Exhibition Review

Carla Crafford

Independent artist, South Africa.

chcrafford@gmail.com (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1738-7327)

Alicia Ferreira

Department of Visual Arts, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

aliciaferreiramedia@gmail.com (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1042-9032)

Artefacts

ABSTRACT

Glass art can uncover multiple visions of reality and hidden narratives that other mediums are rarely capable of. The *Artefacts* exhibition, held at the Pretoria Art Museum from 26 July 2025 to 31 August, examined these hidden narratives and the difference between the public and private spheres through carefully curated glass installations. Lothar Böttcher and Caitlin Greenberg drew visitors in by mixing glass with other mediums in unique ways to encourage conversations around mass media and quiet resilience. This review investigates how visitors were compelled to engage with their own imagination and past experiences to interpret the works displayed and contemplate their meanings.

Keywords: artefacts, art acts, glass sculptures, reflections, installation.

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The exhibition, entitled *Artefacts*, was held at the Pretoria Art Museum from 26 July 2025 to 31 August 2025, and featured Pretoria-based South African artists Lothar Böttcher and Caitlin Greenberg. Böttcher and Greenberg are both regarded as seasoned artists who have worked with glass for decades. By taking part in exhibitions, lecturing, arranging "glass safaris", and doing talks on the history of glass in South Africa, they are vigorously raising awareness of the sophistication of the medium. *Artefacts* invited visitors to engage with the underexplored medium of glass art and immersed them in a unique exhibition space. Visitors were urged to consider how glass can reveal different emotional and political meanings through the intentional manipulation of light and reflections. These reflections are paramount to the meaning of the artworks and evoked various interpretations by visitors.

Artefacts was exhibited in a single room located in the right wing of the Pretoria Art Museum.[1] Upon entering the exhibition, visitors were immediately greeted by installation works placed in the centre of the room framed by other artworks placed against the wall (Figure 1). This meant that visitors were confronted with sculptures and installations regardless of where they stood in the



FIGURE Nº 1

Artefacts exhibition from southern entrance showing various works by Caitlin Greenberg and Lothar Böttcher, 26 July 2025. Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria. Courtesy of Carla Crafford.

room. Benches placed strategically alongside two walls allowed visitors to sit and contemplate the artworks from different angles. It was also noteworthy that the sound emitted from the video installation *Invocation* (2025) by Greenberg resonated throughout the entire room and served as background noise when viewing the other artworks. Most of the recording is composed of the sounds of glass hitting other glass, reminding visitors of the sonic characteristics over and above the visible characteristics of glass. In this way, the exhibition produced a sensory experience that fully immersed visitors in the unique environment of the exhibition.

The exhibition was opened by Carla Crafford, who introduced the unusual ways in which both artists manipulate glass in mixed media installations. Crafford referenced the well-known English saying, "curiosity killed the cat", with a playful twist. Rather than being seen as something dangerous, curiosity should be viewed as an essential part of life and creativity. Visitors were encouraged to remain curious in order to appreciate the curated experience of the exhibition. One of the advantages of curiosity is *seeing more* – especially in ways that enhance one's understanding of the world. *Artefacts* captivated viewers' curiosity by including artworks that appeared almost strange owing to the intentional displacement and juxtaposition of media and objects. Viewers themselves became "more" because of their drive to explore what the exhibition had to offer. Through their interaction with the artworks, visitors were faced with questions pertaining to the potential of glass in art, specifically how glass can distort and manipulate images, all the while reminding them of the medium's fragility.

The use of glass has an interesting and extensive history, with human-made glass objects dating back to around 3500 BCE. *Transparent* glass, however, only became widely used in the nineteenth century as windows. Transparent glass reflects light and all colours, which is what makes glass an attractive artistic medium to work with (Allahverdiyev & Yucesoy 2017:225). Glass was even stained in specific colours for purely aesthetic or narrative purposes, often seen in cathedrals and other religious buildings (Tryggvadottir 1968:126). Over time, the technical limitations of glass have dramatically decreased with contemporary glass art being a far more flexible medium than antique glass. Böttcher and Greenberg stretched the limits of glass as an artistic medium in this exhibition, displaying their immense skill in doing so. Both artists are well-known for their specialised use of glass in multifaceted ways. To scientists, glass is a 'state of matter rather than a single material' (Glass in nature [Sa]), but artists such as Böttcher and Greenberg who use glass as a single medium challenge that definition. This exhibition illustrates how no other single, static, and solid material can achieve the variety of experience to the same extent as glass does. Beyond exploring materiality and cutting-edge craft, both artists also investigated a spectrum of social narratives, including personal dilemmas and philosophies. Visitors were encouraged to shift their focus and experience this exhibition space through a fourth dimension – one shaped by memory, emotion, and embodied presence.

In this exhibition, both artists created glass and mixed-media installations centred around the theme of "artefacts". The textbook definition of an artefact is an ornament, tool, work of art, or other object made by a human being (Tuan 1980:462). These types of artefacts tend to have some sort of historical and archaeological value. Earlier applications of the term were limited to physical objects of skilful making of a reasonable, and not too large, size (Tuan 1980:462). Artefacts are often fragile objects that must be preserved, or risk being lost to natural causes. An artwork can be classified as a type of artefact that embodies and captures strong emotions and reactions to daily life (Tuan 1980:463). Beyond considering how the definition of artefacts creates different meanings in this context, we also suggest that visitors temporarily modify and reimagine the term. If one leaves out the letters "e" and "f", two words remain: *Art acts*. In this exhibition, there were several reasons why "art *acts*". For one, the artworks acted with the participation of viewers. Instead of only looking at a work, viewers also looked through the work and thus saw unusual perspectives on reality – something that is not feasible with other "solid" or opaque, non-reflective mediums such as wood or plaster. The unique properties of transparent and semi-transparent glass, therefore, provided visitors with a viewing experience that stimulated their imagination and curiosity about the types of artefacts displayed.

Böttcher and Greenberg approached the theme of artefacts in opposite ways. Böttcher framed his artefacts around conceptions of mass media, consumption, and curated propaganda. In this way, Böttcher documented artefacts of the public sphere and the dissemination of information. In his work *Dosis sola facit venenum* (*The dose makes the poison*) (2025), Böttcher comments on the amount of time spent looking through digital "keyholes" as displayed by a polished television screen surrounded by a mirror and a starburst design (Figure 2). When looking at the work, the visitor saw a distorted reflection of themselves as well as the exhibition room in the mirror fragments, suggesting that digital users also never see a full, clear picture of reality. This could be a nod to information silos online that often lead to confirmation bias. The title is a Latin adage which means that a harmful substance or object is only poisonous when administered in the right dosage and concentration. Perhaps if this "dosage" of digital technology and information is reduced or altered, and we take the time to see more than a curated fraction, we can learn and grow. Böttcher's artefacts therefore serve as social commentary on the status of human-to-technology interactions on a global, yet individual, basis.

On the other hand, Greenberg's artefacts are much more intimate and private than Böttcher's artefacts. Greenberg investigates notions of silence, memory, and domestic disturbances which women are expected to quietly endure. Her artworks highlight the complexities of life in the private sphere as opposed to Böttcher's focus on mass media. Emotional strain and hidden pains are particularly evident in the recurring motif of the bed seen in both *When I lay me down to sleep* (2025) (Figure 3) and *Introspection* (2025) (Figure 4). Both installations include a rusted, old bed frame dressed in various materials like cloth, sand, and glass to represent traumatic memories and the collective wounds of silenced women. The feet of the bed are covered by literal glass feet,



FIGURE Nº 2

Dosis sola facit venenum, Lothar Böttcher. 2025. Glass and mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Carla Crafford.

hinting towards the idea that if the pressure of the bed becomes too much and the glass cracks, the entire bed will collapse. The contrast between the vulnerable glass feet and the solid steel bed frame highlights different types of pressures that women must endure and navigate. This could suggest that narratives of pain and weakness are often obscured by the strong public front women often put up, since the glass feet are not immediately noticed upon first glance. What appears to be an old bed at first suddenly turns into a story of forced, quiet resilience and tolerance. Greenberg's artworks are thus deeply moving and evoke sympathetic responses from visitors.



FIGURE Nº 3

When I lay me down to sleep, Caitlin Greenberg. 2025. Glass and mixed media installation. Courtesy of Carla Crafford.



FIGURE Nº 4

Introspection, Caitlin Greenberg. 2025. Glass and mixed media installation. Courtesy of Carla Crafford.

Interestingly, *Artefacts* was not the first time some of these works by Böttcher and Greenberg were displayed adjacent to each other. Selected themes and motifs represented in *Artefacts* were previously explored by both artists in an exhibition at the University of Pretoria in 2023 titled *Shifting focus*. An alternative version of Böttcher's *This is not a TV* (2023) (Figure 5) was shown at the earlier exhibition with a different base and in a slightly modified form compared to the 2025 version in *Artefacts*. Greenberg also borrowed ideas from her submission in *Shifting focus* titled *Shadow birth II* (2023) in that she revisited the motif of the bed in *Artefacts*. Both artists have thus already displayed some of the artworks together and reimagined and evolved selected works to be shown in *Artefacts*.



FIGURE **Nº 5**

This is not a TV, Lothar Böttcher. 2025. Glass and mixed media installation. Courtesy of Carla Crafford.

Greenberg and Böttcher's glass installations and artworks both contain manipulated reflections and refractions of light to communicate meaning. Glass is capable of reflecting reality, offering visions to the visitor of what is behind them, but also framing distorted mirror images of themselves (see Figure 6). The word "reflect" has a double meaning, both of which are applicable to this exhibition. Visitors were prompted to ponder a series of questions about the usefulness of these reflections. For instance, they were asked to consider whether they reflected upon what they saw

reflected in the glass. How flexible were their interpretations of that reflection? When they reflected upon their past experiences with glass, did they remember that glass can be so fragile that it can trigger anxiety? If glass is broken, its fragments can be physically dangerous beyond psychological concerns. However, glass fragments can also reveal a multitude of otherwise undiscovered light reflections. This fluidity raised questions about what can be regarded as the "truth" or a truthful representation of life.



FIGURE **Nº 6**

Detail of *When I lay me down to sleep*, Caitlin Greenberg. 2025. Glass and mixed media installation. Courtesy of Carla Crafford.

Since entering the exhibition, visitors were immediately drawn into the unique capabilities of glass in art. *Artefacts* blurred the boundaries of materiality and the meaning of visibility in both artists' works. Greenberg and Böttcher offer profound insights into types of artefacts that are worth preserving and remembering in the private and public spheres respectively, while directly confronting visitors with their own roles in these spaces. The questions regarding memory, truth, and social responsibility that the exhibition posed lingered around the space and in visitors' minds long after they had left. Visitors were therefore impacted by the emotional and social implications of the artworks and were compelled to remain curious to see the world through different lenses.

Notes

1. The artists' statements which were displayed on the wall of the exhibition are available here: https://lotharbottcher.com/artefacts-at-the-pretoria-art-museum/

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