

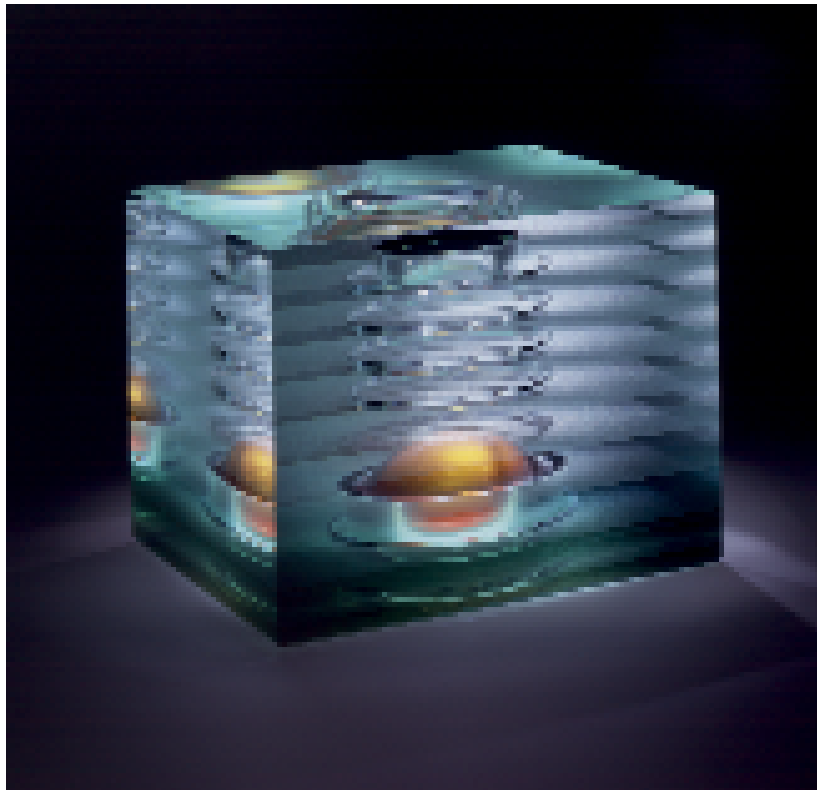
**Tom Patti
constructs
an architecture
of the
invisible**

LIGHT INDUSTRY

BY PETER VAN KESTER
Photo credit: Ron Zijlstra

BELOW **Marta Gibiete, Latvia. XXX, 2003. Cut mirror, glue. H 170, W 320, D 10 cm.** NEW GLASS REVIEW 25

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to break out of what he feels are confining limitations he faces as an artist working in glass. The title piece of the exhibition, *Pushing the Point, Art in Glass* (2004), illustrates Meitner's attitude. A transparent vase is harshly penetrated by a graphic black arrow on a white field, ambiguously painted *sous verre* (behind-glass), and framed. In spite of the obvious violence, the result is surprisingly serene: art and glass don't battle for attention, but instead, harmonize. The medium fits, but does not become, the message.

And then there are the works *Decorative Art, Still Life?* (2004) and *Decorative Art, Limited Perspective* (2004) where the dividing line between the fine and decorative arts is Meitner's subject. Small framed *sous verre* paintings depict a van Gogh-like chair and, in another, a piece of fruit. They are repeated on a platform on top of the paintings, but now as three-dimensional objects of roughly the same size. These are attractive painting-sculpture hybrids, yet somehow their message lacks urgency.

However, when Meitner makes direct reference to well known modern artists, he is much more appealing. *Who is Afraid of Wood, Paint and Glass?* (2004), shows a blue Disney-esque carved wooden coyote. The animal is howling at a red rectangular painted canvas, which forms the bristles of a yellow-glass-handled paintbrush. Here Meitner freely expresses his mystification at the universal reverence for Barnett Newman's most famous paintings—a series of several very large paintings entitled *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?*, one of the most prized possessions of Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art. Meitner's reaction to Newman is a cynical and humorous reference to the apparent difficulties for some art collectors to experience a sculptural work in which glass is the dominant material, the same way as they would a painted or wooden sculpture.

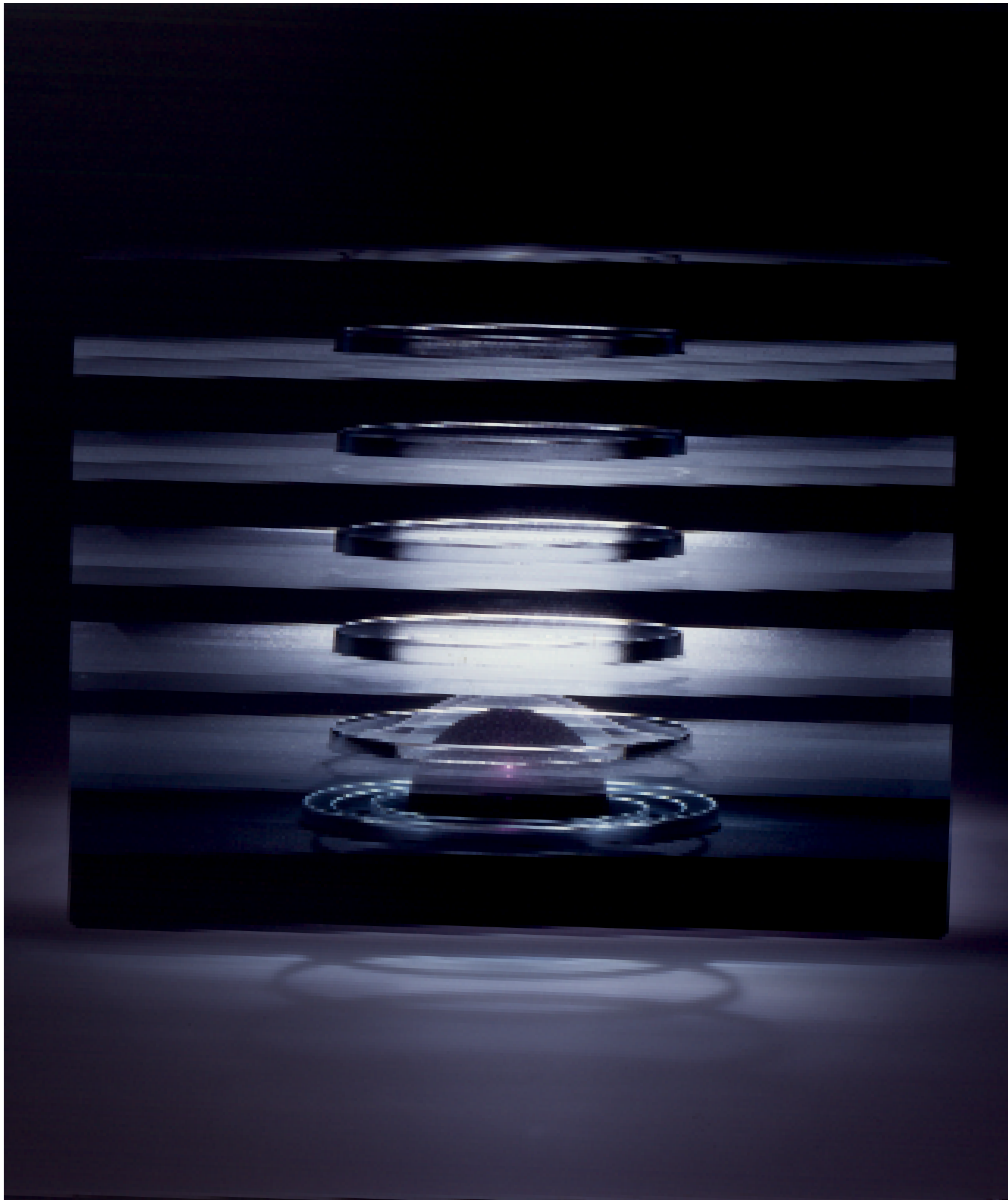
In the poetic work *Almost, Art Before Horse* (2004) in which a blue carved wooden horse is perforated by a glass branch, Meitner refers to Franz Marc and the Blaue Reiter expressionists. Humorous but vivid and impressive is *After the Scream* (2004), another allusion to a famous icon of art history, Edvard Munch's *The Scream*.

The Meitner show offers much more than merely a discussion of his personal difficulties with the artificially divided art and glass milieus. Many pieces deal

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Richard Meitner's recent show, "*Pushing the Point, Art in Glass*," was not displayed at a pristine white gallery space, but rather at an art society clubhouse, where smoking chairs and even a billiard table shared the room with 28 works on the walls. The clubhouse, named the Kring, is in the very center of Amsterdam and was chosen by Meitner because he wanted his work to be seen outside of the specialized glass gallery context.

Meitner's intense focus on breaking free of the glass ghetto is somewhat puzzling. For more than a decade now, the borders between glass and art have seemed increasingly fluid in Holland. Young artists freely move from painting to glass, ceramics, textiles or video, selecting each time the medium which is most appropriate for the message or feelings they wish to convey. But Meitner sees more *confusion* than fusion between the art world and glass art, and is determined





with private memories and fears. Like *Alptraum* (2004), German for both “nightmare” and “dream of the Alps,” in which the innocence of a Biedermeier porcelain statuette of a small boy with a rabbit at his feet, is strangely disturbed by the gun in the boys’ hand. The visual expression is intensified by the repetition of the same figure on top, but now in platinum porcelain and imprisoned under a glass cover. To intensify the horror of the scene, this caged boy holds a severed child’s head on his knee.

Another example is *Artist, the Unbearable Likeness of Being* (2004), a statement about artists in general. It resembles a transparent carafe consisting of two separate parts, held together only by a handle. Apart from the technical bravura, it’s a sparkling metaphor of the artist’s schizophrenia, as he tries to escape himself, or earthly reality, or, perhaps, the low status of a glass artist. In a sense, the artist reaches for the Sun, but is bound to Earth, a modern-day Icarus. In the twin piece *Artist, Clear and Present Danger* (2004), the upper part of the form is very sharp and penetrates the interior of the lower one. It’s as if the artist threatens to injure himself badly when he plunges too deeply into his personal feelings and subconscious.

These pieces also depend strongly on the their titles, an aspect which one must accept if one is to gain access to the content Meitner proffers. In doing so, he challenges unashamedly the convention that the title of a work cannot be seen or used as material that is essential to understanding the work as a whole. Meitner freely uses his titles here as a painter would a color, as material integrated in the work and highly relevant, even essential to it. Sometimes these titles refer to existing masterpieces in art or literature, like Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. But they always create an extra layer of meaning, and often an immediately accessible humour.

From 1981 to 2000, together with Mieke Groot, Meitner was in charge of the glass department of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie. The two figures, and their

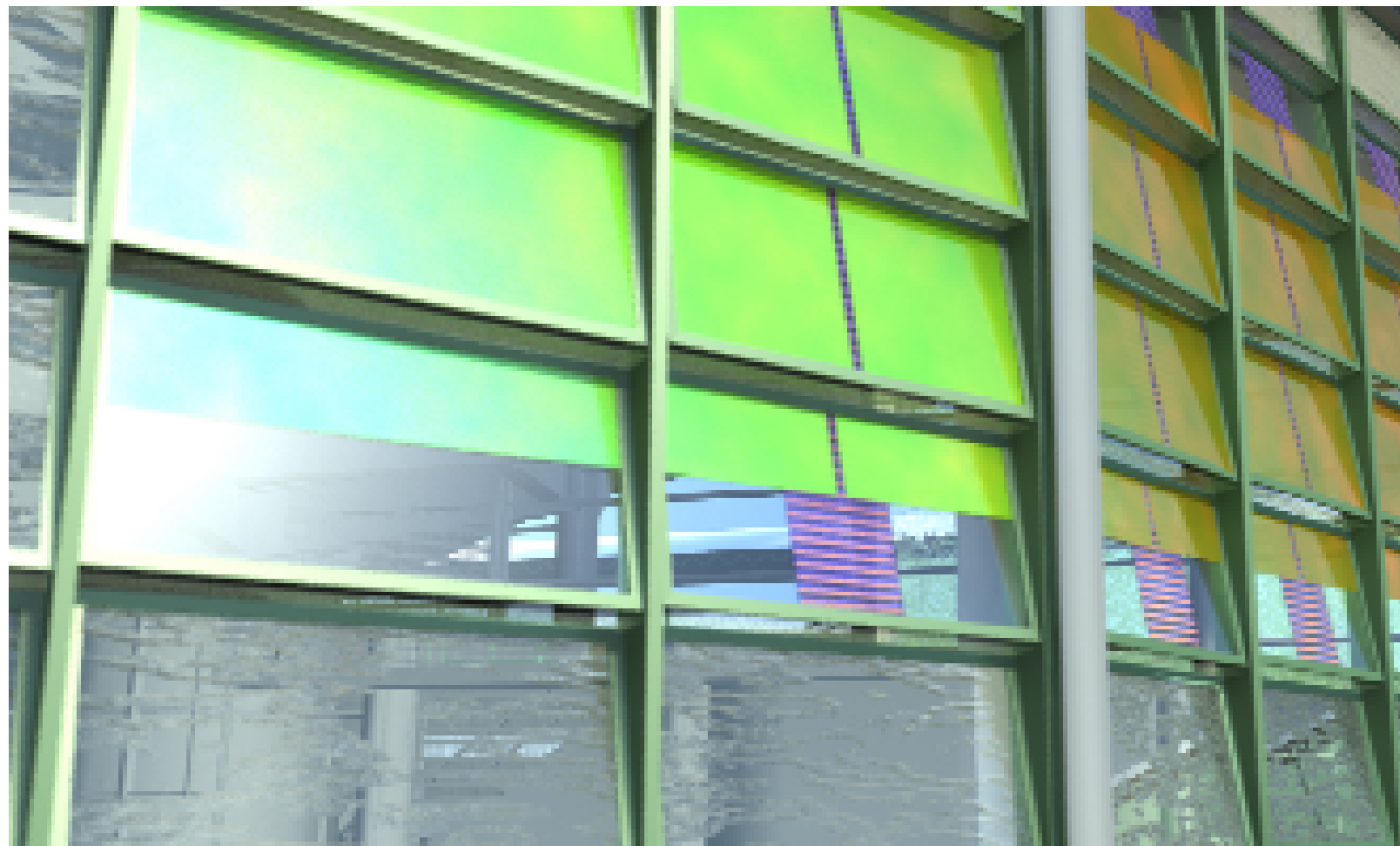
students, have played an important role in the studio glass movement as a whole, and an undeniably pivotal one in Europe, where they have used, and promoted the use of glass by others in fine art. People sometimes consider Meitner’s work hermetic, even eerie or bizarre. But once you start to recognize the different devices he employs to express what he intends, their beauty easily opens.

In the tradition of Marcel Duchamp and the pop artists, Meitner often incorporates daily utensils and popular folk art, or old memorabilia which he finds or buys during his regular travels in Europe, the U.S., Mexico, Africa, and Asia. But these objects are not chosen at random. They are very select and unusual ones. His eye is highly demanding, and not easily pleased. By placing these objects in unusual contexts, often changing them drastically, he transforms their meaning. In his piece *Vase* (2004), a glass flower grows out of a black frame, underscoring the unnoticed beauty of this virtuoso blown Murano chandelier

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OPPOSITE, TOP **Nani Croze, Kenya. Bottle Bosoms (showers), 1996. Glass bottles, concrete. H 200, W 150 cm. each.** NEW GLASS REVIEW 18

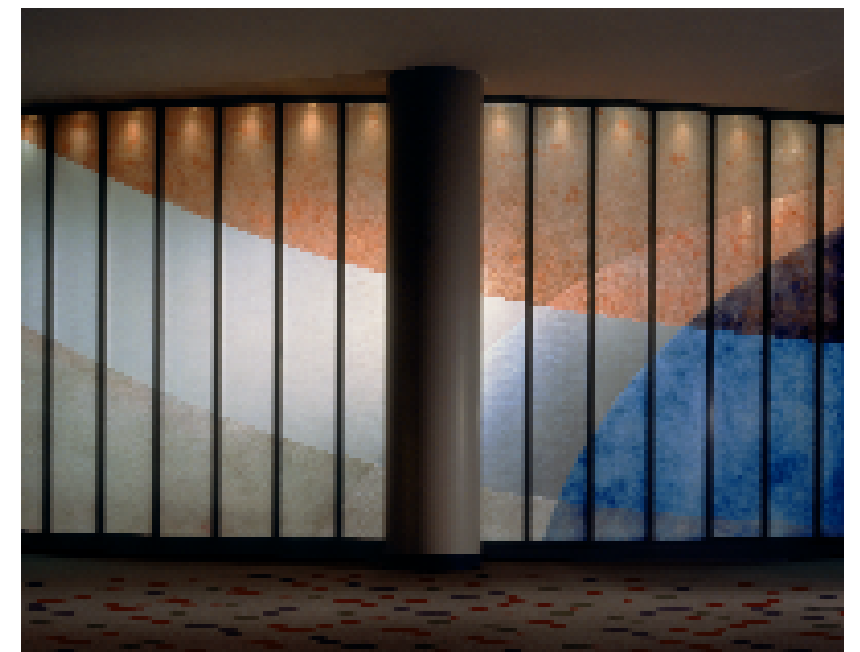




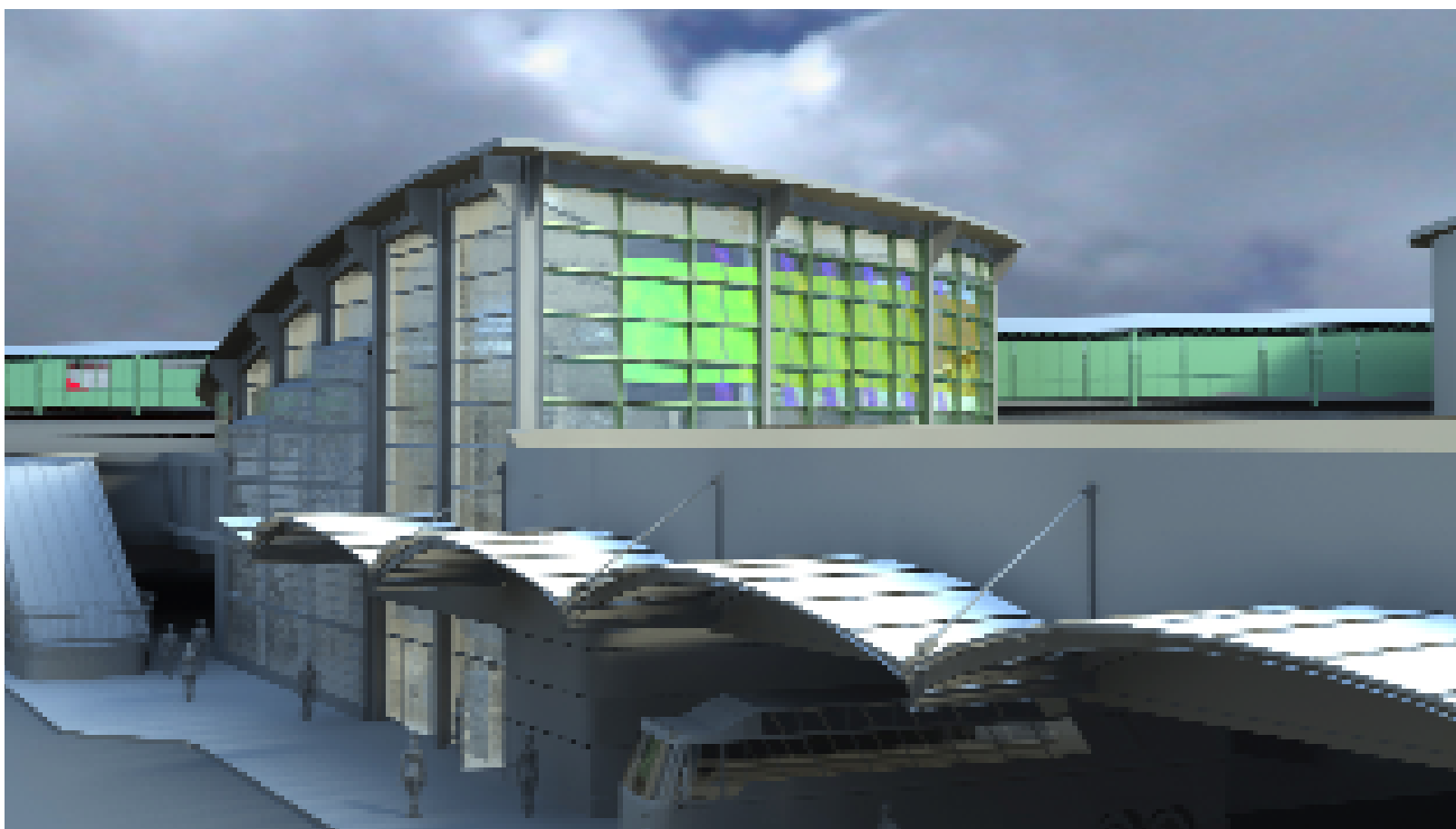
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detail. In *Reds* (2004), a blood-red painted canvas with two identical porcelain lobsters hanging on a glass loop evokes associations with cancer, illness, testicles and ovaries. Meitner constantly manipulates the line between reality and representation, between two and three dimensions, often using the devices of repetition of form, alienation and ambiguity. The frequent use of archetypal functional forms, such as bottles, vases and goblet-stems, enhance this ambiguity, perhaps creating hurdles for some viewers - curators, gallerists and collectors - who may be either unable or unwilling to cope with Meitner's subtlety, preferring to stick to safe but simple categories.

In pieces such as *Eenheid* (2004), which is Dutch for "unity," Meitner seems to attain this magical mystery. It shows a glass branch and a red number-3 poolball, above which a Madonna-like figure holds a holy water font, though she has no hands. Behind her is a trellis-work and a copy of an antique animal trophy mount. This work is reminiscent of Renaissance Madonna-of-the-rose-bower paintings. *Eenheid* emanates a superb richness of ambiguous allusions to religion, miracles, holy trinity, relics, games, magic and high art. Also, *Patience Again* (2004), in which a huge transparent bottle is penetrated by a lifesize branch, produces mystery. This technically amazing blown borosilicate glass piece, made together with the mas-

ter instrument maker Edwin Dieperink, plays with the idea of the huge patience you would need to see a branch growing into, through, and out the other side of a bottle.

Patience Again refers to an earlier work, *Patience* (1996). It is one of the many interesting examples of themes and motives from earlier years reappearing in different guises in Meitner's oeuvre. Branches, iron oxidized laboratory funnels, small glass figurines of animals and fairy-tale characters in many sizes and materials perform in a continuous *dance macabre*. Meitner uses them in an attempt to exorcize or express his—and possibly our—fears, fantasies, fascinations for nature, popular art, mass media, science, history, politics and human interaction. Not every collector, curator, critic or viewer will be ready yet to follow this pied piper, or to recognize and appreciate the richness of his art. Meitner himself may well need to have more patience before finding the audience he needs, and richly deserves.