

## Glass Menagerie

Glass artist Amber Cowan transforms found tchotchkes into gallery-worthy sculptures.

By CLAIRE BUTWINICK



**IT'S EASY TO GET LOST IN AMBER COWAN'S WORK.** Reconfigured from found glass, her intricate pieces are a riot of pastel glasswork vegetation that delicately frames figures of animals and women, who could be interpreted as stand-ins for the artist herself. All are crafted from midcentury glassworks that she sources from flea markets and defunct factories, then melts and hot-sculpts into complex feminist, autobiographical, and mythological vignettes. Cowan sees her work as new fairytales made by her hands and mind, and not without a good dose of wit: "I joke that the bridesmaid got sick of the wedding and wandered into her own fantasy world," she says of a green figurine dreaming alongside a deer in her *Bridesmaids Forest* (2017).

Cowan—a finalist for the Museum of Arts and Design's 2019 Burke Prize—has

been a glass artist for nearly two decades, working in a fashion meant to highlight the history of the American glass industry. She pursued the craft as an undergraduate at Salisbury University and later the graduate program at Temple University, where she began working with pressed glass, a popular technique in which molten glass is compressed into a patterned mold. "I was making work that looked similar [to my current output], but I was running out of money," says Cowan, now a faculty member at her alma mater's glass department. "I found a barrel of old pink glass that was collecting dust at the school. I tested it out and thought, 'This is 150 pounds of free color that no one wants.'" After graduating in 2011, she continued to work with glass, fusing it with her interest in history.

Strangers who have seen Cowan's work regularly send her castoff glassware as potential material. Last year, a woman sent her a broken candy dish from the late 1800s. Drawing from Venetian glass-sculpting and flame-working techniques, Cowan remelted the dish alongside sections of an epergne centerpiece using a 5,000-degree tabletop torch. After shaping the molten glass with bonsai shears and annealing the result in a kiln, *The Engagement of Orzo and Cara Wilson* (2018) was complete.

Today the sculpture, more than 8 feet square, hangs in Florida's Imagine Museum. The heyday of pressed glass might be behind us, but Cowan's transformations of the thrift-store staple suggests it could see a 21st-century resurgence. ✱