as the transformative experience of disintegration and reconstitution. On a speculative note, I would argue that there are clear intimations in Glass’s art that his intensive practice led to an experience similar to the one described by Mabille, which seems to have been both a source of, and led to a wider pursuit of, gnosis. Glass probed the possibilities of an understanding of death that discursive language is incapable of articulating, but which can be expressed through poetic imagery, myths, and esoteric symbolism. Such a thanatognosis is an exalted, transformative approach to the mystery of death.

The most excessively baroque approach to death in Los Relicarios may have been Para Gérard de Nerval “Aurélia” (1966; Fig. 8), which was illuminated from within by electric light. With its rounded top side, the shape of the box is similar to that of a birdcage. The brass wings affixed to its sides recall Robert Rauschenberg’s combine Coca-Cola Plan (1958), but Para Gérard de Nerval “Aurélia” eschews Rauschenberg’s ironic pop critique of US imperialism in favor of luxuriating in Nerval’s obsession with death as it permeates his 1855 Aurélia. In the main compartment of the box, the bust of a woman is placed on an ornate...
brass cast of leaves, melted candle wax running down her bald head. An equally ornate mirror behind the bust reflects the top of her skull and her shoulders, affording the box an immersive sense of depth. In the rounded compartment above, a female doll with auburn hair down to her ankles is transfixed in mid-step, her face turned toward a metal mask with piercing eyes. On top of this rounded compartment, Glass has mounted eleven painted eggs set in gilded holders. Para Gérard de Nerval “Aurélia” appears to be a condensation of key themes in Nerval’s autobiographical book about the visionary potential and profound reality of dreams. Throughout the narrative, Nerval is preoccupied with doubles and doubling, including his oft-cited notion of the dream as a second life. The mask-like object in the upper compartment may be an allusion to Nerval’s intimations of the presence of a strange spirit, an uncanny and possibly malevolent double, and, with its piercing, inhuman gaze, it seemingly alludes to the significance ascribed to visionary seeing in Aurélia. The baroque wings on the sides of the box, meanwhile, may well relate to Nerval’s belief that he has managed to transcend death through his oneiric excursions. Turning Aurélia into a double idol, frozen in mid-step and emerging from bronze petals, Glass evokes Nerval’s guilt-ridden insight that he has worshipped Aurélia in a pagan way, preferring “the creature over the creator” (Nerval 1964, 129). In contrast to Nerval’s ambivalence, Glass’s reliquaries embrace pagan embodiment as they seek out a gnostic spark in the poetry of death.

Resurrection and the Raven

To the best of my knowledge, Glass never made another winged box. Yet, wings are present in different ways in his art throughout the years. Preoccupied with birds, he often depicts them as hermetic messengers between earth and the heavens. In several assemblages, he also incorporates reproductions, sometimes modified, of a photograph of Gislebertus’s sculpture Dream of the Magi (1125–1135) in the cathedral of Autun. The sculpture depicts the three magi lying under a blanket and having a vision of an angel who points to the star that will guide them home. In Glass’s works, he often adds three or four fingers sticking out above the heads of the kings, transforming the ensemble into a hand; adding a mirrored version of the image, he makes the two sets of magi look like a pair of wings. In a 1998–2018 untitled box, the doubled angel is pointing toward the many tin foil stars fastened to the piece of cloth that forms the backdrop. Taken together, these depictions of birds, angels, and wings point to a lasting preoccupation with the mysteries of ascent, fraught with intimations of a thanatognostic solution to the riddle of death.

Thanatognosis is the central theme of an untitled 2020 assemblage by Glass (Fig. 9), which has a headless raven affixed on top of a black box. Flea market finds the raven was originally a special-edition tequila bottle and the box packaging for a high-end bottle of whiskey. Glass has mounted a yellow sheet of paper on the front of the box and equipped it with a miniature yellow ladder and cut-out drawings of two ravens. Once this outer casing is removed, the box opens to form a triptych. In the center compartment, a yellow ball of yarn rests on top of a drawer out of which peers a toy raven’s head; to the left, Glass has mounted a
page from A. E. Waite’s *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* with an illustration of the Hanged Man card from the Major Arcanum, a yellow thread piercing the paper and tied around the leg by which the man hangs; to the right, parts of a lock mechanism are affixed above a yellow square upon which are mounted a black feather and two further cut-out drawings of corvids. Characteristically complex, the assemblage appears to posit the raven’s headlessness—the *tête tranchée* again—and the Hanged Man’s visionary suspension as states conducive to gnosis. The inclusion of a page from Waite’s book points to a further esoteric aspect of the box. In his brief interpretation of the Hanged Man on the page facing the image in question, Waite states that this is a much-misunderstood card, with all earlier interpretations merely signs of vanity. Instead, he offers, the Hanged Man “expresses the relation ... between the Divine and the Universe,” and the person “who can understand that the story of his higher nature is imbedded in this symbolism ... will know that after the Sacred Mystery of Death there is a glorious Mystery of Resurrection.”11

As a work of gnosopoetics and thanatognosis, this untitled assemblage alludes to possibilities of mystical rebirth articulated through surrealist associations as much as through esoteric sources.

NOTES


2 For the surrealist object, see Fijalkowski (2016), 193–206.


4 Conversation with Alan Glass, Mexico City, February 2022.

5 See, for example, Mathews (2003).

6 Conversation with Alan Glass, Mexico City, September 2022.

7 See also Susik and Noheden (2021).

8 “Oh! Ne fuis pas! ... car la nature meurt avec toi!”

9 “Je reconnus des traits chéris, et, portant les yeux autour de moi, je vis que le jardin avait pris l’aspect d’un cimetière. Des voix disaient: ‘L’univers est dans la nuit.’”

10 “La creature au creator.”


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