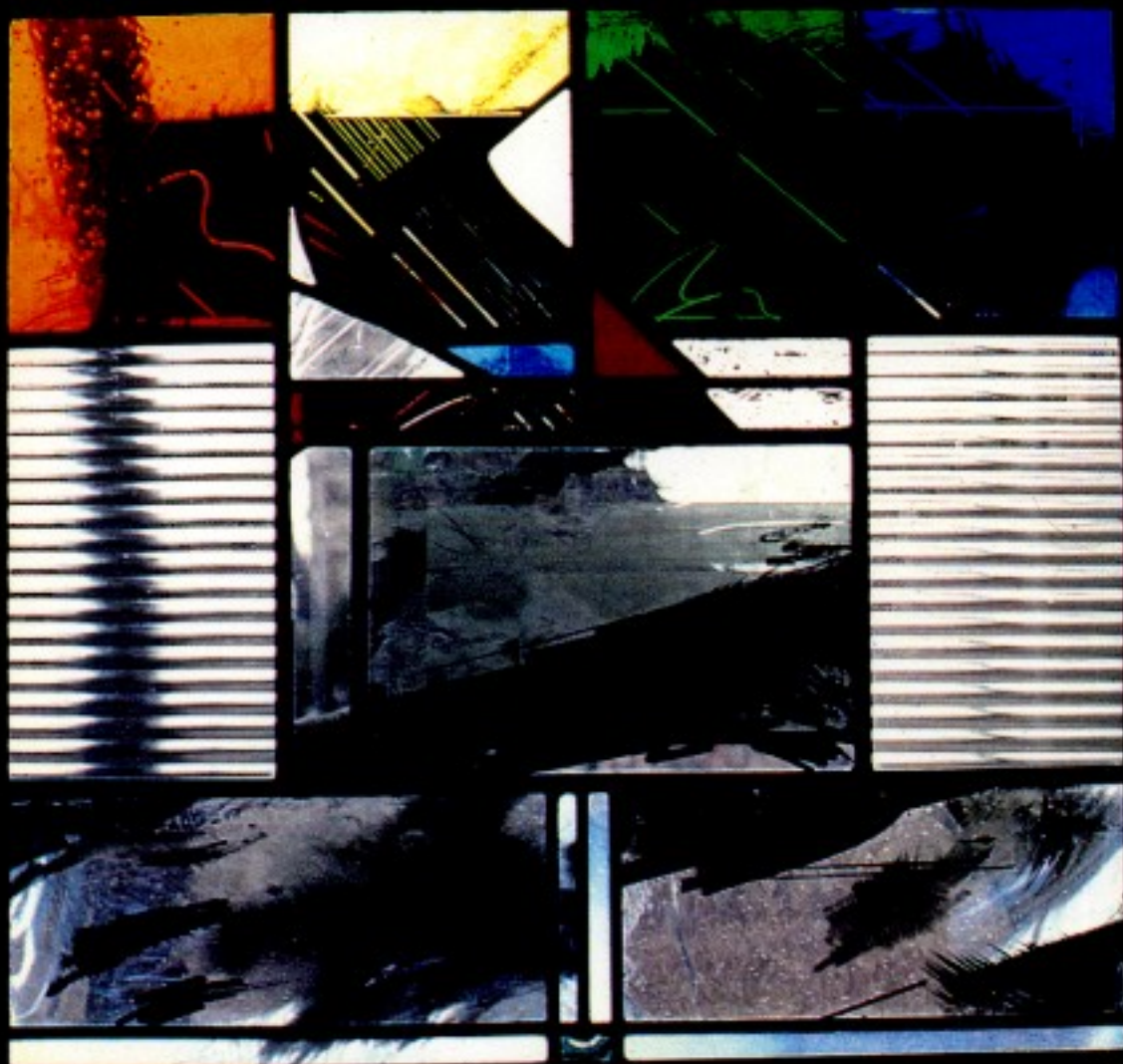


A brush with freedom

An artist breaks with convention.

Gene Mallard



Blackening Day, 24" x 23", 1998. Leaded and painted glass.

IT SEEMS SUCH A SHORT TIME AGO that any discussion of stained glass inevitably turned to laments about it being a lost art. With the revival of stained glass in this country in the '60s, the pundits fine-tuned their laments toward the art of painting on glass. This venerable art form whose techniques were long considered 'secret' was, however, about to undergo a renaissance and revolution of its own.

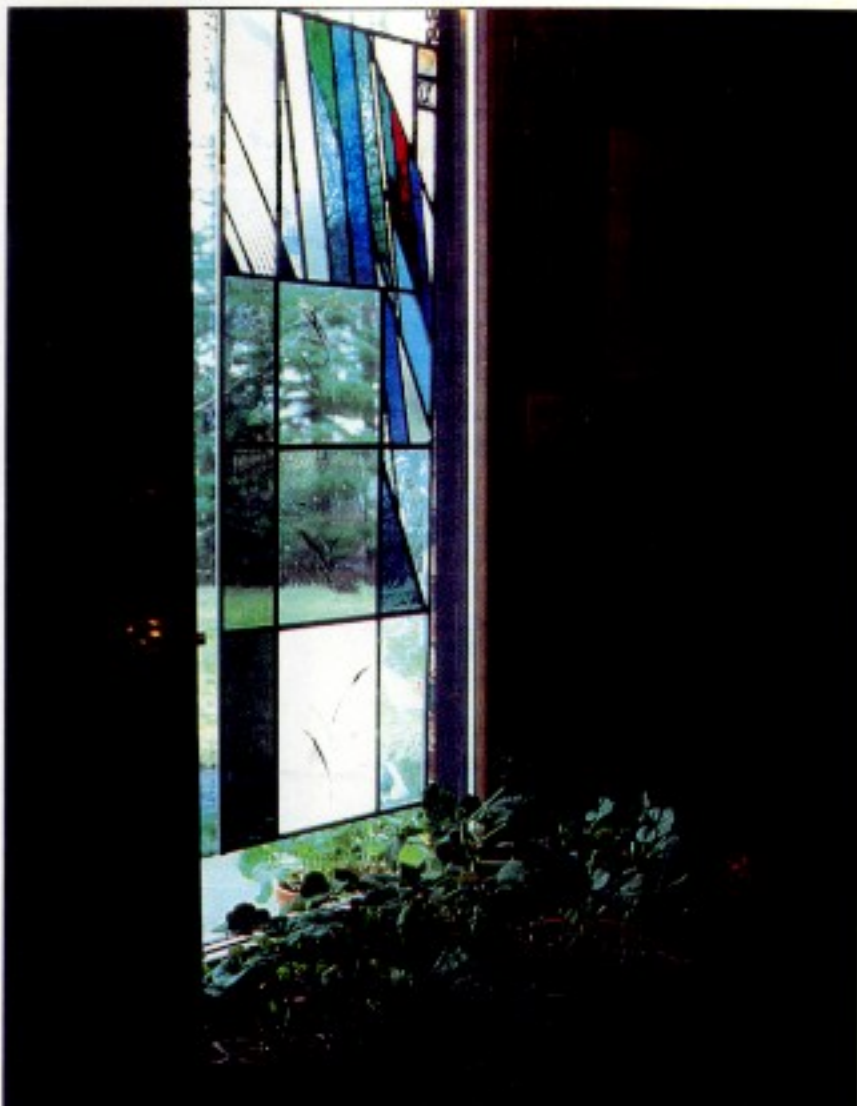
As the resurgence of traditional painting on glass was occurring—that is, the use of fired-on paints to incorporate fine line and shading in representational stained glass artworks—we began to also see refreshing new attitudes toward the use of paints on glass.

Certain artists—many educated in other fields of art—began taking highly individualistic approaches to the medium. One began to see expressive new ways of working with glass paints. New artists seemed to wink coyly back at the old masters and say "That's nice, but I'd rather do it my own way." One artist at the vanguard of this movement was Ellen Mandelbaum, who has become a rising star and an internationally acclaimed glass artist/painter.

Mandelbaum, not surprisingly, studied painting at the University of Indiana where she received an MFA in 1963. She worked for several years as a painter, educator and lecturer before developing an interest in stained glass in the mid '70s. In 1975, her studies in stained glass began in earnest at the now defunct Stained Glass School in North Adams, Massachusetts. By the mid '80s, Mandelbaum had studied with or participated in workshops with such well-known masters as Ludwig Schaffrath, Johannes Schreiter, Jochem Poensgen, Albinus Elskus, Ray King and Ed Carpenter. After having learned the basic skill of leaded glass, and having attempted a portrait using these techniques, it didn't take long for the painter in Mandelbaum to assert herself.

While Mandelbaum respected the strength of the rigid lead line, so necessary for separation of the colors of the glass, she also wanted the possibility of more fluid motion and softness, thus her attraction to glass painting. In the late '70s, finding a glass painting teacher required much more effort than it does today. Mandelbaum's earliest inquiries resulted in discouragement. She was told that she could only paint black and values thereof. Initiation into the rigid traditional disciplines proved frustrating to the painter in her. Her breakthrough came when she studied with Albinus Elskus, who encouraged her to paint in a more personal way. Becoming a participant in the Glass Painting Society (initiated by John Nussbaum as an informal glass painting appreciation group) gave her the needed encouragement and helped her to make contact with people who were more willing to utilize free expression with glass paints.

From the beginning, Mandelbaum's primary interest has been in the architectural use of stained glass. To this end, she has worked diligently to establish a rapport with architects and designers, building a solid reputation in a field that often overlooked the 'small studio' artists. Mandelbaum does all of her own marketing, which includes attending meetings of women in architecture, publish-



Robin Panel, 20" x 54", 1989.



Interaction Inside/Outside Vermeer Window, 36" x 32", 1987.

ing her work in the *Guild* [Kraus-Sikes, New York City] and attending stained glass conferences worldwide. It has been an investment in time that has amounted to years, but it seems to be paying off in the long run. And publications have taken note; besides *PSG*, her work has appeared in *Stained Glass Quarterly*, *Home* magazine and others, including a favorable mention of her work in *The New York Times*.

When asked about her preferences for architectural commissions, Mandelbaum's response is surprisingly down-to-earth. She enjoys the limitations imposed by such commissions. She finds the personal involvement with her clients pleasurable, working with their input on colors, the special requirements of the light and the space itself. She says it gives her "so much more to draw from" and is something she can "sink her teeth into."

Although she has designed some exquisite autonomous pieces—especially those she has entered in exhibitions and competitions—it is the limitations of architectural commissions that best put her in touch with what she calls "the source" of her creativity.

Mandelbaum's work is often composed of bold, often starkly geometric leaded glass elements, offset by an expressive free-handed use of paints, stain or enamels in select areas of the composition.

She frequently makes use of clear and light tints of glass to enable what is beyond the stained glass, the view itself, to participate as a design element in its own right. Indeed, the painted elements of her work may even appear to reflect what is occurring in the view beyond. *Interaction Inside Outside Vermeer Window* is an excellent illustration of this technique. A quick glance may at first only reveal a traditional horizontal-diamond, leaded glass window. A closer look reveals playful interruptions of the diamond pattern and an arrangement of tints and colors that create a play of light in direct variance to the seemingly rigid structure of the diamond grid. Mandelbaum has used silver stain on select pieces, which reflect the image of what lies beyond, thereby creating a perfect integration of see-through art to its background.

Generic Window is another good example of this kind of integration of window to scene. The lower area of the composition utilizes a white opal antique glass to block an unwanted part of the view, whereas the clear upper elements of the window allow the colors of the sky and trees to shine through. The artist saw this as a problem-solving exercise with a window that was generic in nature, hence the title. Intended or not, however, there is a visual pun going on as well, which the title seems to support. In this piece she uses the same type of border treatment as one might see in a generic, turn-of-the-century, production stained glass window. A bold diagonal stroke through the center, however, gives the window the kind of movement and dynamic that make it anything but generic.

Mandelbaum's techniques are interesting also. One, in which she scratches through the layers of paint to reveal bright colors underneath, is a technique she compares to children using India ink to cover crayon drawings. When they scratch away the ink, they form brightly colored designs.

With stained glass, however, the light appears to burst through the paint in brilliant, laser-like beams of color. *Blackening Day*



Generic Window, 19" x 33", 1988.

shows just how effective her techniques can be when used in conjunction with one another.

Not unlike just about every glass painter who ever lived, Mandelbaum considers painting on glass a tool which enables her to transcend some of the limitations imposed by the art glass medium. But she cautions that it should not be seen as just another set of limitations which have to be followed, but rather as a "flexible technique and a concept for expanding an artistic vision in the medium."

Among her recent accomplishments, several stand out. She was a participant in the exhibition entitled "International Flat Glass: 36 Women from 12 Countries," [see "36/12/89", November 1989] which toured Europe after its initial opening in Bremen, West Germany. The entire collection, including Mandelbaum's *Blackening Day*, was purchased by a Japanese businessman for exhibition in his own museum.

In addition, her piece *Waves x 3* was selected to be shown at the Second International Juried Exhibition of Stained Glass, at the Centre International du Vitrail, in

Chartres, France. She is currently working on a one-person show which will be presented at the Port Washington Library in Long Island, New York.

She has garnered many prestigious commissions, including *Square Arch* for Broadcast Department, a New York City recording studio and a commemorative panel for Geraldine Ferraro, former New York congresswoman and vice-presidential candidate. Her list of art awards is not short either.

As we enter the '90s on this the last leg of the 20th century, it is encouraging to see that our art form has survived another century without becoming lost. With creative artists like Ellen Mandelbaum at work, we are sure to survive the millennium. **PSG**

Gene Maillard has been designing and executing fine art glass creations for the past 15 years, specializing in painting on glass. Prior to that, he trained for three years in Switzerland with Hans Joachim Albert. He has had a number of gallery and museum shows of his work. The bulk of his current work is commissions produced in his upstate New York studio.



Crystal Night Commemorative Window. 5 1/2" x 11", 1988. Collage for presentation, includes glass, housepaint, photocopies and water color.