

Shared Intimacies

Traversing functional design and fine-art sculpture, **AYALA SERFATY** builds luminescent objects on glass-rod skeletons while expressing a holistic connectedness to nature.

BY WILLIAM GANIS

Ayala Serfaty makes mysterious glass, light, and polymer works that resist characterization. Her “Soma” objects occupy a threshold between fine art and lighting design; their forms are indeterminate but invoke a wide range of natural forms and phenomena, including clouds, cocoons, foliage, underwater plants and wildlife, corals, stalactites, and crystals. While the objects may function as lamps, the soft glow emanating from within is less illumination than a life force. Despite their organic references and internal energy, these pieces are more unspecific than non-objective. The artist says of her creations:

I would like my works to be perceived, like minerals in nature, as part of processes of crystallization and erosion. Each item that you see is meant to be associated with the accumulative memory of cells and molecular units, so that it enfolds within it the memory of the broad organic process that yielded it; each “mineral” item of this kind is meant to arouse the sensation that things go on crystallizing after you’re no longer there.

Serfaty communicates an unconscious sense of being and ecological congruence. Such sentiments might unsatisfyingly be described by shorthand ranging from “eternal return” to “spirit” to “body memory” but are otherwise not easily put into words. The 20th-century psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan posited the neologism “extimacy” to denote primordial interconnectedness and how others shape one’s sense of self. “Extimacy” beautifully describes Serfaty’s communication, especially as intimate sentiments become externalized as equivocal works and shared with a broad, abstract audience. In turn, the artist’s identity (and further expression) is formed through these critical interactions.

The abstract yet evocative qualities of Serfaty’s output are purposeful. Her expressions defy precise readings; they parallel unconscious impulses and feelings that resist language and knowability. As such, they embody philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s phrase for artistic expression of the irrational, irresolute and ineffable, “presenting the unrepresentable.” Serfaty further elaborates on her works’ connotations:

I chose the Greek term soma, which refers to the human body, as the name for my light sculptures to highlight their merit as poetic objects that are in dialogue with the natural world and human nature. Soma is a metaphor for my spirit and perceptual encounters. The work is powerful, yet fragile, mirroring cycles of nature in its imaginative abstraction.

Soma Light (installation at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art), 2008. Glass rods and polymer membrane . H 10, W 314, D 197 in.

Serfaty has designed organic armatures wrapped in textiles for much of her career. Her furniture and lighting from the 1990's anticipate the "Soma" efforts. For instance, her "Morning Glory" lamps (1994), manufactured and sold through the artisanal-production atelier Aqua Creations (founded by Serfaty and her husband, Albi Serfaty, in 1994), consist of a metal infrastructure covered by silk, have an interior glow, evoke indefinite flora and fauna, and are designed to relate to interior architecture. It may not be so surprising that high-profile commissions from this time were for the design of seating and lighting (1998) for the Red Sea Star, an underwater restaurant in Eilat, Israel, and a sculptural lighting feature for a prominent space in L'Oceanogràfic, an aquarium in Valencia, Spain (2002). Much of her furniture similarly features layered textiles that conceal an underlying structure—one might consider the fabric-covered "cells" that characterize the many configurations of the Aqua Creations "Anana" seating (1997) or the felted wool and silk on metal comprising her one-of-a-kind *Akka Leh III* chair (2014).

In 2002, Serfaty saw a glass-rod matrix made by Eytan Hall (who now collaborates with Serfaty) at the Ceramics Department of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem; the "Soma" works were born from this material epiphany. She recalls, "When I discovered Soma, it was like coming back home. Soma is something I was looking for all my artistic life. The discovery, like a present for my 40th birthday, was a true revelation." Serfaty readily acknowledges that the "Soma" objects are the result of shared efforts in her Tel Aviv studio. Albi Serfaty developed and perfected the use of the polymer membrane, deriving the material from a World War II-era technology for protectively coating ships. A

studio artisan, Avi Saina, carefully applies this material. Ceramicists working independently of Serfaty's atelier, Marcelle Klein and Ronit Zor, create the handmade bases, as seen in *Once* (2004) and *Adaptation* (2014), among other pieces. The glass lattice is painstakingly flame-formed from two-millimeter-wide rods, custom-made by Sergio Serra in Empoli, Italy. Two skilled glassworkers, Anna Gautier and Eytan Hall, build the vitreous skeletons—they "draw" in space by melting the straight glass rods into repeated lobes, lancets, and other natural forms. The resulting glass objects are comparable to Anna Skibaska's groundbreaking lampworked lattices (1991–present), which expanded the scale of frameworked sculpture. Serfaty's glass infrastructure also makes one think of Brent Kee Young's "Matrix" series (2003–present), though Serfaty doesn't shape her glass into immediately recognizable forms. The dense supporting structures may take weeks to build (or months, for large pieces); nonetheless, each "Soma" is covered with a polymer "skin" that is sprayed onto the glass. She describes the moment of application as "bittersweet," as the polymer covers the colorful and appealing glass lattice and obscures the considerable effort required to build it. When first applied, the polymer seems like gossamer strands; the webs are carefully and strategically built up on the work's exterior and removed from the interior, eventually forming a smooth surface that mediates complex optics.

The directly underlying glass is seen, much like bones, cartilage, and veins in the human body, as subcutaneous structural elements. The polymer creates a homogenous lustrous white that Serfaty modulates with the colored glass. For each work she may choose one or several of the 150 colors at her disposal. She likens the layering of colors to painterly glazes (she was trained as a painter), especially those capturing the



Memory (from the "Soma" series), 2007. Glass rods, polymer membrane, and ceramic. H 22, W 23, D 18 in.



Hiba Pura (from the "Soma" series), 2013. Glass rods, polymer membrane, polyurethane. H 12, W 104, D 72 in. COLLECTION: PRIVATE

complex translucencies of human skin. Some "Soma" pieces, such as *The Rest at Sunset* (2013), present colors more obviously than others. The light produced by the LED bulbs situated inside is subtly transmitted, scattered, and filtered by the interior glass, creating understated color and shadow contrasts that add to the works' visual complexities. In pieces such as the wall-mounted *Entudia* (2015), the varied, if calculated, placement of the colorful rods fosters visual depth by creating understated pockets of warm and cool tones. In addition to the colors, lighting is strategically placed vis-à-vis the sculptural massing to render bright and dim passages that variously enhance and obscure the sculptural forms—an effect akin to lightning discharges dramatically illuminating storm clouds. With their interior lights turned off, the "Somas" are far less translucent, and the synthetic coating's sheen reads as milky glass. The objects become attitudinally different—more about surface and complex, organic form than an interior life.

The differences among the works are astonishing given the consistent materials: polymer, glass, lighting. Serfaty begins with sketches that become the guide for the compositions. The quality of the lines in her sketches anticipates those rendered spatially in glass and gives the pieces distinctive personalities and textures that range from feather softness to fleshy appendages to crystalline points. Gautier and Hall add their idiosyncratic, if masterful, hands and interpretations, which further infuse these structures with individuality.

On another level of perceptual difference, the "Soma" pieces fit equally well with ideas surrounding fine-art sculpture and design. Certainly the situation of the individual work informs its reading. For instance, *Adaptation* seems—with its scale, verticality, and exposed cord—to be a table lamp emanating a soft light, and *Hiba Pura* (2013), positioned on a ceiling above a dining-room table, has a practical primacy whatever the extravagance of form. The signification shifts, however, when Serfaty's installations are placed in gallery settings and sized or massed to create environments. For instance, her "Soma" installation at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2008) was placed on the floor; this expanse, at 26 by 16 feet, reads more as a luminous landscape than functional lighting. There her object was situated for aesthetic contemplation, allowing poetic meanings to come to the fore.

Two prominent U.S. museums have recently acquired "Soma" works. The Indianapolis Museum of Art obtained *Memory* for inclusion in the museum's comprehensive Contemporary Design collection but also as a complement to the museum's Glick Collection of Studio Glass. Starting in August, *Memory* will occupy a prominent threshold, negotiating between a central court defined by a 40-foot-tall Robert Irwin installation of fluorescent light tubes, *Light and Space III* (2008), and the contemporary design galleries. This September, The Corning Museum of Glass premieres, in its New Contemporary Art + Design Wing, an approximately 5-by-7-foot installation situated on the floor, titled *Soma* (2015), and specifically designed for the institution. In this new space, *Soma* will be in dialogue with objects that include Fred Wilson's *To Die Upon a Kiss* (2011) (contemporary art in the form of lighting) and Jeroen Verhoeven's *Virtue of Blue* (2010) (lighting design as contemporary art). It will be worth noting the reception of Serfaty's works given that both museums incorporate contemporary art, visual culture, craft, and design, and both have programmatic spaces that purposefully isolate or blend these classifications.

The "Soma" efforts are situated among fine-art contextualizations, domestic utility, technical and material concerns, and contemporary critical readings. They exemplify the blurring of disciplinary distinctions at a time when other institutions collecting Serfaty's works—including

the Mint Museum; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Museum of Arts and Design—grapple with both the practicality and relevance of such differentiations. Serfaty's objects, with all their indeterminacy, both fit and are products of a critical discourse in which curators, collectors, audiences, and artists challenge categorical and even institutional fixity. ■

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The Rest at Sunset (from the "Soma" series), 2013. Glass rods, polymer membrane, and ceramic. H 24, W 13, D 16 in.