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National College of Art and Design

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Reflections on Bertil Vallien's Glass

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Glass is an alluring and fascinating material, beginning with its creation within the heat of the furnace. It can be both delicate and clumsy, both beautiful and functional. Since the beginning, glass has been honoured for its hard to touch feel, its fragility and its optical illusions. Glass is a mass of contradictions, hot and cold, opaque and transparent, fragile and strong, liquid and solid. The metamorphosis of glass from its molten state to its solid state is similar to the metamorphosis of water into ice; from one clear liquid state to another clear solid state. Glass today is not only a material for the decorative crafts, but also a modern medium suitable for personal artistic expression.

Few artists attain the international recognition and respect that the Swedish glass artist Bertil Vallien has earned for his unique vision as a sculptor working in glass, and for his important contribution to the technical development of Glass Art. Vallien continues to move in new directions and create entirely new bodies of work. He is constantly searching further into the themes of spiritual and physical enchantment, surrounded with myth and mystery. Within the last thirty years he has greatly stretched the technique and existence of sandcast glass sculptures. Vallien entered the glass field quite by chance, after

studying ceramics at art college. He creates both functional and sculptural pieces within the constraints of a factory environment. Both his functional glassware and sculptural sandcasts are equally exciting. However, it is his sandcasts for which he is better known worldwide, not only for their beauty but also their technical ability. Glass gives Vallien the opportunity to create enclosed worlds full of symbolism and messages, vividly focused on the basic elements of human life. A comment regarding Bertil Vallien by Doug Heller, co-owner of the Heller Gallery, New York, states:

"Within the International glass community, he stands at the very highest level, for both his design work and his Art" (1)

It is not easy to write of an artist who is still deeply involved in an on-going process; thus this paper can only be a fragment of the whole story, due to his work's dynamic nature, and will always be incomplete. My intention is to present the biographical details of his life and to discuss a selection of his sandcast glass sculptures, focusing mainly on his 'Boat' and 'Head' series. I will also discuss the technique of sandcasting, with which Bertil Vallien is most familiar.

CHAPTER ONE

Background

Bertil Vallien was born in 1938 in the small suburb of Sollentuna to the North of Stockholm in Sweden. Sollentuna is set in attractive surroundings and is populated by both middle class and working class families. Bertil Vallien's father, Nils was a painter and decorator and was born in the midland district of Sweden. Bertil's mother, Astrid was a housewife who grew up in the South-Eastern province of Vastmanland. Bertil was the second of seven children. He left home at the age of fifteen and moved to Stockholm. Whilst there he met Olle Adrin who taught sculpture, and Nissie Bruland who was a philosopher, he was much influenced by these two people. However, soon after, Bertil was faced with the challenge of deciding on a future career: a priest, a pilot or a potter? Bertil chose the last and in 1959 he decided to continue in the area of ceramics at Konstfack. Here he felt uneasy because of the fact that some of his fellow students had grown up in homes where art was a normal part of everyday life and thus, as a result, Bertil gave 100% to his work, working both day and night at any challenge which came his way. Later in that same year, Bertil met a teacher called Stig Lindberg who opened many new doors in the area of creativity to his students. Here Bertil's imagination and creativity began to expand, leading to free ideas and impulsive projects, towards all of which

Lindberg was positive. This gifted ceramics tutor had a great influence on young Bertil Vallien. All of Bertil's time spent at Konstfack helped to shape his future career. While at College studying ceramics, Vallien's pieces were irregular in form, a contrast to the beauty and simple forms of earlier years. Thus we can see Vallien was influenced by what was happening around him in the art world. Although, his pieces showed great respect for traditions and craftsmanship. But he pushed these boundaries slightly to produce unconventional vessels. Husberg and Lindberg taught Vallien while at College to play with the clay and to work with it, to experiment more but mainly to enjoy what he was doing, leading ultimately to new outcomes in his work.

From 1956-1961, Bertil Vallien studied at the National College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm. From here he graduated top of his class, winning a Royal Award. This fund allowed him to travel around the United States of America and Mexico. He also visited England, the Aran Islands and Tulla Ranslet, off the coast of Denmark. All of these influences led Bertil Vallien to make imaginative and technical experiments within his work. Vallien was greatly influenced by America and this would have a lasting effect on his work. This gave a great new freedom in his style of work, a new radical direction. At this same time, an article was published in Design Magazine

with a comment on him, from Vallien's past tutor Stig Lindberg:

"Works fast in a rustic manner, equally adept at horses, and oxen, sewing machines and telephones. An all rounder" (2)

The reason he returned to Sweden was because of a job offer from the Afors glass factory, in Smaland, in the Southern region. See Fig. 1. At this stage, Bertil Vallien was unaware of the growing studio glass movement.



Fig.1. Bertil Vallien in the studio at Afors.

Date unknown.

CHAPTER TWO

The Swedish glass industry and Kosta Boda

Since the end of the first world war, Swedish glass has had a reputation for excellence in design and craftsmanship. Glass has become the most highly acclaimed product of the Swedish arts industry. During the 1950's, the Scandinavian studio glass tradition was known worldwide and was at its climax. In the late 50's and the early 60's, large changes were taking place in the art world. A rebellion was starting against work which was simply functional. Artists were challenging perfection and were allowing glass pieces to contain air bubbles, the impurities being made a strong feature of the work. Also the forms became much more sculptural. Function and simplicity were strong characters within Swedish glass art. These new ideas meant the artists and designers were excited and had new ideas to develop. Thus, feeling became an important element in the work of that period.

The early 60's in Sweden were a time of transition for the craft industry. The characteristic balance of beauty and grace with simplicity and clarity were being challenged. There was colossal criticism of the standardised forms which had come to be associated with Swedish design. During the 60's it came as a shock when artists started to set up studios on their own. Some of them have managed to be

successful, and the studio tradition still remains today. Traditions and respect play a large role for these artists working in the medium of glass today. In the 60's, the emphasis in Swedish glass art become more experimental and more flexible, without constraints.

In the early 60's, Bertil Vallien focused on his ceramic sculptures but later in this decade, he shifted towards glass works. The key elements in his work of this time were diversity, freedom of space and confidence of expression. Vallien experimented a lot with new glass techniques and new forms of representation. He demonstrated a development for Swedish design in the 60's, producing asymmetrical, distorted objects of both regular and irregular shape, opening up the world of form. In the early 70's the Swedish glass industry hit harsh times. With the use of technology, machinery and reduced imports, industrial glass was being produced much more quickly and cheaply than handcrafted pieces and thus sold rapidly in Sweden. Vallien at this point realised that there was still a retail market for handcrafted glass, but it would have to take a new route. Pieces would have to be one offs, incorporating both elegance and glamour with expression. Thus he used moulds which were appropriate for production in larger quantities. Although all made from the same mould, each piece would be slightly different from the others. The "Artist's Collection" was set up to preserve the craft traditions of

the Swedish glass industry in 1976, at the Afors glass studio. The "Artist Collection" made it possible for most householders to possess a beautiful piece of glass craftware. Each piece of work in this Exhibition had the appearance of being an original. This led to the survival of Afors.

Kosta Boda

Kosta Boda is the longest running glass studio in Sweden, set up in 1742. Today Kosta Boda consists of three other Glass Studios: Johansfors set up in 1891, Afors set up in 1876 and Boda set up in 1864. Vallien worked at Afors in the summer of 1959 as an assistant to Erik Hoglund, helping to produce his series of blue and grey bubbled glasswares. Vallien was then asked to return the following summer by the director Erik Rosen, to design glasses and decanter sets. This left a great feeling of importance and being needed for Vallien, one he was not to forget even after returning from America. It is clear that America had a great influence on Vallien and whilst there he absorbed a lot of information. After returning from America, Vallien accepted a job with Afors glass studio. His reason being

"I needed a job. My idea was to support myself as a designer while I worked as an artist with clay, wood and iron. But after five years glass took over" (3)

Bertil Vallien entered Afors as a designer, with no

experience of the methods associated with glass. All of Vallien's designs were current, contemporary and untried beforehand, but were confined within the limits of his workplace. Vallien adopted the path of Afors in the 70's, when Swedish glass was starting to decline. Bertil Vallien believed that the hands could not be replaced by machinery, but that traditions should be maintained. He was convinced that the personal skills of the Swedish glass artisans were what made them different from those in other countries. Thus, Bertil Vallien believed that such a heritage should not be rejected or discarded.

Since 1963, Vallien has also worked as a designer for Kosta Boda, one of the leading glass companies in the world. Shortly after he began at Kosta Boda, Vallien began to experiment with glass and next he produced his first sandcast glass sculptures. Whilst working at Kosta Boda, Vallien was offered a 50/50 contract; six months studio work and six months personal work. Simultaneously he designed functional glassware for the studio and sculptural pieces for himself. In 1978 Vallien became the principal designer for Kosta Boda.

Vallien has successfully combined the two roles of designing glass for industry, working with it artistically and personally since 1963. Of glass Bertil Vallien says

"Glass is an invisible substance that eats the

light and then redirects it, no other material is so volatile and capricious, it is impossible to capture on paper - which is probably why I find it so fascinating".(4)

During each week, days of freedom from everyday production of studio glassware allowed Bertil Vallien to reflect on his own situation as an artist and experiment with new technical advances within the technique of sandcasting. His sculptures took on a more depressive perception, where death was almost always a main theme. The main technical change of this time was his experimentation with blue glass, which was tinted with cobalt. In November of 1991, Bertil Vallien himself said blue was the only colour he could use, because of its closeness to the sea, the sky and the universe. During 1989 - 1990 Bertil Vallien had the opportunity of taking a year off to work on his personal pieces, thus allowing him more freedom to expand his creativity. His main experiment during this time was with the forms of his pieces and making them much more sculptural.

CHAPTER THREE

The technique of sandcasting

Bertil Vallien is well known within today's glass world, particularly for his exceptional talent at the process of the sandcasting technique. He has developed this technique to equal standards of blown and kiln-formed glass in the art world. For more than thirty five years he has developed, and still continues to improve, sandcasting as an artistic medium. Within this technique there are many advantages for him, such as freedom of expression and the contrasts he can obtain within each piece, the main one being between the rough, coarse texture created by the sand and the clear, shiny reflective surface of the cooled molten glass. Within the technique, great constructive and organisational abilities are required in preparing the moulds. Vallien has started an extraordinary development which he will probably not exhaust fully to its limits before he dies.

He has taken sandcasting from a metal industry casting method into a contemporary, sculptural process.

Sandcasting is basically a simple method of producing glass forms. It is not known exactly when it started, but the Romans used sand for a technique known as sand coring. It is considered to have started because of the need for blown bowls which would fit onto the outside of another bowl,

usually made of silver. The inner bowl would be pressed into damp sand, removed carefully and glass would then be blown into the resulting cavity to form the outer bowl. It is now a familiar technique for producing quick and energetic sculptural forms. The only drawback with the sandcasting process is that each time the mould is destroyed, and a new one needs to be produced.

Vallien starts the process with a series of rough sketches, until he has clarified a final idea which answers all his design problems. The next step is to bring the drawing to the workshop and start to bring reality and life into his idea. He has to be flexible and prepared to modify and alter sections of his designs if they cannot be produced. He prepares for a pour well in advance, choosing his exact design, and leaving out the correct templates and tools required. Then, he plans and arranges the coloured oxides that he will apply in his work. Another priority is to assemble the objects or symbols to be incorporated in each cast. Each mould is composed of a metal box which holds the sand. The important part of the sandcasting process is preparing the sand. Sand, charcoal, graphite, bentonite and water have to be mixed until an even, fine consistency is achieved. If too much water is used, steam penetrates the glass on its way out and creates huge air bubbles. If there is not enough moisture, the sand will collapse when the molten glass is being poured into the mould. A wooden mould

of the final piece is made of abachi wood because of its soft characteristics and its simplicity to carve. This is then pressed into the sand. The sand is packed tightly surrounding it and, once removed, the desired shape is obtained. This is then the hollow where the molten glass will be poured. See Figs.2+3. When Vallien has completed the finalised form within the sand mould and all the imprinting is concluded, the mould is then sprinkled with graphite powder to prevent too much of the sand adhering to the exterior surface of the glass. Next, over this are sprinkled the desired coloured oxides. See Fig.4. Then these moulds are carefully transported to the hot workshop, assuring the sand does not collapse or crack. Now Vallien is prepared for his team of casters to begin the hot work. Ladles of molten glass are carried from the furnace to the casting table and poured into the mould. Several ladle fulls are required. The master caster will direct and instruct the remainder of the crew's movements, i.e. adding metal inclusions and solid glass elements or adding more molten glass. See Fig.5. But the main instruction is to reheat the surface of the glass, so as to avoid cold and hot stresses or pressure in the piece or produce any visible joint lines. All of the glass needs to remain at a similar temperature. Vallien, when sandcasting, performs a dynamic dance with his team of workers.

This is a very speedy process and during it there is a lot

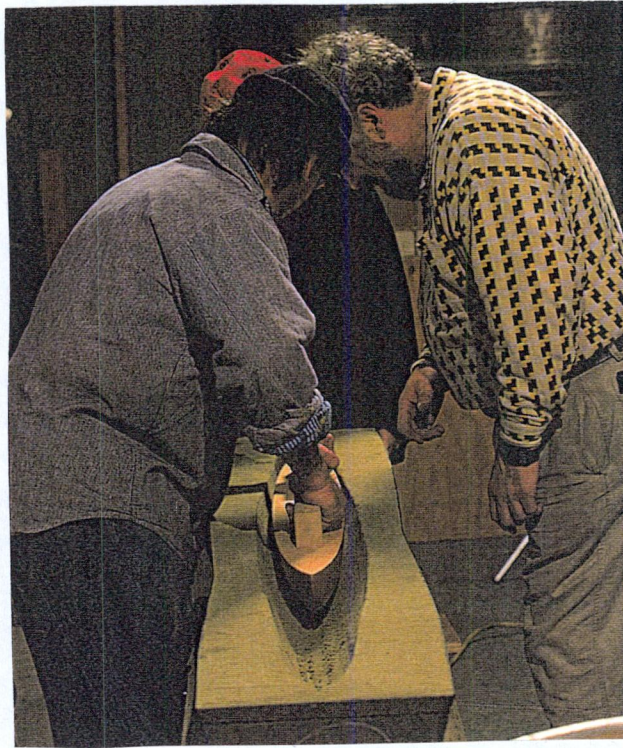


Fig.2. Preparing the sand with a wooden mould.

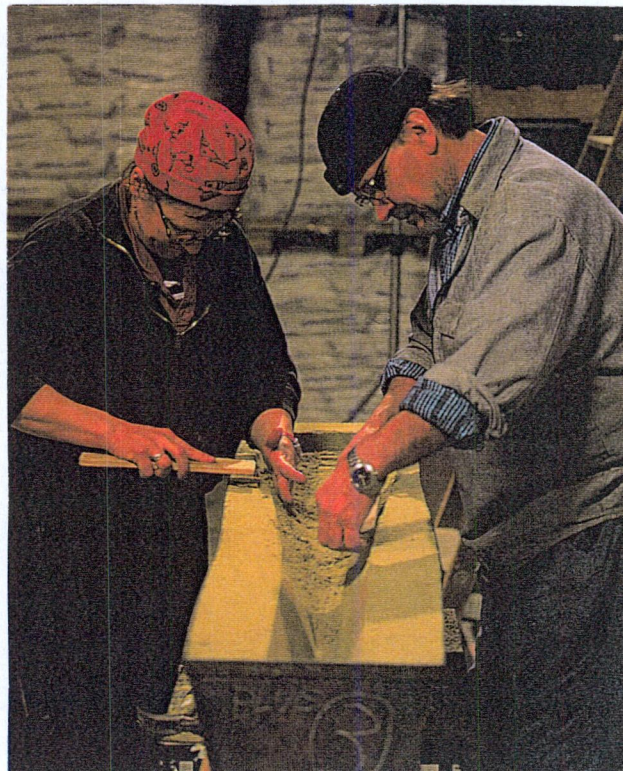


Fig.3. Making final preparations to the mould.

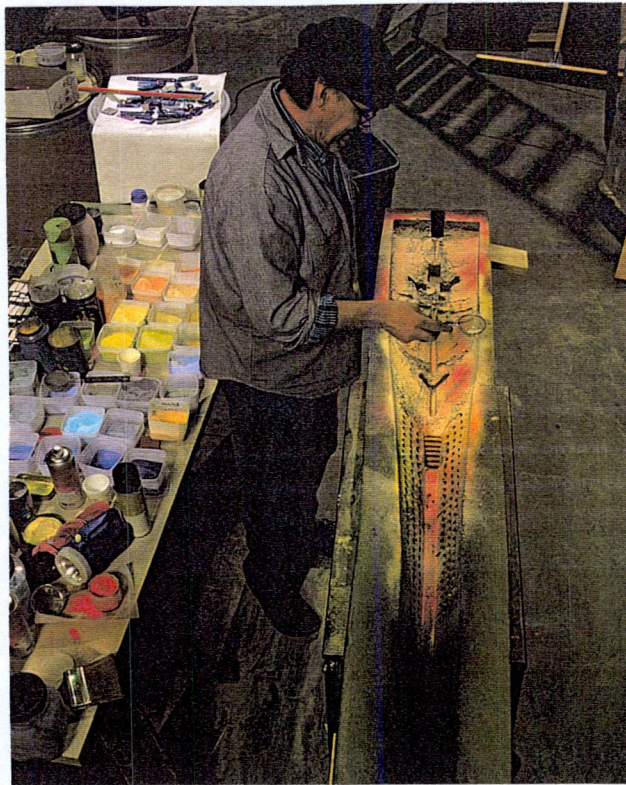


Fig.4. Applying the coloured oxides to the mould.



Fig.5. Work in progress, during the pouring of the glass.

of energy and noise. It requires exact synchronisation and a complete understanding of the non-verbal communication that occurs when the roaring furnaces drown out all other sounds. It also requires considerable ability to interpret the colour language that the glass speaks at 2300 degrees and below and an immense physical effort and sheer muscle power. Once completed, the work area returns to a still calm area. The cast is complete; whatever has not been accomplished during the process, cannot be completed now and must remain unconcluded. The mould is carefully transported to the annealing oven. This process requires great concentration, as the glass is still semi-liquid and could spill out of the mould. Also, the sand could collapse on top of the piece and obscure it. It is left for several weeks to cool sufficiently, to eliminate stresses and reduce the risk of cracking. When coming out of the annealer, it is a frozen piece.

Bertil Vallien is perhaps Scandinavia's most distinguished artist working in glass at the present moment. He has been more or less responsible for the development of the sandcasting technique worldwide. It is because of Bertil Vallien's continuous exploration and dedication that sandcasting has become one of the most superb forms of glass art in the late twentieth century. No other material offers such characteristics of diversity of form obtained through both hot and cold working processes. That is why Bertil

Vallien finds this medium so appealing.

The first goal Vallien wanted to achieve was hands-on practice to allow him to see the inherent characteristics the material glass had to offer him. Because he came to glass not knowing about it, he had no preconceptions, except those that came with the medium. He was innocent of the whole process and thus learnt the basics and advanced these. Due to his lack of knowledge, Vallien became exceedingly experimental with the use of glass as a medium. Vallien himself said of glass:

"Glass cannot be designed on paper. Many effects are impossible to calculate, that is why I often go straight into the hot workshop and try out my ideas in practice. A lot can happen in the process, things that are impossible to predict". (5)

Vallien's primary sandcasts were composed in the mid 60's at Afors, with pieces such as 'Clean Force' (Fig.6) and the 'Goddess' (Fig.7). The only words to describe these pieces are awkward and ill-shaped. However, even at this early stage, inclusions were being added. These consisted of copper shapes and hot and kiln formed shapes in glass. These symbols have been advanced considerably over the years to a high standard and level of perfection. Even in his first sandcasts, Vallien managed to manipulate and trap the light within the pieces, creating seductive, labyrinthian interiors.

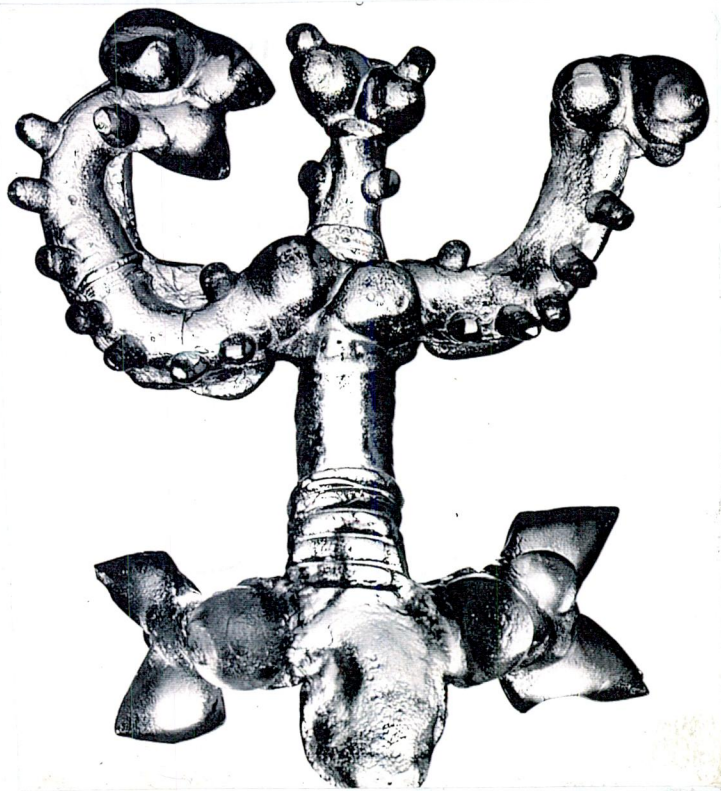


Fig.6. Clean Force 1965

Height 50cm

Sandcast by Bertil Vallien

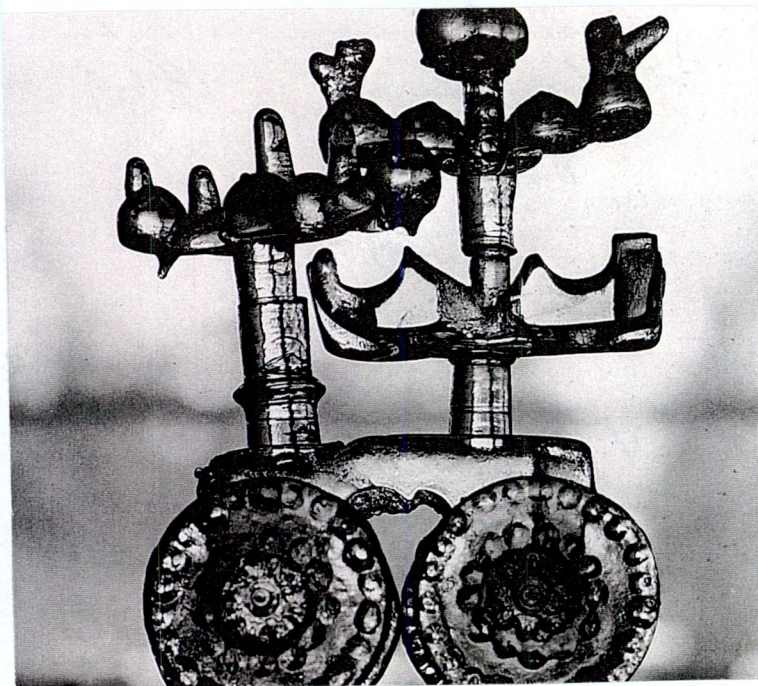


Fig.7. The Goddess 1967

Sandcast by Bertil Vallien

Glass is an ideal medium in which Vallien can create an enclosed world; as he describes it, "*Glass eats light*", meaning that the light is trapped within his sculptures. The light rarely emerges from the interior, but is ever present, indefinable. It leads the viewer through secret passages and exits, in assorted directions and or paths of hope and ambitions. The light is a concealed, mysterious light, glowing from within. Vallien's pieces are very secretive and have new routes within them, symbolised by tunnels, bridges, stairs and ladders. They are forms of communicating from inside, mystical and mysterious, freezing a moment in time a happening or an event. When you look inside Vallien's sculptures there is no scale and thus it is easy to get lost. They invite you to see inside them. Glass can represent something very hot like fire or something cold like ice, so this medium can be used as a metaphor for Vallien's own personal ideas, thoughts and knowledge.

Vallien has continuously pursued sandcasting as an escape from traditional techniques that would allow him more freedom and spontaneity during the process, and allow him to use his inspiration of the moment to become a part of the final flawless, perfected piece. Vallien wanted full control of the form and the surface decoration, thus the technique of sandcasting allowed him all of this, its texture giving different dimensions to his cast sculptures. The surfaces of his glass sculptures are uneven

and matt, they seem weathered, corroded or robbed of their original glow that is associated with glass. The exterior forms of his sculptures are always characterised by extreme simplicity, yet at the same time they remain powerful, energetic and full of symbolism. Perfection can be the artists number one enemy, but Bertil Vallien has allowed destiny and fate during the process to push him forward. Impelled before he understood the technique by a fascination for it, now he understands it he has time to concentrate on the message held within.

While Vallien has been developing the technique of sandcasting, he has also been building up a language of signs and symbols, which he continues to use again and again. One of his distinguishing qualities has been his admirable capacity for getting glass workers to work with him and making them an important part of the process. He has always permitted them to use their own knowledge. Vallien does not want to solely be a conductor, rather he wants to be part of a team. The factory atmosphere has been with Vallien for years. It plays a large role in tradition. The factory is made up of many smaller individual lives, all of whom have talented needs, dreams and hopes. Not only are these people tied to this life but also to the lives of their own families and friends.

The latest developments Bertil Vallien has achieved in the sandcasting process include the ability to produce sections where no sand adheres to the surface. The traditional way to achieve this was through cold working techniques, but Vallien has a solution for areas that cannot be cold worked on due to the shape of the piece being cast. A glass spout is blown and its surface is rapidly cooled while the heat remains inside. It is inserted into the sand at exactly the same time as the molten glass is being poured in. The coolness makes the sand stick and the heat inside ensures that it will not crack. Another technique Vallien has managed to achieve is hollow sections within the pieces. These are created by mixing bentonite with the sand and water so, once hardened, it will not move, it becomes solid. This is then positioned in the mould and molten glass can be poured on top of it. Thus, a relief effect is created within his sculptures. This permits Vallien to create certain effects previously thought of as unattainable. With sandcasting you have to have knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of glass. It is impossible to cut corners, you have to know the process to enable you to get results from it. At times Vallien has said:

"Glass infuriates me! As a material I've never liked the damn stuff, its willful, its cold and unfriendly, and it presents a lot of technical problems" (6)

Such a statement can only be appreciated by understanding

the trials the designer faces when transforming a lump of glass into an attractive, cheaply and quickly produced object for production. Bertil Vallien has achieved a revolutionary technical development, simultaneously refining quality in his work and individual creativity in his designs. Within the difficult process of sandcasting, Bertil Vallien's sculptures appear as great technical advances and leave one wondering how he has developed this medium to levels of such perception and achievement. The large proportions of his sculptures, in particular, make them memorable and outstanding.

Life on the boundless voyage or journey through life, or into the future, has been a constant theme in Vallien's ingenious work. All of Vallien's sandcasts are a means of expression for his thoughts, feelings and emotions. They have been produced by his passion to represent his ideas within the medium of glass.

CHAPTER FOUR

The 'Head' series (1995-1998)

The main communicative part of the human body is the face, which reveals a lot about a person's character or mood, yet it can also act as a mask and conceal information. The head is a powerful symbolic form. It immediately speaks of life and death, and also of reality and appearance. Facial gestures communicate information to others. Expressive gestures can be portrayed mainly visually, through our facades. These gestures of all types are universal and are known worldwide. Facial expression is crucial to daily human interaction. The bulk of non-verbal signalling is transmitted by the human face. We are so aware of what our faces are doing that it is easy to lie with facial expressions. The face is so complex, with the capability of hundreds of minor tensions and relaxations that can express changes in underlying moods. We can thus hide true feelings and emotions.

With the main characteristic of glass being transparent, the relationship between the interior and the exterior is obvious. What could be hidden by an opaque exterior is now revealed and what is not is deliberately obscured. Behind each of Vallien's pieces there is a narrative as a form of inspiration. His 'Head' series began in 1995. It was

inspired by the story of Carolina Olsson who was thirteen and the daughter of a crofter from Monseras in the South of Sweden. On the 14th of February 1876, on her way home from school, she slipped on the ice and injured her head. The next day she complained of a sore head and her father let her remain at home for the day. On this same day she fell into a deep sleep and remained unconscious for thirty two years. She awoke in 1908 to find herself with the mind of a thirteen year old girl in the body of a forty five year old woman. A lot had happened at her family cottage. Her mother had died and her two brothers had drowned. But she quickly regained her strength and was soon able to participate in the farm work. She refused to comment once she awoke from her sleep, but only to say she remembered "*a great darkness and blue men*" (7). Vallien was inspired by this story and in 1995 started to portray these men who had appeared in her dreams, see Figs.8+9. Men of anger, threat, melancholy, and fear. Men created of fire and appearing as ice. Vallien did not produce these so much as a family of men, but as the faces of every man, seen by different people or in different circumstances.

Vallien began with a face that was beautiful, archaic in the sense of early Greek sculptures. The eyes were empty sockets which the Greeks would have filled with painted eyes or jewels. The mouth was similar to the half smile of the Kourous figures. For Vallien, they offered a view to the



Fig.8. Head IV 1996

Measurements unknown

Sandcast and copper wire

by Bertil Vallien



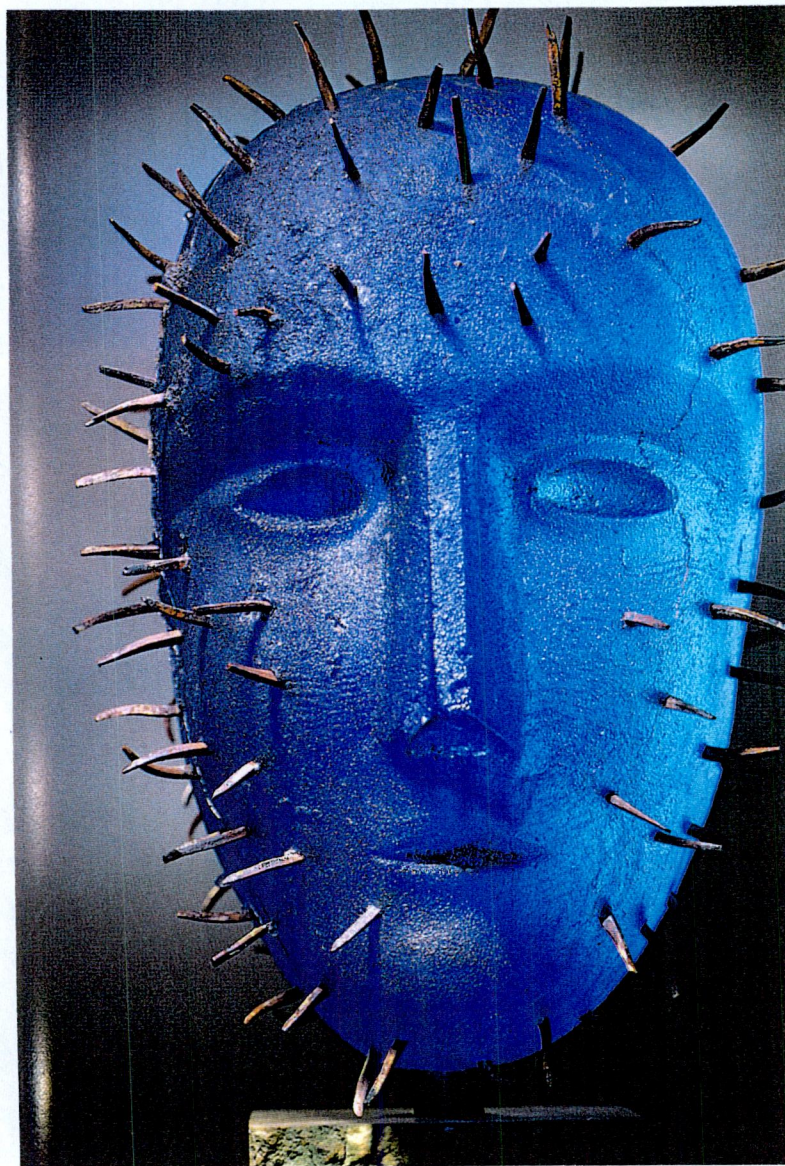


Fig.9. Head V 1997

Measurements unknown

Sandcast and metal

by Bertil Vallien



interior and all that it represents. Bertil Vallien began to reconstruct this visage by the attachment of abstract forms to it. He placed a bar across the mouth, copper wire circles inside, suggesting communications, and also a monolith rising from the skull, suggesting creativity. Portions of the head may be sliced off and polished to present a window into the brain, so that Vallien's usual vocabulary of inclusions, or even another face - the man's true face - can be visible. Once inside, one can experience character traits from an androgynous face. They are created with minimum concentration on human expressions, and one can only guess what lies behind each facade. The faces appear as static shapes in the world of past, present and future, a modern world of technology, full of emotional coldness, where masks become part of a way in which we can hide our feelings and sensitivities. The man's thoughts are there to be understood. The heads have become more abstract, unrefined, ruthless because of man's experiences in today's world. For examples of this series see Figs.10-14. Vallien called them "*Wounded*". The first heads produced were a seductive cobalt blue. The main reason was because that was how Carolina saw her men in her dreams, also because blue is an appealing, depressing and spiritual colour. The cobalt blue glass glistens as though there were a source of light somewhere deep down inside it. The cobalt blue glass with its intensity is transparent enough to define the forms within. There is a necessary desire to enter the shell of



Fig.10. Head 1 1997

Height 8½"

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

"Head 1"

8 1/2" high

Partial Volume - Complete Volume
Gaining 11 1/2"

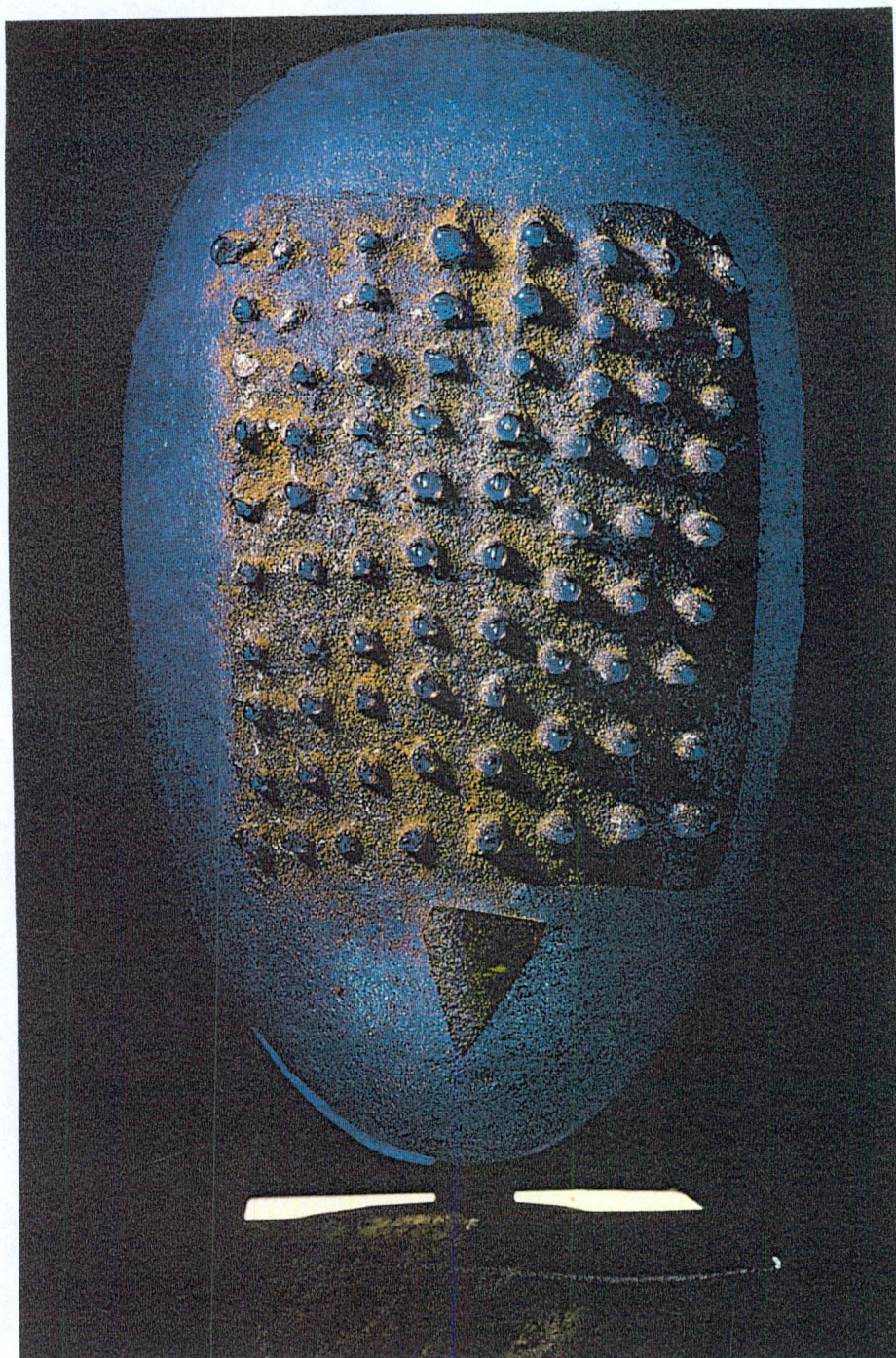


Fig.11. Head 2 1997

Height 8½"

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

"Need 2"

8 1/2" high

Bibi Sabian

Catalogue Miller

Gallery 1997

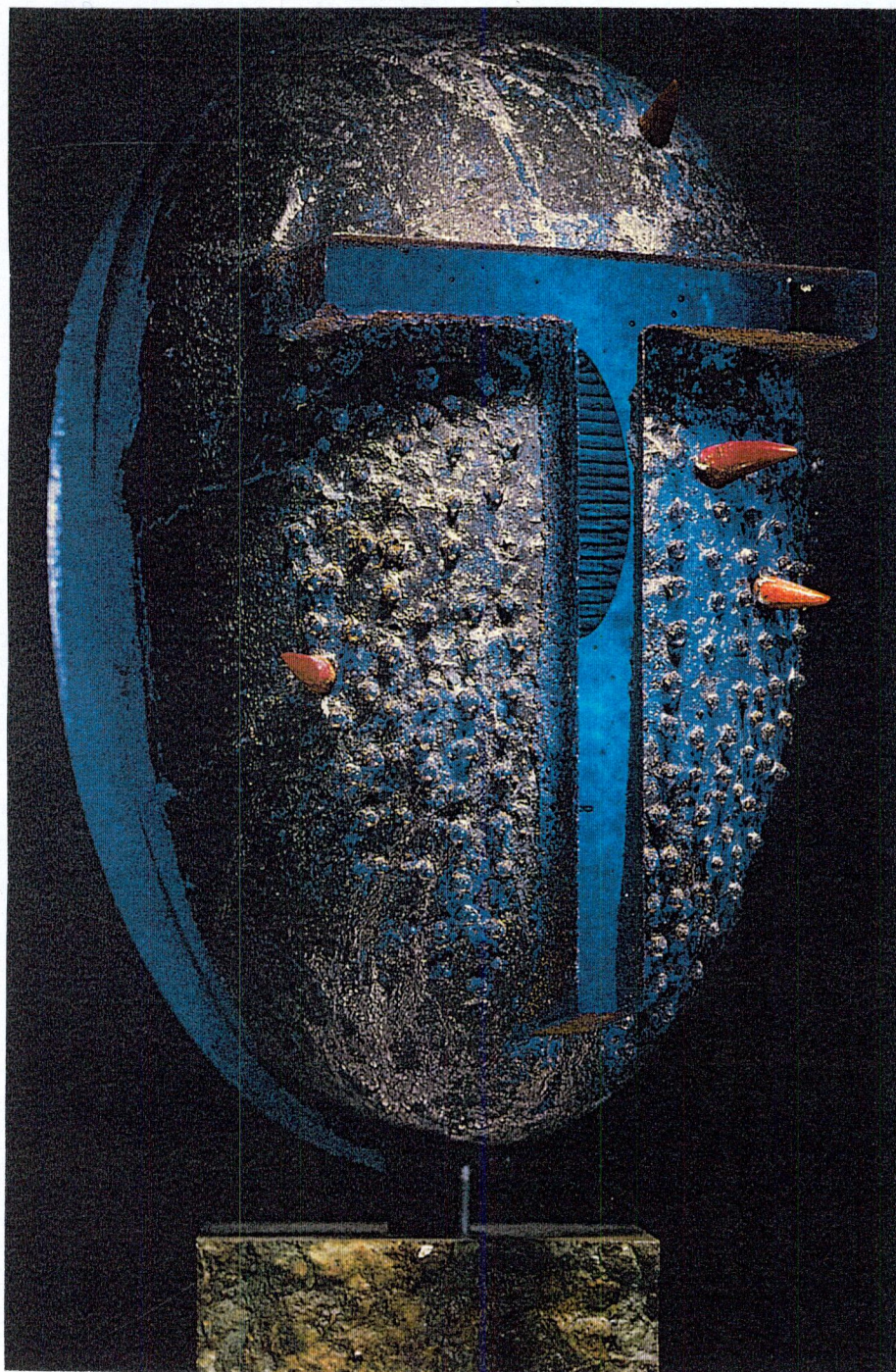


Fig.12. Head 3 1997

Height 9"

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

"Head 3"

9 1/8" high

Brill letter

catalogue Hel'co
Gallery 1997

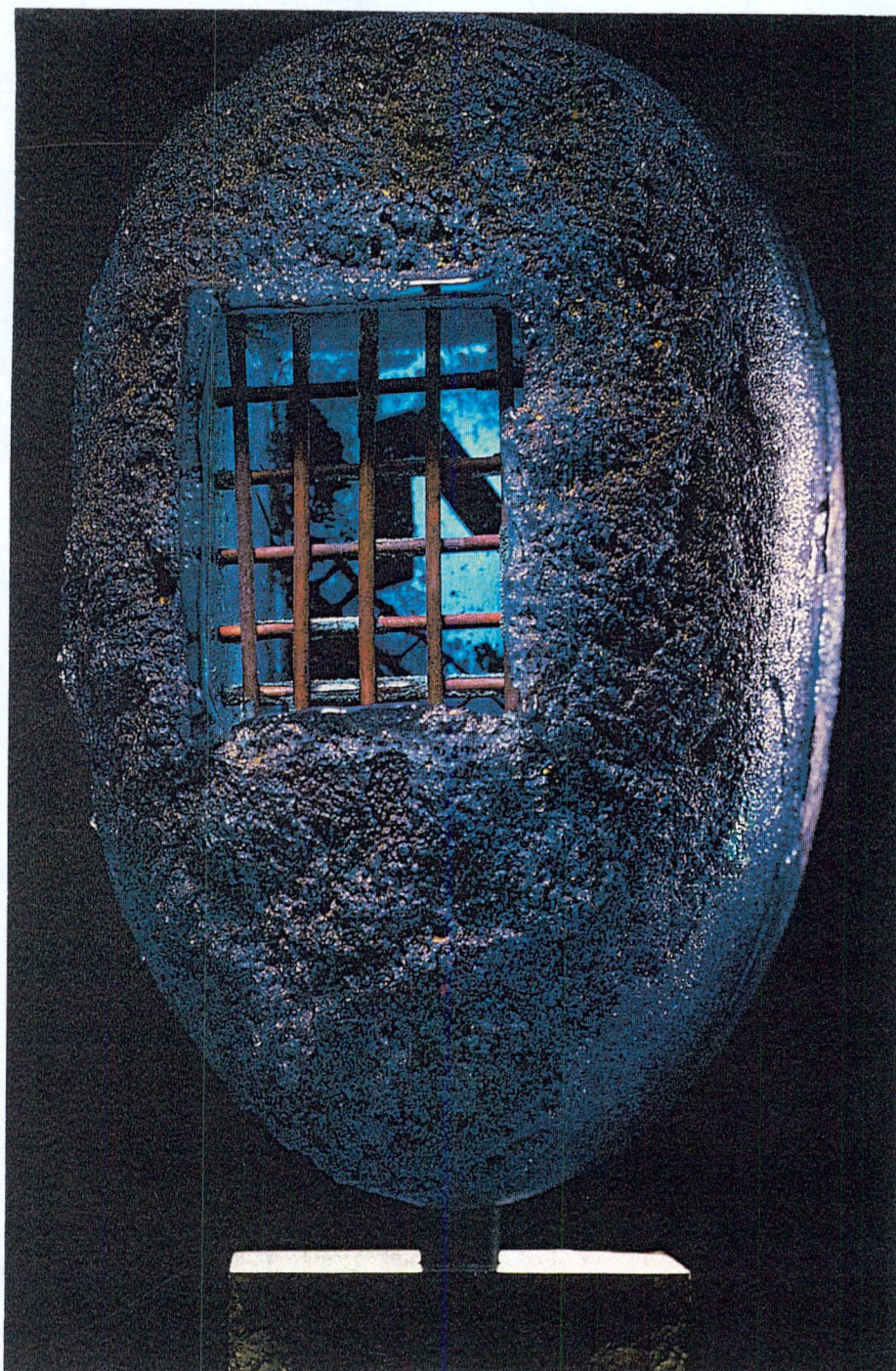


Fig.13. Head 6 1997

Height 8½"

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

"Head 6"

8 1/2" high

Birds of the — Catalogue of the
Cottages of the

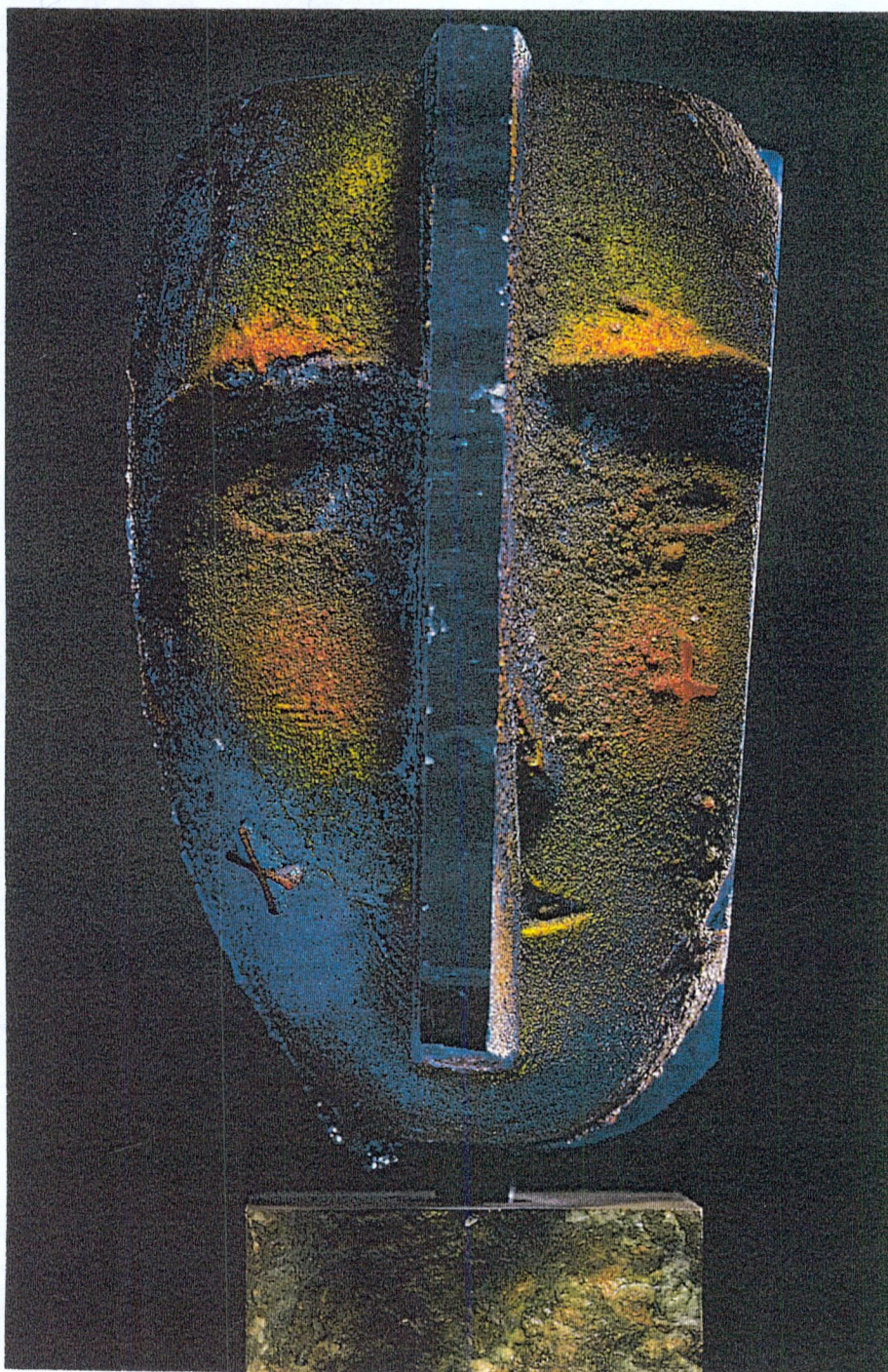


Fig.14. Head 12 1997

Height 8½"

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

"Wood 12"

8 1/2" high

Best of Volume - catalogue, Heller
Gallery 1991

the unknown, rather than simply pass it by. His later pieces are also made of clear crystal and they represent a physical materialisation of light and all that it can symbolise, see Fig.15.

Each of the heads is slightly smaller than lifesize and they are presented on thin, black slender pillars just above average eye level, in a sense the body beneath the head. Vallien has removed the once encased figure from within his sculptures to be the main theme that faces us. With the passing of years, the human body has become an ever more central element of Vallien's glass sculptures. Some of the heads are classically beautiful with polished surfaces, while others have rough, textured surfaces, where some of the sand has been allowed to adhere to the surface of the glass. Some of the gritty surface areas have been polished to expose a view of the interior, where a detailed landscape is revealed. Sometimes you can clearly see the meaning inside Vallien's sculptures, but on a second look it is obscured and the secret is once again retained. It remains inside the glass, untouchable. This is a challenge for viewers, stimulating them to try again and again for understanding behind each piece.

The above shows us that Vallien does not wish to represent a realistic view, but one that relates instead to our world of experiences, either genuine or conceivable. The

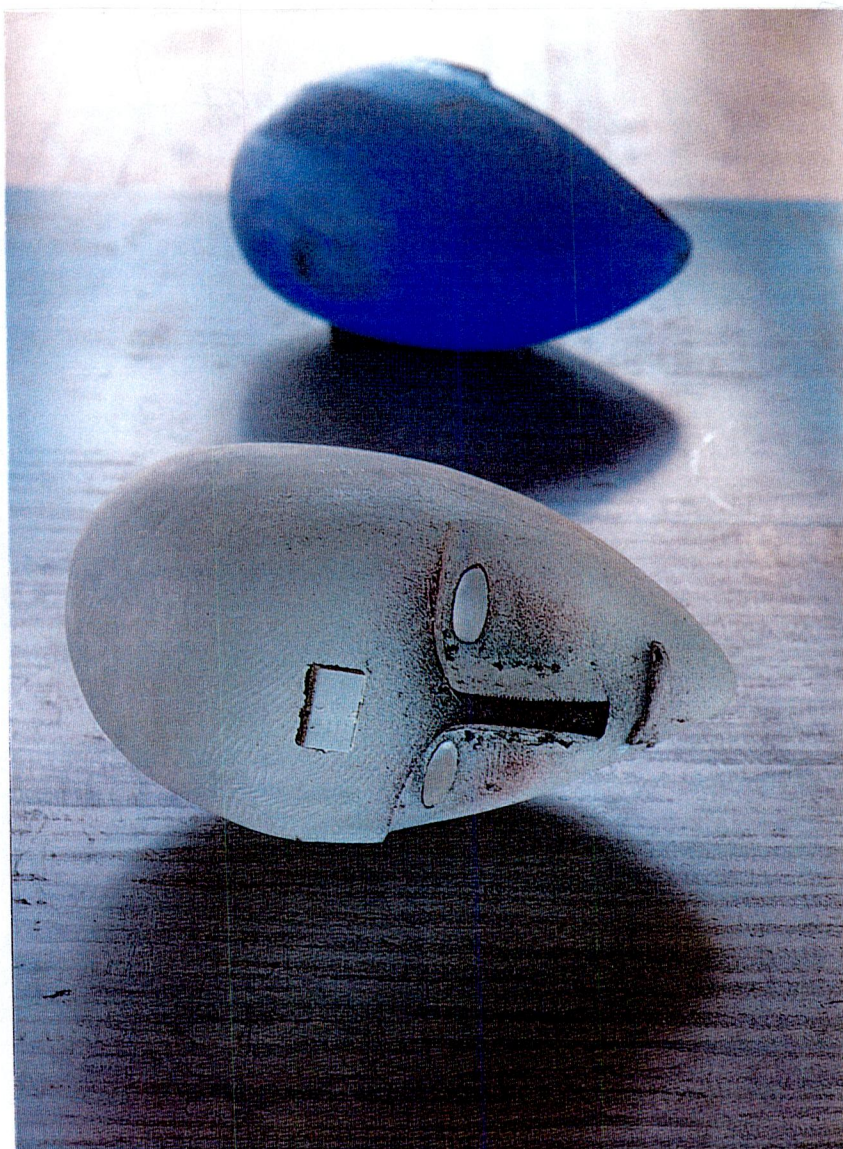


Fig.15. Resting Heads 1997

Measurements unknown

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

"Resting Heads" 1997

by

3. Wallace

Art in glass

p 84

heads are installed as a network of tortuous passages to be viewed as a whole. But, like a maze which has to be viewed step by step, so must each of the heads be viewed individually. Each head is self-contained but is also part of a larger arrangement. They are not in conversation or even in dialogue with each other. If they communicate, it is telepathically. When Vallien was asked how his viewers should react to his 'Head' series, he replied "*with silence*" (8). His sculptures always contain several interpretations, partly due to the characteristics of his glass. Indeed, they overflow with symbolic meaning. It is in the fusion of minimalist elements and symbolic richness that Vallien's art stands in a class of its own.

Vallien exhibited at the American Crafts Museum from November 11th 1997 to January 18th 1998. The exhibition was called "Four Acts In Glass" and consisted of works by Bertil Vallien, Dale Chihuly, William Morris and Pike Powers. Vallien displayed sixty-four cast glass heads, all of which were similar in size and, again, they met the viewer at eye level. The installation dealt with the main concept of dark and light. You entered it through a dark rusty box into an over illuminated room. The only other colour surrounding the heads in this room was white; white walls, white pedestals and white gravel on the floor. Here we could follow the development of his work from the very beginning of the series, and witness Vallien's magical creative powers. We

can also trace the progressive transformation that occurs in the series from start to end. We can see in Figs.16+17 two more examples of parallel installations which Bertil Vallien has held in the past.



Fig.16. Untitled 1996
 Installation, Palazzo Ducale, Venice
 Sandcast
 by Bertil Vallien

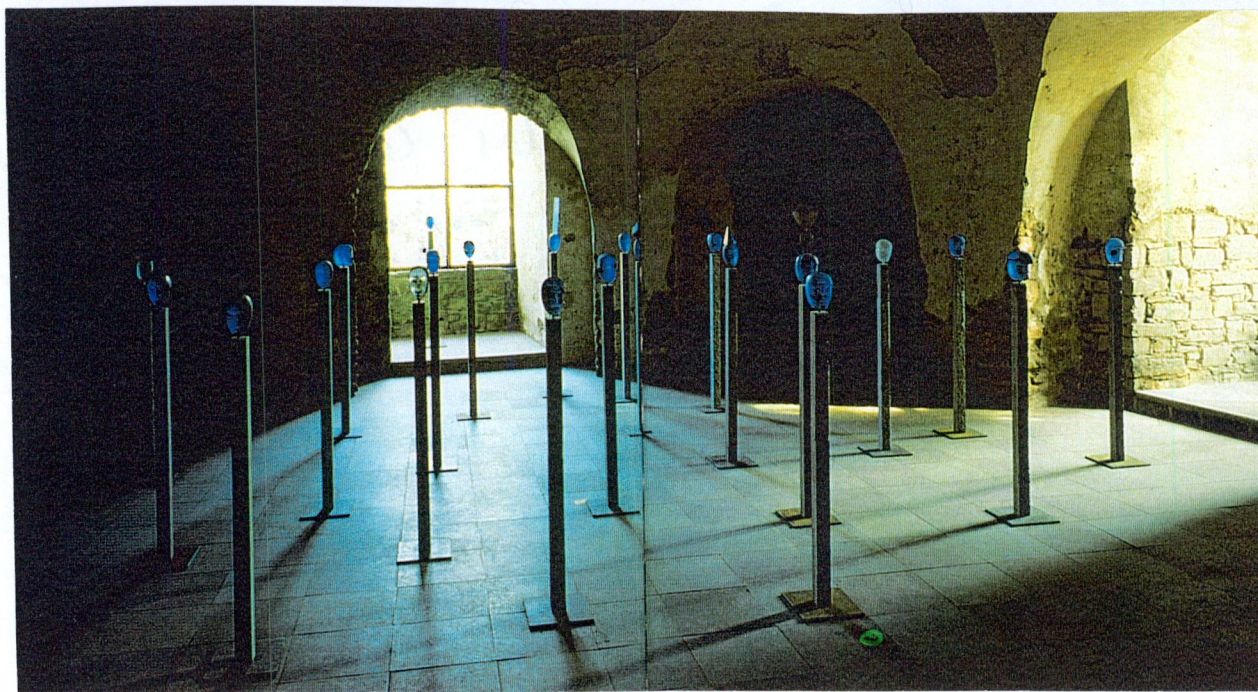


Fig.17. Untitled 1995
 Installation, Borgholm Castle, Sweden
 Sandcast
 by Bertil Vallien

"Untitled"

Installation, Palazzo

Trucchi, Venice

1996

4 Acts in glass P-55

Untitled

Installation, Borghese Castle, Sweden

1995

3 Tables

4 Acts in glass P-57/RE

CHAPTER FIVE

The "Boat" series (1983-1997)

The most noteworthy and well known of all of Bertil Vallien's series is his 'Boat' series. During his visit to America, he produced his first boat sculpture, but in the medium of clay. This theme was later to develop into a series of glass works. His first boat sculpture was a simplified, crude piece. In his piece entitled 'Ceramic Boat' date unknown, (Fig.18) surface pattern was very minimal, but texture was an important element even at this early stage. Also, figurative representation was started at an early stage in his work. Vallien has given a sense of direction to this piece by placing an arrow on the side of the boat, perhaps pointing to past or future lands. The strong frame of the sail, together with the primary boat form, can be associated with Viking sailing ships, but can also be connected to Vallien's portrayal of tradition and history. This sculpture is both bulky and solid and lacks a sense of direction or mobility. Vallien moved on to introduce a feeling of movement within his work at a later date.

Vallien first became influenced by boats and ships whilst visiting the Aran Islands off the West coast of Ireland. This led him to also take a closer look at Swedish boat

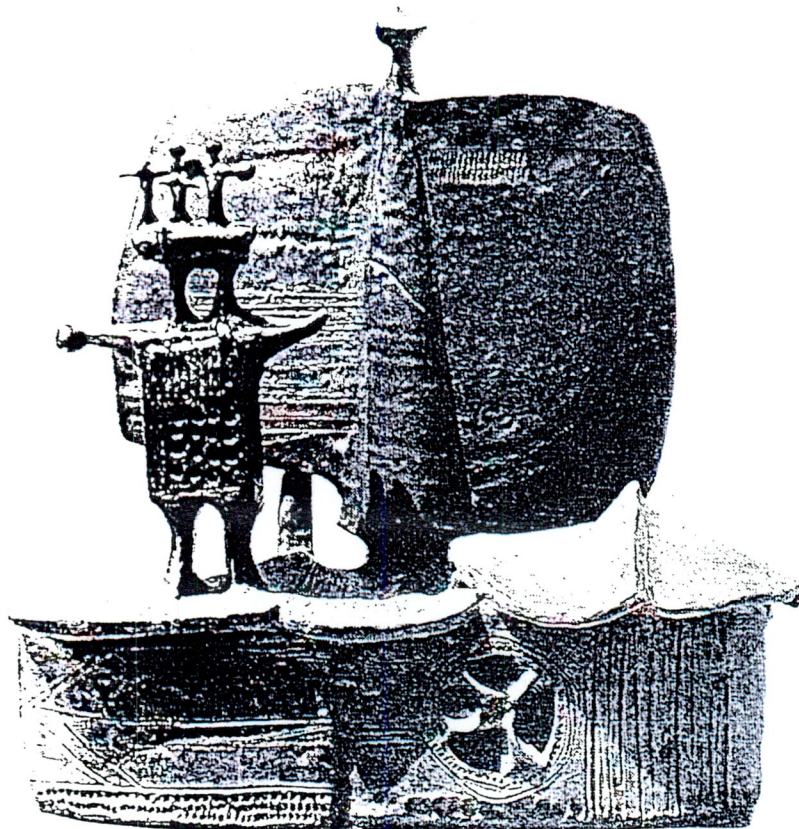


Fig.18. Ceramic Boat

Date Unknown

Clay

by Bertil Vallien



traditions. Under the main theme of 'Boats' he produced smaller series, entitled 'Woman', 'Death' and 'Admirers', all of which were made in the medium of clay during the 1970's. His 'Ruler' (Fig.19) of 1979 created an image conveying death, and of sending bodies from one world to the next. This is comparable to Viking traditions, where funerals of royalty took place at sea. The dead bodies were entombed in the ships, then they were set on fire and pushed out to sea to burn.

Vallien first exhibited 'Boats' in 1979 in Stockholm, although these were not glass, but ceramic. These boats, like the later ones he produced in glass, each convey a strong individual feeling. Within all of Vallien's 'Boats', there is a sense of freedom. They contain a strong, energetic force and are also filled with harsh images of suffering and death. He was greatly inspired by how islanders used boats for their everyday tasks. The boat for Vallien became a special vehicle for his own need of emotional expression and thus he saturated them with the emotions of life including, hate, sadness, happiness. The most powerful communication the boats convey is one of freedom, implying constant movement, both imaginatively and intellectually within his work.

As early as 1977 Vallien had begun sandcasting clear boats in the medium of glass, but not until 1983 did he start to

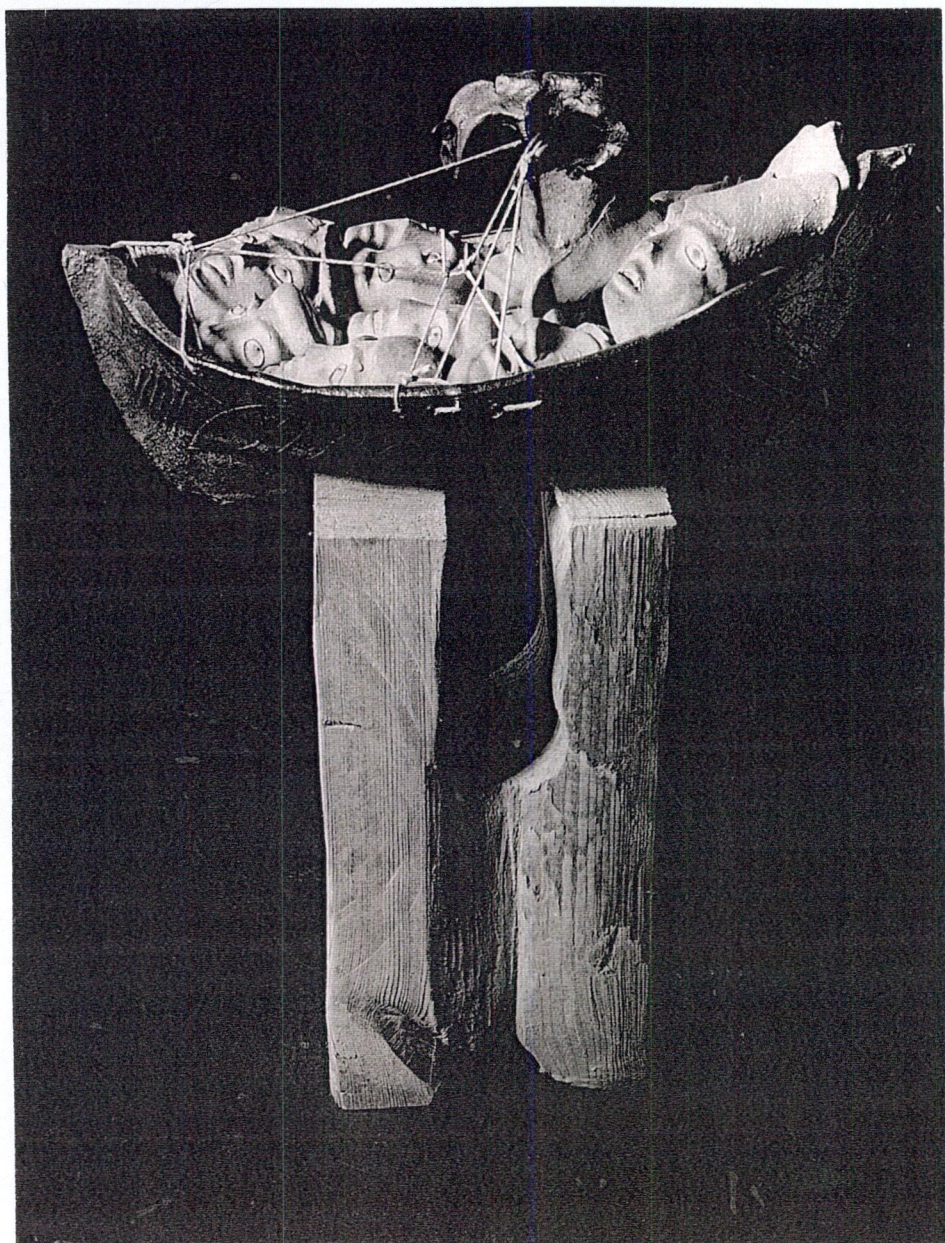


Fig.19. The Ruler 1979

Measurements unknown

Stoneware

by Bertil Vallien

"The Euler" 1974

by S. Vallin

Stencils

Scott Vallin by G. G. G.

1974

manipulate and dominate the technique of creating narrow, delicate, long, thin forms. The boat is an irrelevant looking container for the valuable objects and messages housed within its interior. Not until 1984 did Bertil Vallien make his extensive international breakthrough, when he exhibited his 'Boat' series in the Heller Gallery in New York and, later that year, in Australia. The boat form continued as a major theme during the remainder of the Eighties. Vallien does not handle glass solely as an aesthetic material, but he also fills it with meaningful imagery. The boat for him is a symbol of life and death and also a major sculptural theme, one which would last him for years. It represents a journey in time from the past to the present and to the future. It also represents lonely travellers out at sea. The boat is a symbol of movement and, whilst appearing to be a refuge for its passengers, it is very vulnerable to conditions at sea. A boat gives haven, protection and safety to the crew on board against the stormy, foggy weather conditions of the real world. Boats as a perception have a powerful, positive feel to them, suggesting dreams and ambitions. They are a way of progressing forward. The boat is the perfect vessel for the expression of loneliness. It also calls to mind images of femininity because of its slender vessel form, as well as images of adventure and travel. It is a container for all of life's forces, it is a self-contained world at sea, navigating through unknown regions and districts. It

also represents a world of mythology, a surrealist world beyond our own. The boat will always be a symbol of either success or failure, yearning for both far-away lands and homelands, protection against nature and the dangers of the sea and of the passage through life and time.

Within his 'Boats', Vallien began to convey symbolic interpretations. The boat sculptures are divine-like and each appears to hold within it a definite measure of hope and belief. With his sandcast boats, he does not want the viewer to stop and see the shiny surface of the glass, instead he wants them to look inside and see inner dimensions and forms, held within a translucent solid, see Figs.20+21. A sense of order and meaning can be seen within his work. These symbols represent the artist's dreams and thoughts. Appearing as timeless fossils within Vallien's pieces are many recurring images such as a ladder, a ring, a mummie, a staff and a cross, all of which have become part of Vallien's non-verbal language. There are many symbols within Vallien's vessels and, from these, he finds his own words and sentences. They therefore become international and universal. No matter what country or nationality, the symbols and the language of art can speak directly to the viewer with one universal meaning and thus one understanding. Bertil Vallien's boats do not sink because of disasters but because of the weight of the memories and dreams contained on board them. The glass sculptures, like



Fig.20. Solitude 1987

Length 111cm

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien



Fig.21. Untitled Date unknown

Property of the National Museum, Stockholm

Sandcast and Stone

by Bertil Vallien

1907
Larger than
smaller, with small
surfaces

History of the National
Museum, Smithsonian

boats, steer towards the horizons of the imagination. The travellers on board must put their trust in the thin skin that separates them from the unknown. Sometimes Vallien's boats become his own escape boats. Vallien says:

"I make boats because I think the form is beautiful, it carries both mystique and symbols. It implies passage. Thats what life is - a voyage from start to finish".(9)

As the themes developed, so too did the forms, becoming larger and both more complex and technical each time, see Fig.22. The meaning behind Vallien's work after 1988 is in complete contrast to his earlier boat sculptures. While the earlier boats convey a sense of hope, these new boats suggest a fear of extinction.

Vallien's theme of 'Crossboats' (Fig.23) in the mid 1980's had many variations. These boats took on the form of a crucifix, symbolic in itself. They also contained the same details and symbols enclosed in earlier works. Sometimes the colours in the glass are only blue and green, resembling the colours of the sea water surrounding boats. Bertil Vallien's sandcast boats have placed him on a high level among other leading glass artists.

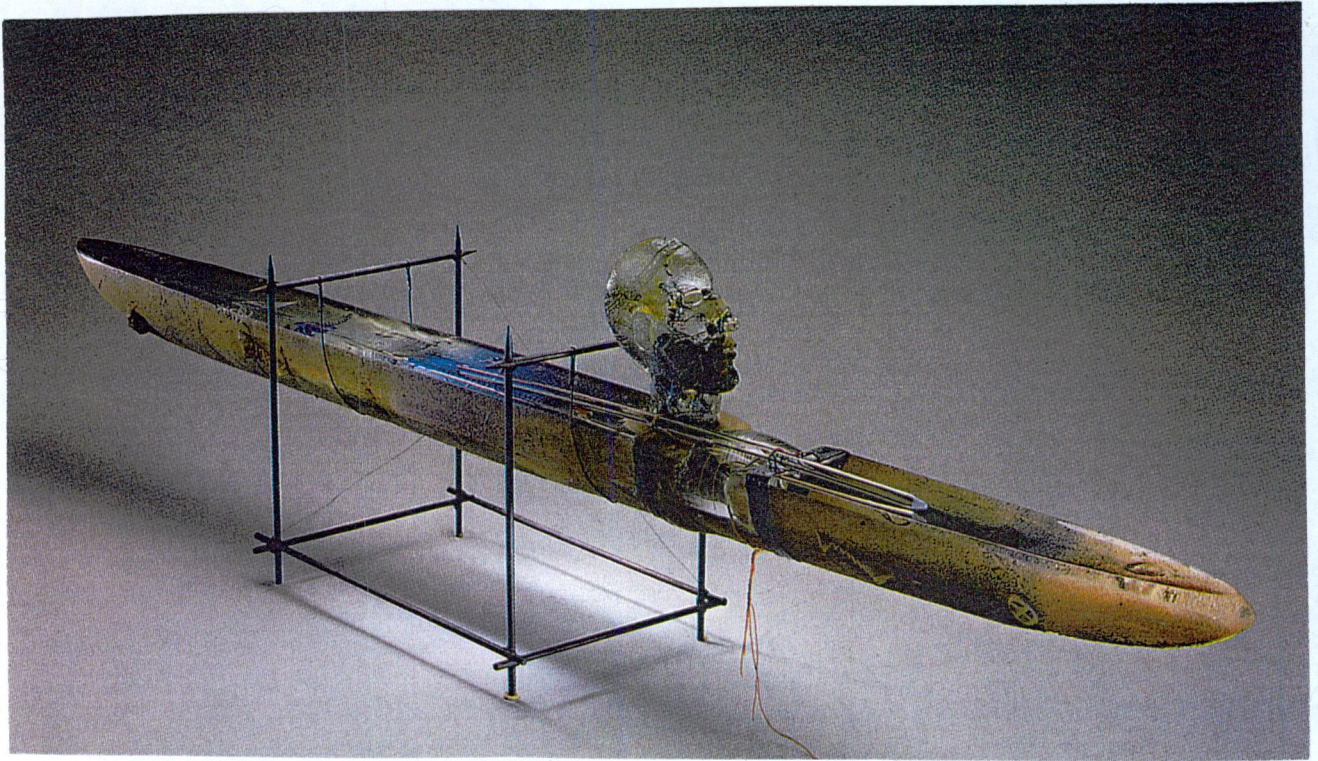
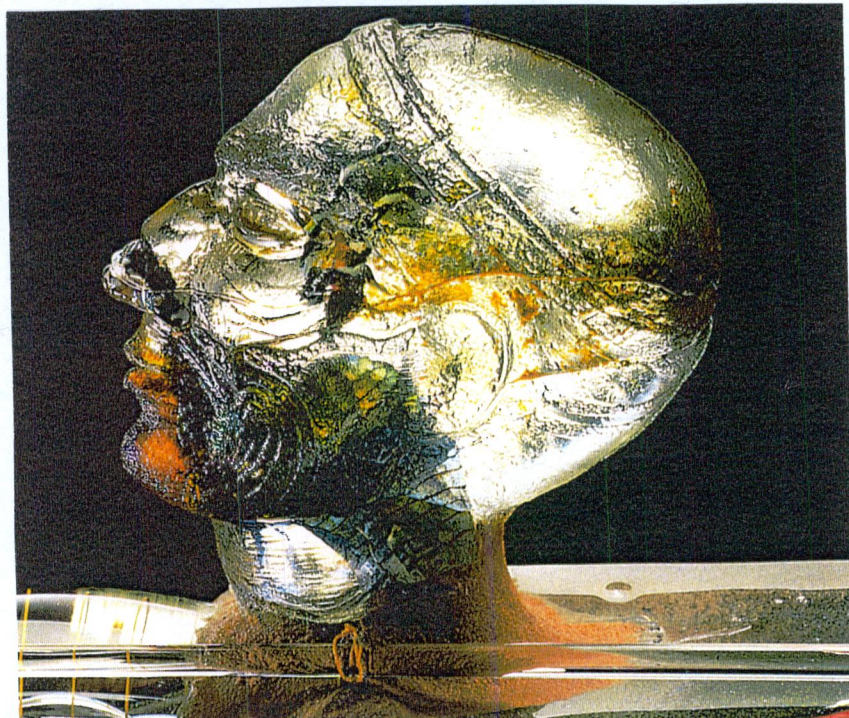


Fig.22. Voyage of Dreams 1986

Length 209cm

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien



Detail

Voyage of Dream

1976

Long 209

Sandcastle

B. V. by G. E.

Voyage of Dream

by

John L. L. L.

1976

A. Acts in 1976 - page 70

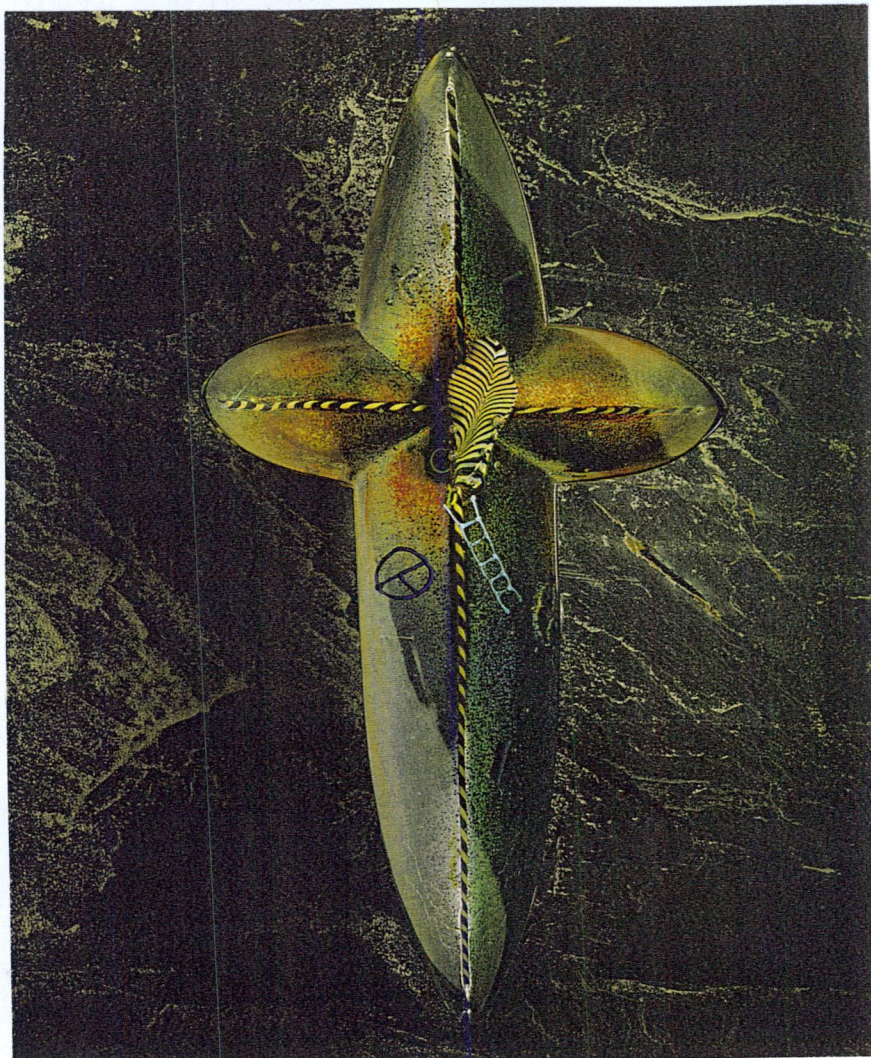


Fig.23.Crossboat 1985

Measurements unknown

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien



CHAPTER SIX

Recent works

Vallien's newest forms are equally meaningful; these include the 'Pendulum' see Figs.24+25, the 'Circle', the 'Vase' see Fig.26, and the 'Torso'. Some of these works are characterised by extreme clarity, others place greater emphasis on the exterior form's sense of mobility, all of which he has chosen as a medium for his message. Through years of creative struggle, Vallien's work has taken on greater routes and problems, rather than solving them. There is in his recent works evidence that he seeks solutions to his own beliefs of the world. He is no longer in a world of dreams and thoughts, but rather in one of survival.

All of Vallien's pieces from 1988 on are distant and show alarm and anxiety about the remainder of his personal life. His most recent sculptures have a tendency to be lifted, suspended or drifting in space. Thus a sense of mobility and flight is obtained. During the 1980's Bertil Vallien made many upright sculptures. These objects of transparent glass appear jewel-like, suggesting wealth. Bertil Vallien has made his sculptures secret message-bearers for many years to come. But some of his present works contain a gritty, dense surface, making them appear primitive and aged. New techniques and forms have driven Vallien on after he completed his 'Boat' series. At the end of the 1980's he

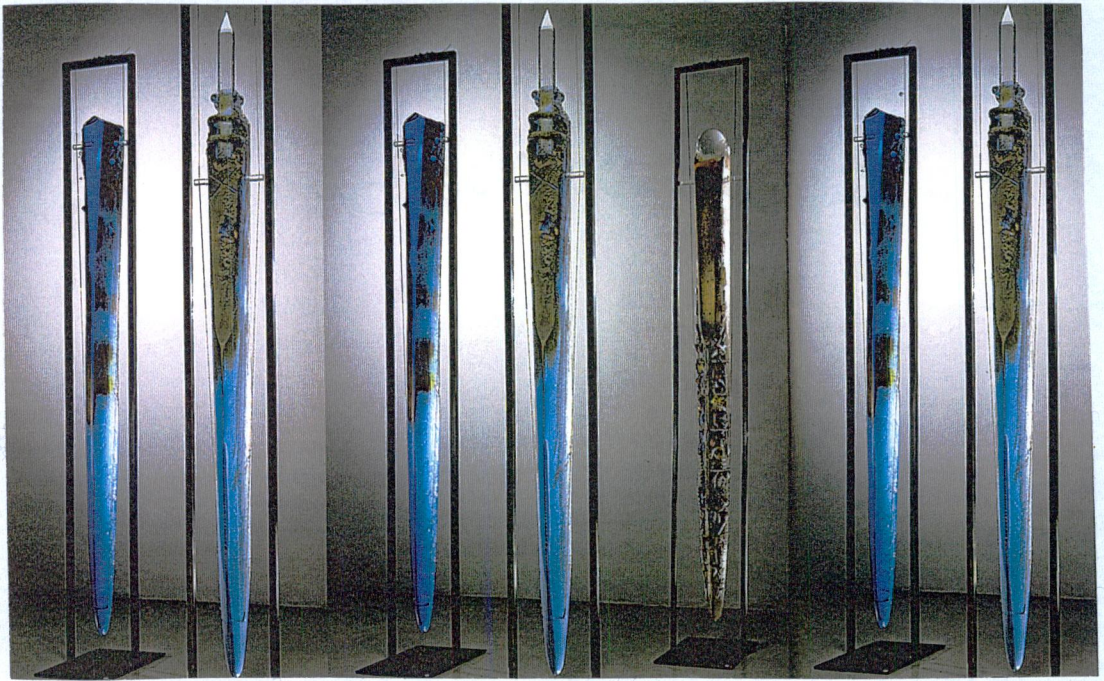


Fig.24. Pendulums 1990/92

Height 200-220cm

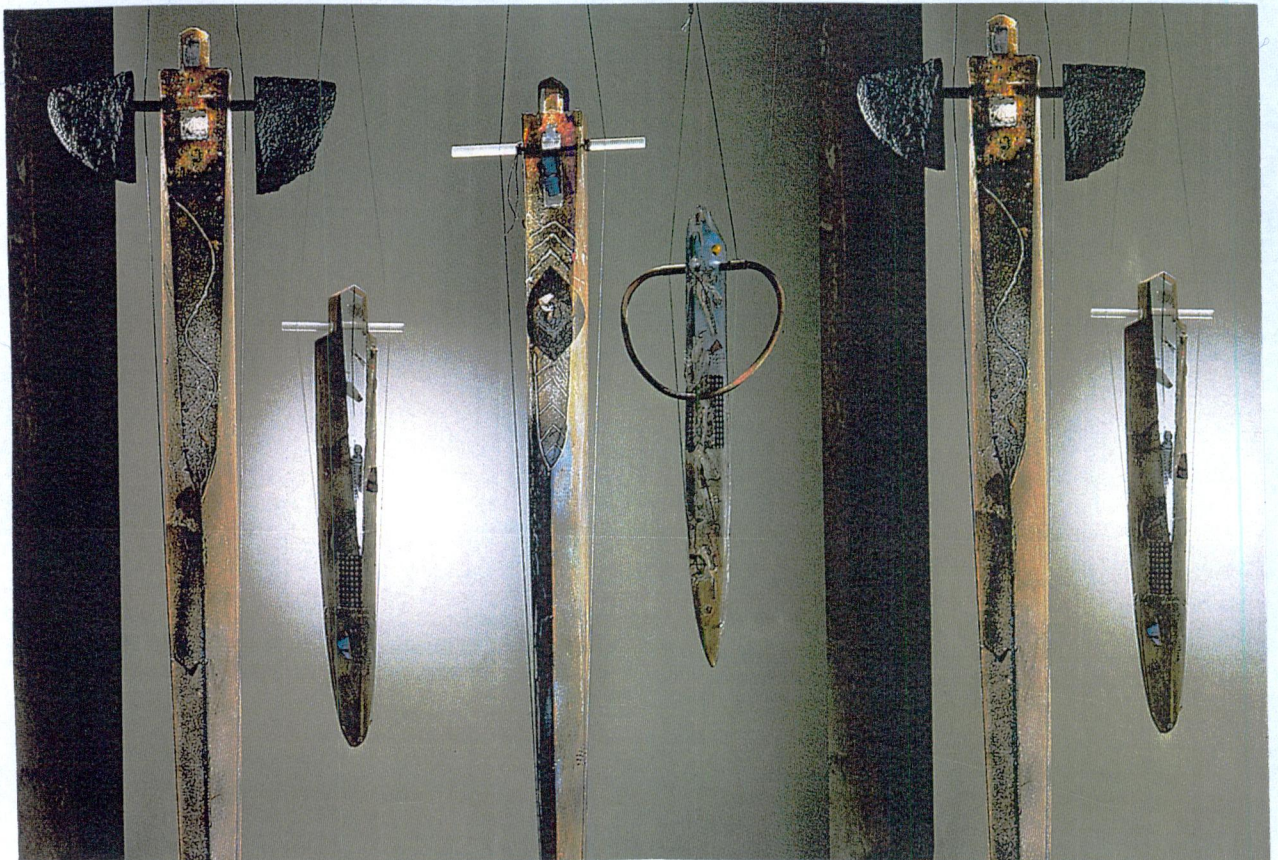


Fig.25. Pendulums 1989

Height 90-193cm

Verdun 1990/92

92 - 100 - 200 cm

Verdun 1994

H 10 - 13 cm

1994



Fig.26. Freccia (woman as a vase) 1989

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

created two new themes, the 'Monolith' and the 'Torso'. The 'Monolith' has no lift to it; it is grounded and signifies restraint. It has a sense of permanence. The 'Torso' is a sculptural piece, similar to the form of his 'Vase' series, but it is of a dense consistency, see Figs.27-29. The 'Torso's revolving coils give a sense of a whirlwind movement, uplifting.

'Arran Sapphire' (Fig.30) was produced in 1988 and is 94 centimetres in height. It is a multi-media piece of glass, leather and thin wire. The oval sculpture, a vessel, transports one through the depths of the deep sea. The contrast of the sparkling clarity of the glass and the rough opacity of the leather manages to hide some of the mystifying beauty of the blue glass. The feminine, slender form of glass is held within a masculine, strong leather bodice. All we see in this form is part of a human body, off-balance and weightless. We can also see a red dot on the outside of the form, perhaps a sign of trouble, similar to a floating buoy on the surface of ocean waters, when someone requires help.

During the late Seventies and the early Eighties, one of the themes in Bertil Vallien's sandcasts was 'Bridges' symbolising connecting and communications, suggesting the ability to think in new ways and the ability to lift oneself out of a deep depression. The 'Bridge' is a structure that



Fig.27. Blue Venus 1981-88

Sandcast and Rock

by Bertil Vallien



Fig.28. Donna 1988 and Uomo 1988

Measurements unknown

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien



Fig.29. Ovo (The female torso) 1989

Measurements unknown

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

"Oyo" (the female her)

1469.

B.V. by G. L.



Fig.30. Arran Sapphire 1988

Height 94cm

Sandcast and leather

by Bertil Vallien

stretches towards hope, perhaps even a link between one state of mind and the next, or even the link between the past and the future. The 'Bridge' is full of positive symbolism. It has all the practical significance of a bridge, stretching over water, see Figs.31+32.

Another small series completed by Vallien was called 'Findings', which contain objects from a civilisation which duplicates our own. They are square boxes of obscure and dreary glass, where fossil-like objects lie rooted within, see Figs.33+34.

The 'Circle' as a sandcast theme was started in 1987. Fig.35 is an example of a later cast from 1989. Its main themes were mechanical and infinity. It is a perfect non-organic form. Inside the circular ring, events happen on a humane level, secured thus within technology's achievement and excellence. The 'Circle' has condensed objects encased within it. Its form is an ever-constant ring, spinning to eternity. The rounded glass ring with its enclosed objects and symbols whirls around in an ever-constant cycle, drifting without direction. Vallien has increased the poetic metaphor within this piece and the imagery and symbols grow ever more powerful and dramatic, see Figs.36+37. He completed a series of three separate circles, each one showing a development: the first circle is whole and unaffected by time; the second begins to crack, to be

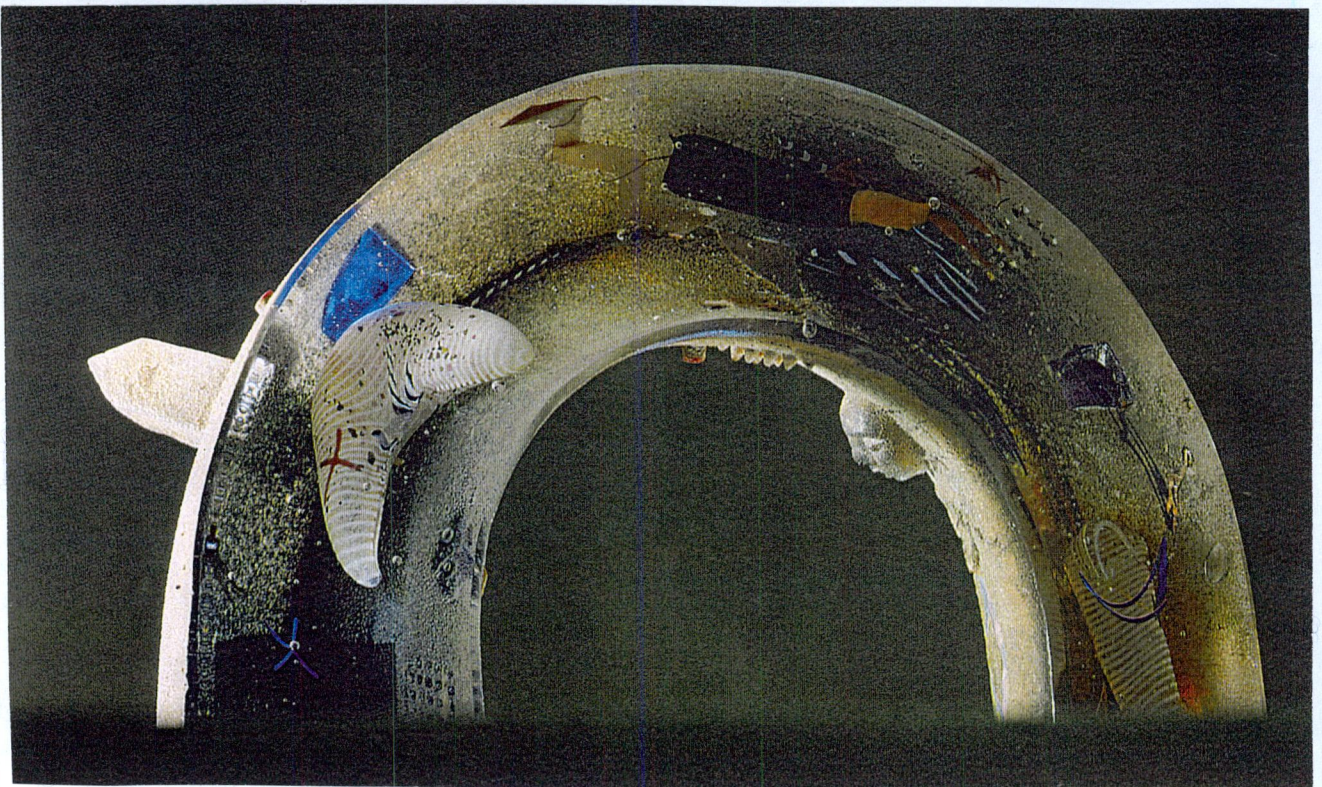


Fig.31. Bridge 1986

Height 34cm

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

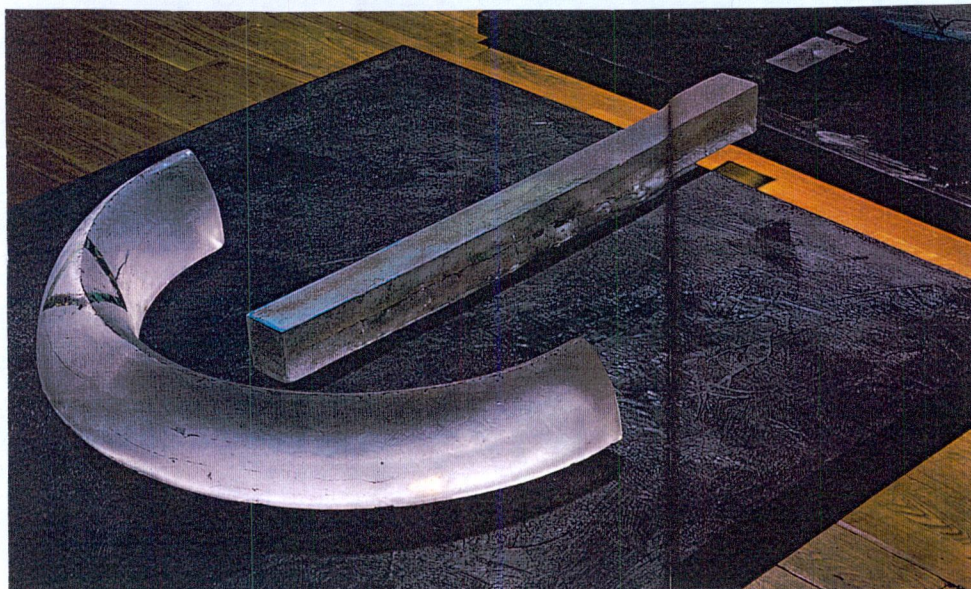


Fig.32. Bridge 1998

39" Wide

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

Bridge 1180

3100111

by B.V.

Gardner

B.V.

by G.C.

19" side

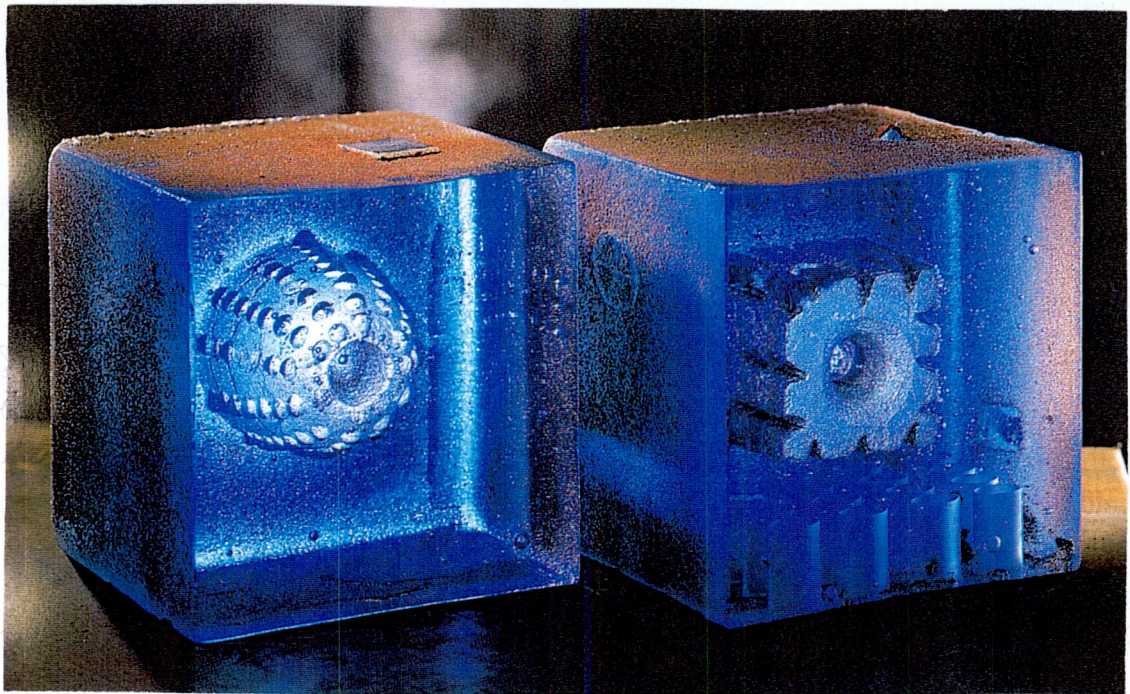


Fig.33. Findings Area II 1992

Height 13cm

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

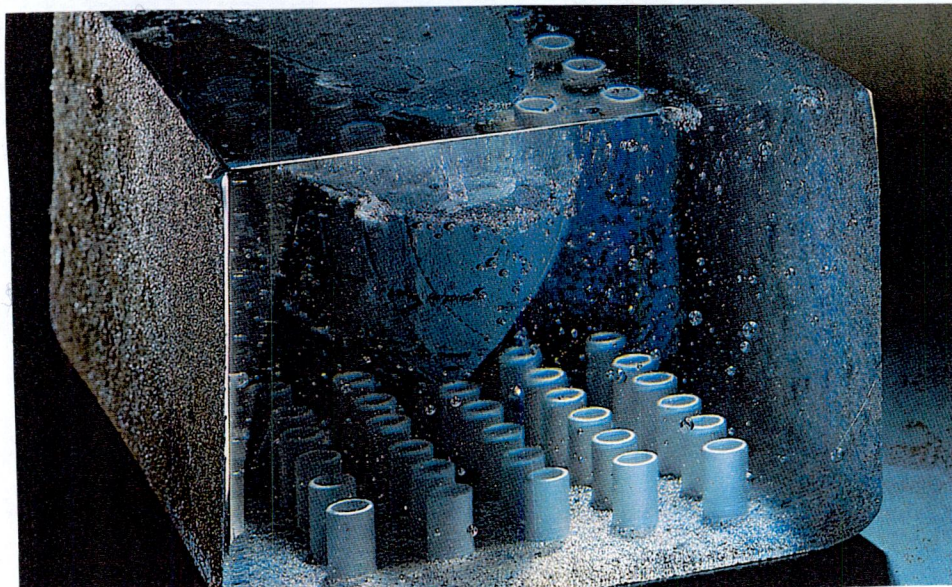


Fig.34. Findings Area II 1992

Measurements unknown

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

"Findings from II"

1992

H. G. M.

"Findings from II"

1992

H. G. M.

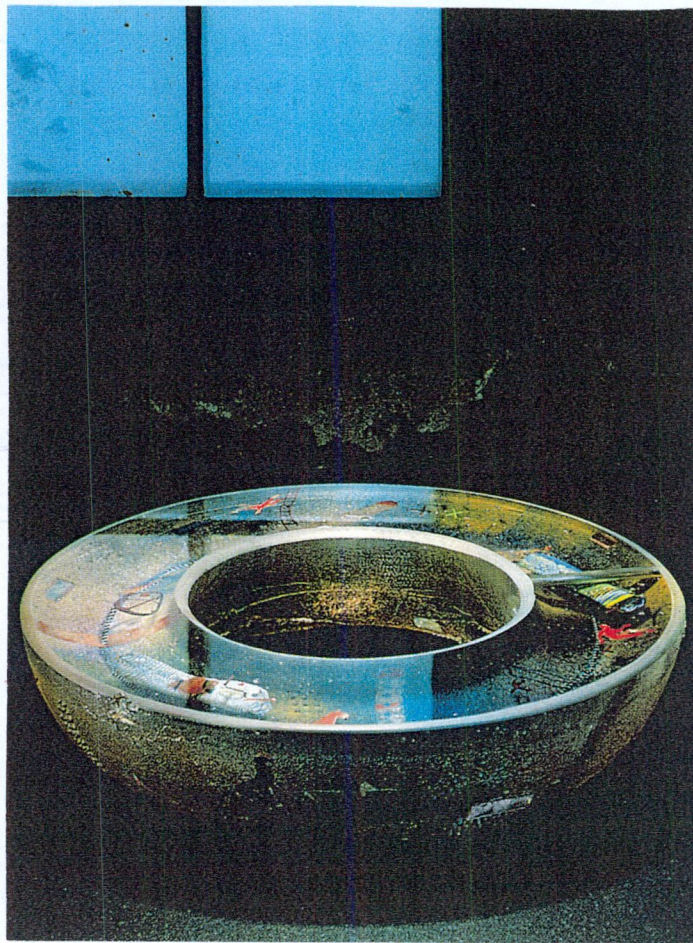
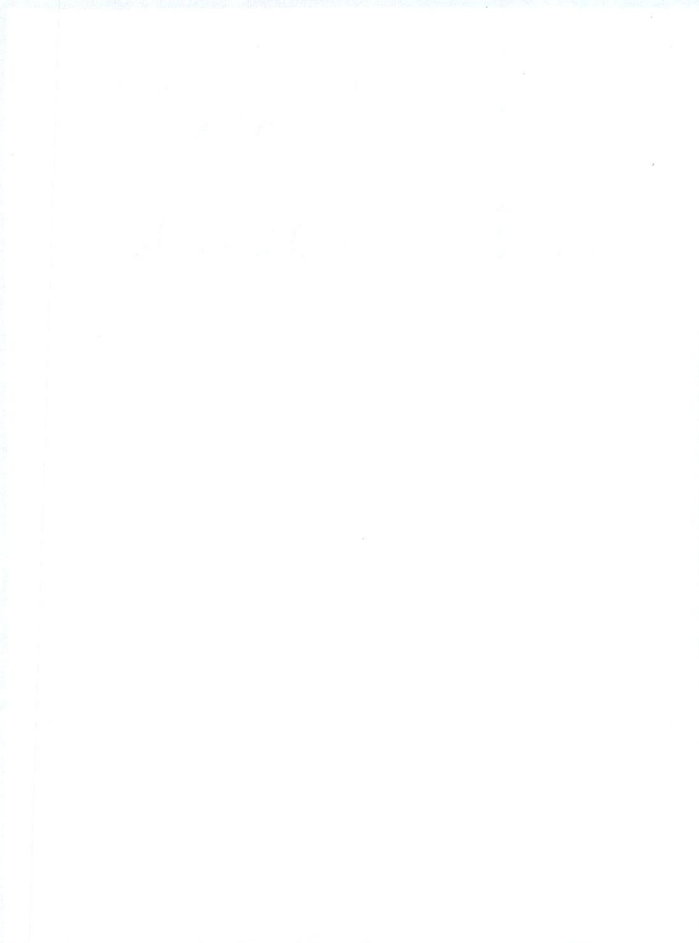


Fig.35. Circle 1989

Diameter 53cm

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien



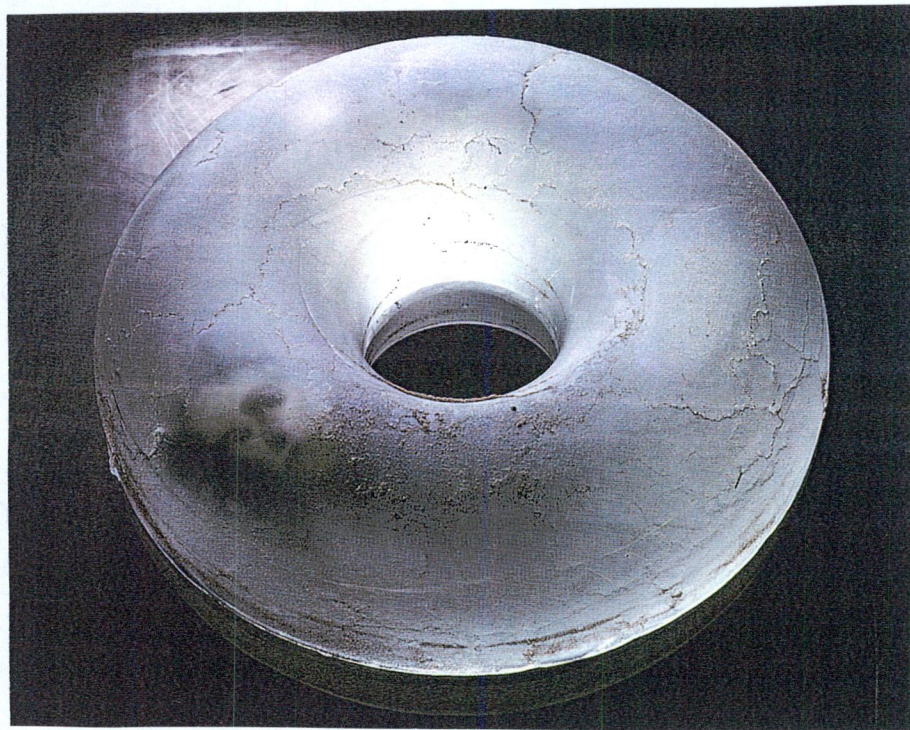


Fig.36. Circle II 1998

Height 9"xDepth 20"

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

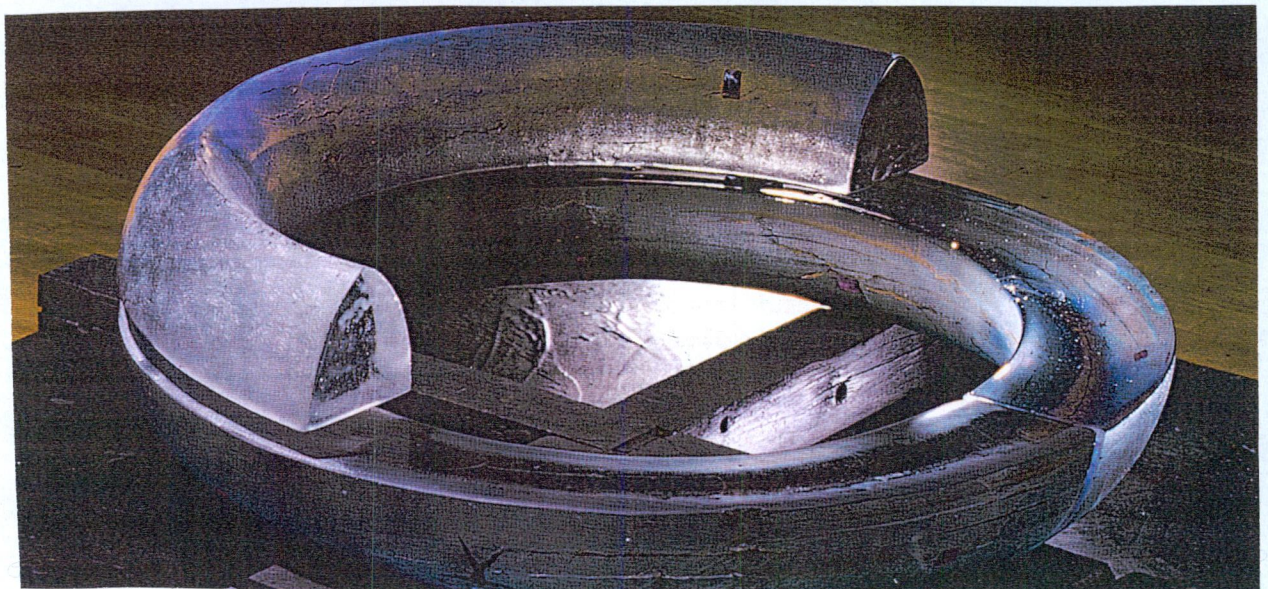


Fig.37. Circle 1998

39" Diameter

Sandcast

by Bertil Vallien

Circle 11 1926

9 1/4" high 100" depth

Circle 12 1926

30" diameter

deformed and slightly damaged; finally, the third is not much more than fragments. Thus the 'Circle' becomes a clear symbol of the enclosed universe.

In the 1990's Vallien began to emphasise more the narrative within his pieces instead of their forms. He did this by using massive glass slabs to represent historical events. These became his 'Map' series, where the lines within the glass create or tell a story, see Figs.38-40. They are transparent forms and yet they are dense landscapes. The series consists of sandcasted, cut glass pieces, with enclosed historical signs open to various interpretations. Bertil Vallien's maps are like pieces of glass on which time has carved its mark and where history has been created, evidence of unknown landscapes. They represent a journey through the ages of history.

Vallien is not only recognised now as an artist and designer but also as a teacher. He taught at The National College of Art and Design in Stockholm between 1967-1984 and also as a guest lecturer at the Pilchuck Glass Centre in Stanwood, Washington between 1980-1985. Most recently Vallien completed a workshop class in Lybster, Scotland in 1997. The essential concept he taught was that his students should try new skills and freedom in their work. Perhaps failure would result but they would have fully exhausted their ideas to their full potential, something he himself learnt whilst at

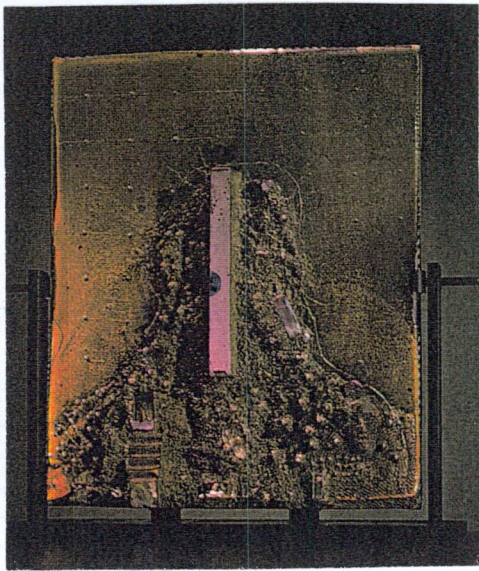


Fig.38. Area II Map 4 1997
21"x20"x8"(including stand)
Sandcast by Bertil Vallien



Fig.39. Area II Man 1997
21"x19½"x8"(including stand)
Sandcast by Bertil Vallien



Fig.40. Area II Map 5 1997
21"x20"x8"(including stand)
Sandcast by Bertil Vallien

100-100000

100-100000

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college.

Bertil Vallien has won international acclaim for his incalculable creativity and technical advances in glass design. In 1980 he was declared Japan's most influential artist. In 1983 he won first prize for Swedish Design at the National Museum in Stockholm. In 1984 he won another Swedish prize, the "Excellence Design Award"; in 1985 he received a silver medal in New York for an international art competition. And again in 1988 he won the "Excellence Design Award" in Sweden. In 1991 he received awards from Denmark and in 1995 he won the Outstanding Achievement in Glass Award in New York. Vallien has revolutionised the technical development of Glass Art, while simultaneously celebrating glass as an artistic medium.

Vallien has carried out a number of commissions for public spaces, his first one being in 1966 for the Swedish Lloyd Shipping Company. In later commissions he has moved away from a decorative style to concentrate more on the form and the contents within each piece. In many ways, this is similar to a step which he took in his own work. The two public commissions for which he is best known can be seen in Sweden at the Volvo Head office in Gothenburg, completed in 1987, and at the Telegraph office in Malmo, completed in 1977, see Figs.41+42. More recent commissions have been for the Church of Akersberg in Sweden and the Kronan Savings

Bank in Vaxjo, Sweden.

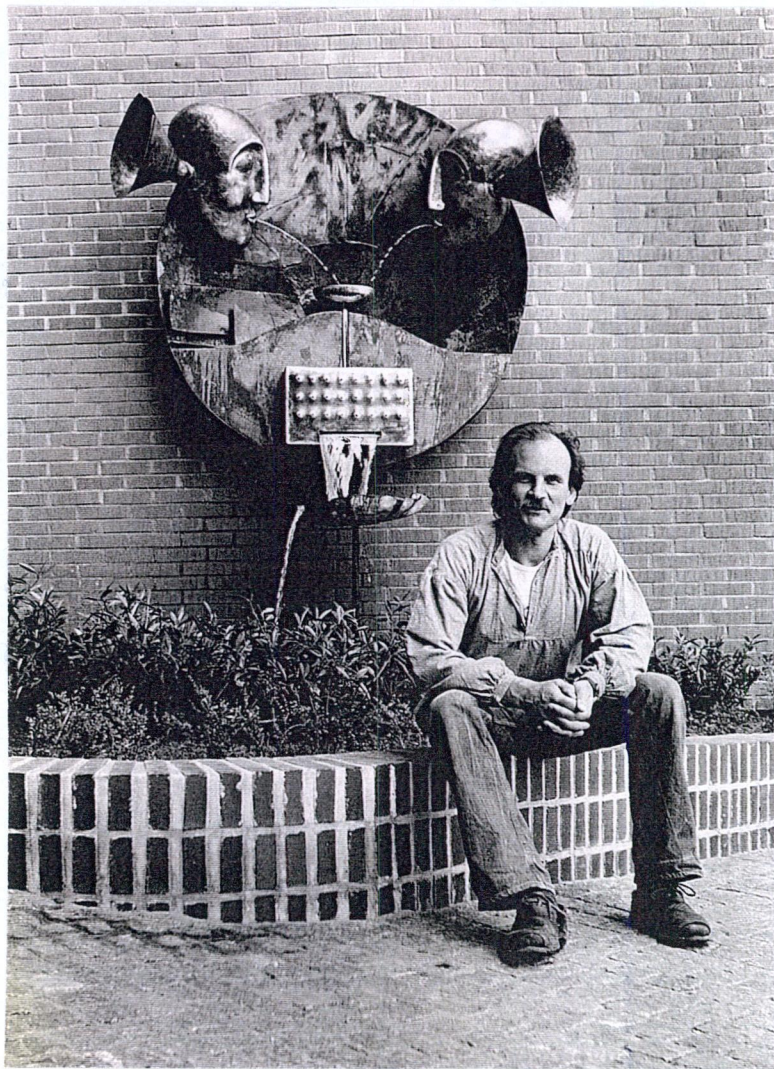


Fig.41.
Bertil Vallien outside
the Telegraph Office
Malmo 1997



Ornamental work in the Telegraph Office
Malmo 1997

B.V. outside the

office Maine

1937

B.V. by G.L.

horizontal work in the
telegraph office - Maine

CONCLUSION

Bertil Vallien has above all become famous worldwide for his sandcasted glass sculptures. Within them he has developed an entirely new technique. In his sculptures he has often captured the frozen moment. He stores signs and symbols in the solidified mass of the glass. Throughout his artistic achievement he has conveyed both historical dimensions and our journey through time. His sculptures evoke an image of destructive civilisation and the human struggle for survival. He manipulates his materials to their limits and he has continued to refine and develop these techniques. Bertil Vallien uses glass as a vehicle for his personal philosophies. His pieces are words of thought and reflections in themselves. His success is that he sees glass as a medium in which he can express himself like all good craftsmen; he controls the glass to suit his needs, the glass does not control him. His reputation as an artist, designer and a teacher is worldwide in today's glass society.

For many years I have not only found the sandcasts of Bertil Vallien fascinating, magical and alluring, but also exciting and awakening. They amaze me for their beauty in form, their use of colour, their sheer capacity, their symbolism and a means of representation and not least, their technical developments. Regardless of their actual dimensions, all of

Vallien's works convey an impression of size, strength and power, but at the same time a sense of peace and calmness. On one hand his sculptures are objects of personal vision of events and history, and on the other they are metaphors of the heroic, past and present. Even today, Vallien remains challenged by his chosen medium of glass; he states:

"You have to be stubborn and a little bit stupid to work in glass. It is so difficult. But glass offers qualities no other medium can achieve. Glass eats light. You can freeze a happening, an event. When you look inside glass, there is no scale, it is easy to get lost. It invites you to see it as air, or stars. Glass for me represents something very hot, molten like a volcano, and something very cold, like ice. I want to continue to examine the duality of fire and ice. I am always looking for a reason to work in glass".(10)

The end of centuries are always interesting in the art world. This being both the end of the century and the end of the millenium, it will be interesting to see what follows next from Bertil Vallien.

ENDNOTES

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- NO.1. ROSENBAUM, Joshua, "Fire and Ice", Scanorama, July/Aug 1993, n.p.

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- NO.2. LINDQVIST, Gunnar, Bertil Vallien, 1990, p.17.

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- NO.4. LINDQVIST, 1990, op.cit. pp.55/56

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- NO.5. LINDQVIST, 1990, op.cit. p.33
- NO.6. LINDQVIST, 1990, op.cit. n.p.

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- NO.7. ROSS, Barbara, Four Acts In Glass, 1998, p.77.

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CHAPTER 5

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NO.10. ROSENBAUM, 1993, op.cit. n.p.

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