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High and Low Culture Come Together in Susanna Conaway's Stained Glass Art

By Zach Rodgers

The first thing you notice about Susanna Conaway's 2024 piece, "It's just a penis for fuck's sake," is the penis. Which is kind of surprising, not because there's a penis but because it is the first thing you see.

Often with Conaway's stained glass designs, the unexpected touch is a little bit hidden. It might be the *second* thing you notice, or the third, after you've admired the overall gorgeousness of the work.

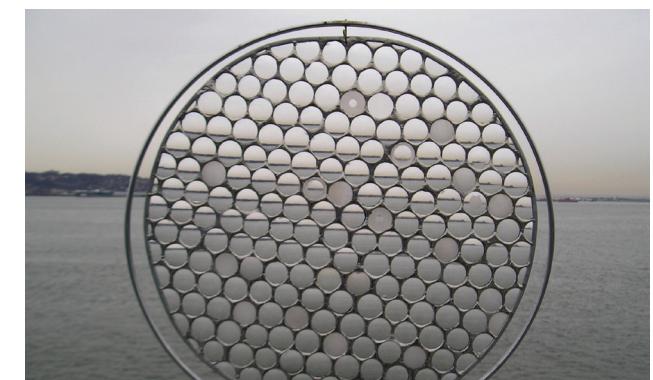
"How beautiful!" you think. And then you see it. And then you clutch your pearls.

This is the case with "Sign," a window that butters you up with aesthetically warm beveling and script lettering before slapping you with a more aggressive message. And in "The Land of Golden Opportunity," a literal "rainbows and unicorns" landscape reveals itself on closer study to be... steamier than expected.

But the penis in "It's just a penis" doesn't try to hide. On the contrary, it stands in literal relief; the phallus is cast in luminous glass and centered in an ornate composition that evokes a Victorian-era brooch.

Left: *I/We*, 2024. 33 in x 80 in. Photo: Scott Russell

Right: *Horizon Lines*, 2007. 22 in x 60 in. Photo: Susanna Conaway





It's just a penis for fuck's sake, 2025. 28.5 in x 24.5 in.
Photo: Scott Russell

The longer you look, the more you feel a tension between the prominence of this penis and the elaborate prudishness of its surroundings. An air of refinement extends to every crafted detail: the antiqued mirror, the gold leaf, kiln-fired lettering that is almost delicate in its 19th century font. Eventually you are forced to concede that what you're looking at isn't a confrontational, bathroom-stall variety of penis. On the contrary, it's a *cherubim penis*. Turns out, the surprise was hidden after all.

Like much of Conaway's work, "It's just a penis" fuses high- and low-culture to pose questions that are both serious and funny. Here she's exploring the biological arbitrariness of patriarchy, the weird ongoing censorship of male genitalia, and for whose sake penises even exist. (It's right there in the title; they are "for fuck's sake.")

Over 25 years, Conaway's stained glass experiments have consistently challenged the constraints of the medium, slyly undermining entrenched perspectives. To achieve this, she often incorporates lowly themes

and materials (domestic artifacts, found objects) into designs of undeniable grandeur—nudging us to consider what stained glass is allowed to say, and how.

SCRAP AND SALVAGE

Conaway grew up in Washington, D.C., a few blocks from the National Cathedral and its 200-plus stained glass windows. But she didn't start working in glass until 1999, when she was 25 years old. The circumstances were almost random. Conaway was working as a ceramics assistant at Chicago's Gallery 37 Center for the Arts, a progressive program that paid high schoolers to be apprentice artists. Joining a ceramics studio was cost-prohibitive, so she decided to explore a new medium by working as an assistant to the stained glass teacher within the Gallery 37 program. She learned how to do stained glass just weeks before she taught the high school students.

In those days Conaway worked with epoxy and scavenged glass; she didn't even own a soldering iron. But she was already interested in the norm-breaking



Fractures, 2007.
36 in x 36 in.
Photo: Susanna Conaway





Shit, cast glass, 6 in x 6 in. Photo: Susanna Conaway



Lantern, 48 in x 8 in. Photo: Susanna Conaway

potential of stained glass. Some of her earliest sculptures were stained glass suitcases, created by drilling into glass to attach handles and hinges.

After Chicago, Conaway spent a decade roaming around the United States. During this time, she made frequent use of scavenged and found materials, including several pieces built around household cast-offs. In "Chainlink TV," she refaced a junked TV with a stained glass "screen" based on a chain link fence. In "Homecooked," she augmented an antique toy oven found in a junkyard with a stained glass door, lit internally and displaying a roast turkey. In "Launch" she combined scrap metal parts with vintage car brake lights, and fractures.

In her "Fractures" series, Conaway deliberately shattered glass panes—either by crushing them underfoot or dropping objects on them from a height. She then rejoined the broken pieces to capture and crystallize the random and destructive forces that fill our world. Breakage, normally the end state of glass (and everything else), becomes a starting point.

| Detail of *I am domestic*, 2024. 61 in x 34 in. Photo: Scott Russell

"Bolt," created in 2008, keeps to this theme but goes bigger—illuminating a destroyed building in Portland, Oregon by modifying a single window. "Every day I'd walk by this space where there'd been a fire," she says. "The building was abandoned. I wanted to install a piece as a graffiti act."

Conaway collected glass from the site, including melted glass and graffitied glass. She decided to intermingle these shattered materials with Saint-Just, the expensive French glass that uses gold to achieve an exquisite pink color. She then worked the upmarket glass and the ruined glass together into a design featuring a suitcase and a rocket ship—highlighting themes of motion and escape that have recurred throughout her work.

"It's a scrappy piece that incorporates actual scraps," she says. "I wanted to mesh high quality and destroyed glass together to show they can both be beautiful. I wanted to activate the space with something radiant, allowing the sun to come through the broken security glass that had been melted and shattered."



Sign, 2003. 16 in x 12 in. "After I made it, I found a lot of joy in people's reactions. Most people initially thought it said "Thank you."

Photo: Austin Goldin

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

In another series featuring repurposed materials, Conaway created two pieces using hundreds of small lenses sourced at a rummage sale. The effect is different from her other work because they use the distortion of optical lenses—rather than the illuminating effect of stained glass—to create the intended effect.

The first of these, "Horizon Lines," is a 22" hoop of soldered lenses, mounted in a vintage birdcage stand. The stand is placed in an outdoor setting, pointed at the horizon. But rather than revealing a single steady horizon line, the lens distortion creates the effect of multiple horizons. The earth's firmament becomes fragmented rather than fixed.

Conaway's larger follow up piece, "I/We," extended this game of perspective with a more uplifting message. Conaway created a wide platter of atomized visual fields consisting of 481 lenses mounted on a tall stand that raises the lens field to eye-level.

She collaborated with Melanie Piech to create a base that could be assembled in three parts, to hold and exhibit the piece.

"I really wanted people to experience movement through it," she said. "The singular becomes multiple. Singular people inspire multitudes. We each have a ripple effect and are part of a community. Our voice and ideas can influence many people—can influence the world."

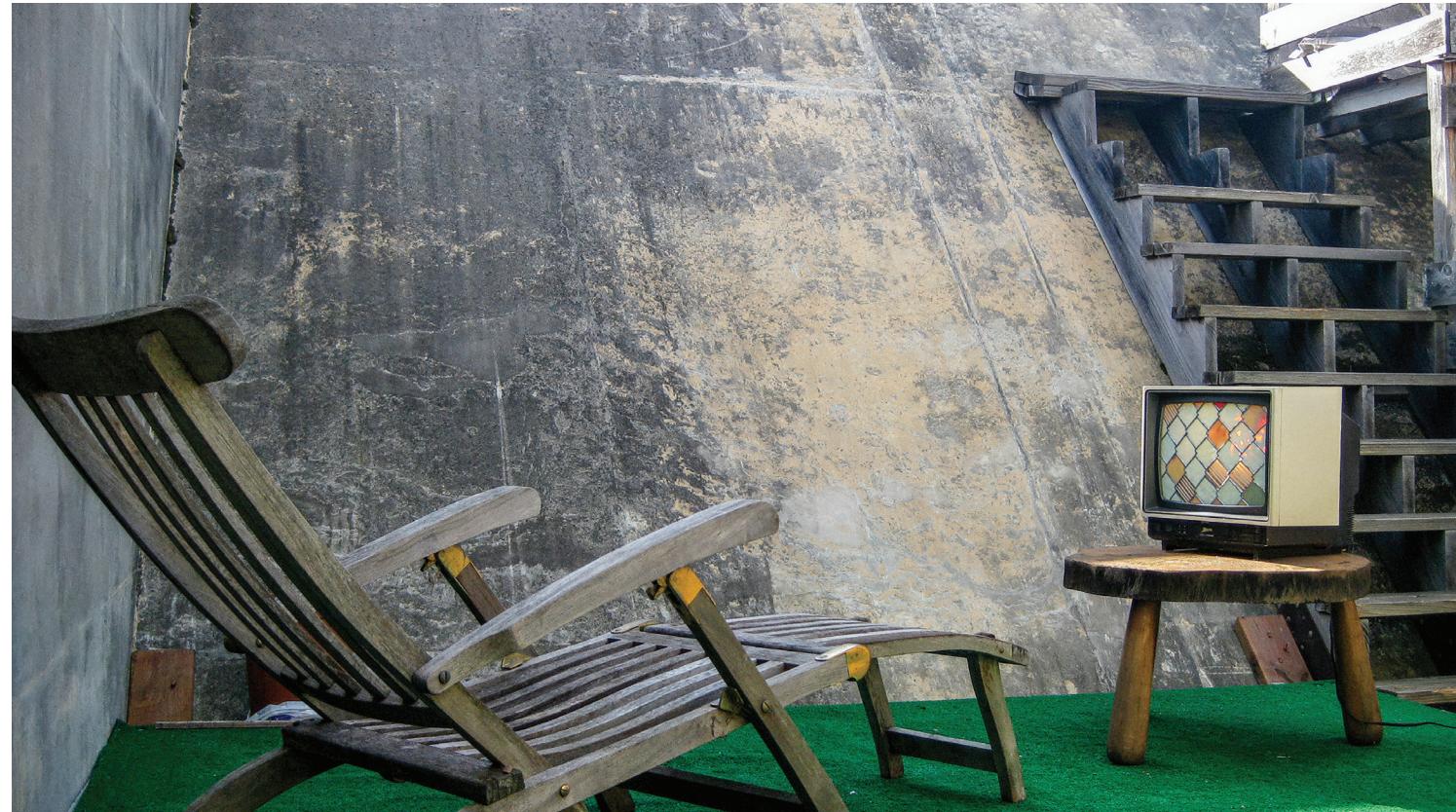
Pieces like "I/We" and "Bolt" signal Conaway's interest in creating art that engages people directly and sparks interaction. She links this impulse to Joseph Beuys' concept of "social sculpture" in which artists contribute to and shape the world.

"I'm using stained glass as a medium, just like anyone who paints or does sculpture," Conaway says. "But I constantly feel the push and pull of the history and tradition of stained glass, which is fun to play with, but is also a constant hurdle. There are just so many

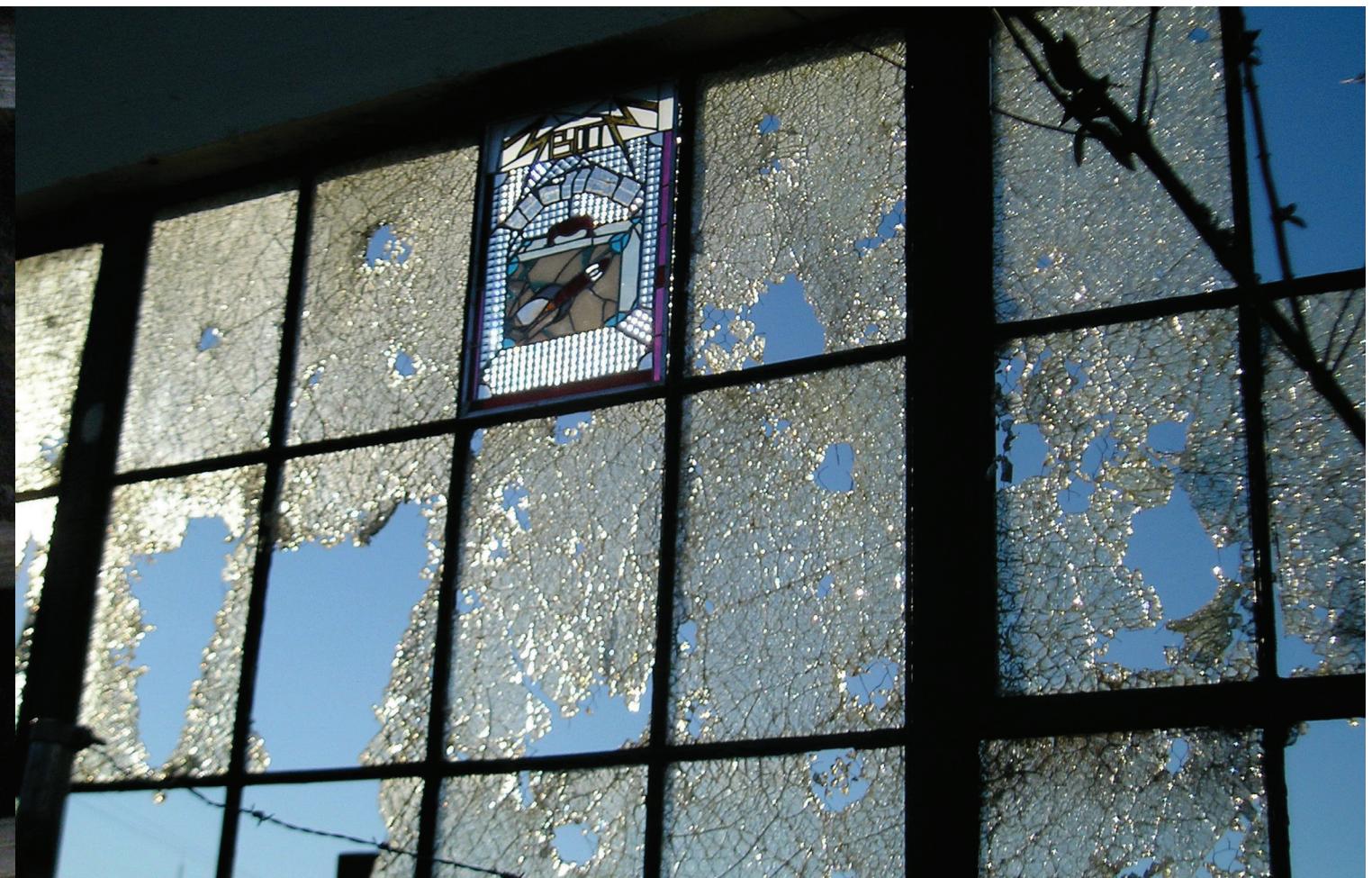
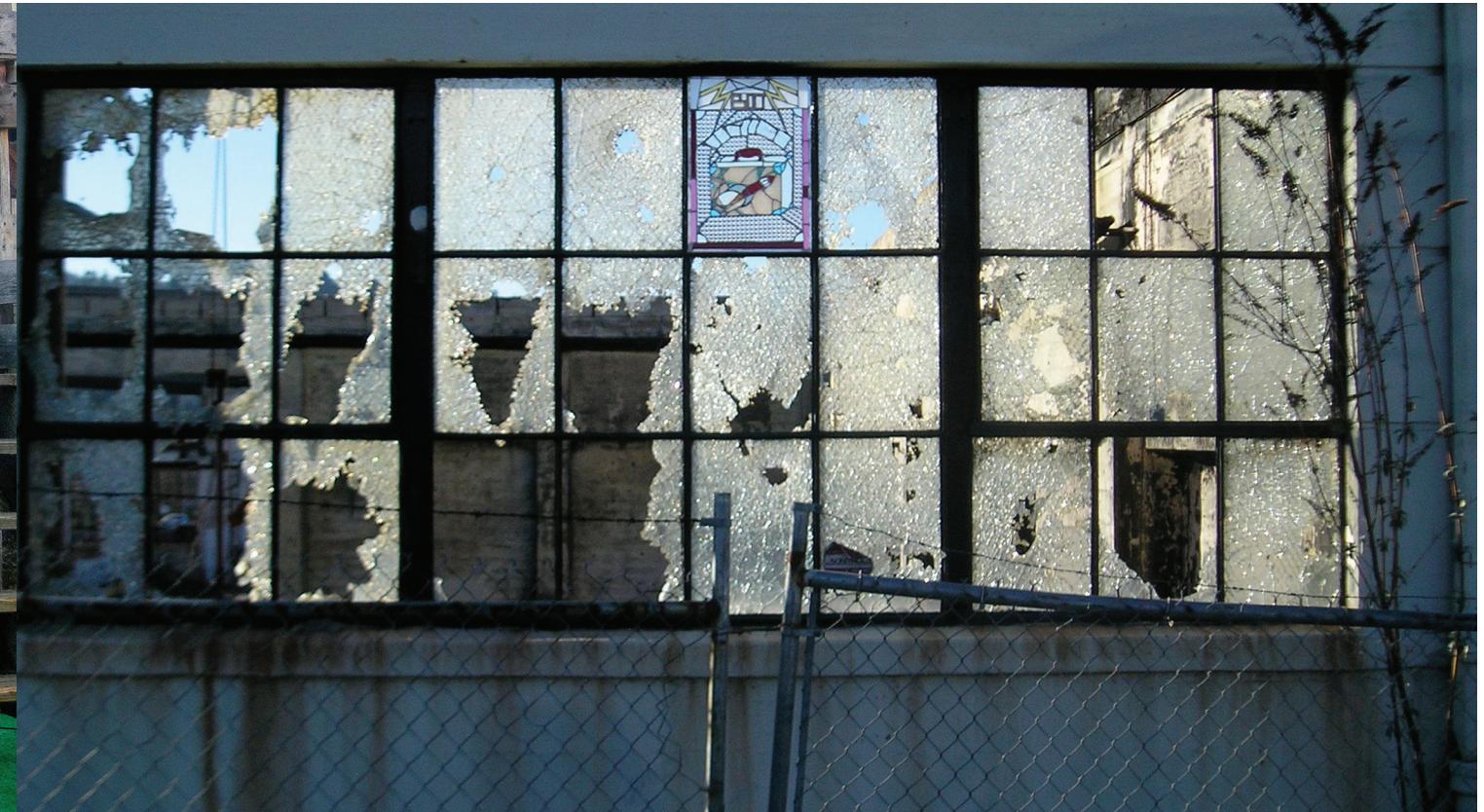


Launch, 2005. 30 in x 40 in. Photo: Susanna Conaway

T.V., 2013. 14 in x 12 in. Photo: Susanna Conaway



Bolt, 2008. 14 in x 18 in. Photo: Susanna Conaway





Land of Golden Opportunity, 2007. 25 in x 16 in. Photo: Susanna Conaway

associations with stained glass. More so than with other mediums, because clay, paint and sculpture have all broken from tradition already. People can't stop calling glass a craft, and its that same old conversation of what is craft and what is art. It's an old way of thinking..."

Another artist whose work resonates with Conaway is Scottish stained glass artist Pinkie McClure, who has explored stained glass as a vehicle for personal storytelling. Conaway and McClure have both embraced imagery not traditionally depicted in glass, such as in McClure's "The Soil," which depicts a woman urinating into a compost heap.

The sense of the personal is evident in Conaway's "I am domestic," which juxtaposes a beautiful design, featuring a screen-printed border with a floral pattern, with a subversive underlying message written using movie marquee letters that triggers a visceral response.

"Being in a partnership, raising children, and having a household is demanding and involves relentless

responsibilities. I'm used to spending a lot of time by myself," Conaway says. "I like the play with the title. I am domestic and domesticity is a bitch, which means I am a bitch. I therefore own the title, and recognize that sometimes, being a bitch is justified or at least understandable."

FERAL STUDIO

Today, Conaway operates out of Feral Studio, her Berkeley-based stained glass workshop where she makes art, teaches classes and does residential commissions. Recognition of Conaway's creative accomplishments has increased in recent years. She was a recipient of the Stained Glass Association of America's award for artistry in glass and received a James Whitney Scholarship courtesy of the American Glass Guild. In 2023 she was accepted as an artist-in-residence at Greywood Arts in Ireland, and had her work featured in Glass Art Magazine. In 2025 she exhibited her work in the Expressions in Contemporary Glass Exhibit at the Chico Art Center, and in the Left Coast Annual Juried Show at Sanchez Art Center.



Crayons and Cornerstore, 2021. 26 in x 26 in. Photo: Susanna Conaway

Glass has held her attention over the decades because she can continue to grow in it. And even 25 years in, her feelings about the medium continue to evolve.

"When I started, I was really interested in the connection of the glass to the sun, how it changes with the seasons and the different times of day. The glow, the personality, there is this living quality to it," she says. "I've been a glass artist for more than 20 years, I now recognize the endless possibilities of glass—painting, silk screening, casting, fusing, gold leaf, sign painting, blowing, etching, and on and on. Not to mention the combination of all those processes for personal expression. I still value how the sun brings true vitality to glass, and I'm also interested in shaping glass to reflect the complexity of life." ■

Zach Rodgers writes about media, art, technology, marketing, and local communities. His work has been published in The Guardian, Adweek and The Highlands Current, among other publications. He is the founder and host of Beaconites!, a podcast focused on the city of Beacon, NY where he has lived since 2007.



Homecooked, 2003. 26 in x 32 in. Photo: Susanna Conaway