

Border Crossings: EGS and the Art of Glass

by Kaisa Koivisto

"[...] EGS is a graffiti virtuoso - someone who has vast historical and theoretical knowledge of the artistic discipline s/he participates in, and who combines this with hands - on practice based on improvisation and intuitive decisions. This is also an approach that s/he has brought with him into the realm of art - institution production."

Whenever the pseudonymous artist EGS comes up for discussion, the conversation almost inevitably begins with graffiti - and with good reason.

Graffiti remains a vital part of his practice even today. Glass entered the picture about a decade ago, when the Lasismi Glass Studio invited several artists to experiment with glassmaking in honour of the cooperative's fifth anniversary. EGS eagerly joined the project.

There is an element of danger inherent in glass, much as there was in graffiti during its early days. When he was first offered the chance to work with glass, EGS could hardly have imagined it would become a primary medium for his art - let alone that he would conceive of himself as a "Finnish glass artist".

Finnish Glass

Finnish glass is known - if it is known at all - for its triumphs at the Milan Triennials of the 1950s, where Tapio Wirkkala, Timo Sarpaneva, and Kaj Franck commanded the gaze of the international art world. The designs presented there were primarily art glass: objects celebrated as unique works of art. In reality, most were serially produced, yet this did not diminish the significance of Finnish art glass, which played a crucial role in shaping the nation's cultural identity. Through glass and ceramic design, Finland projected an image of artistic and industrial excellence, while asserting its place within Western Europe. Contrary to the expectations of many key export partners, Finland escaped occupation and avoided socialism, despite having lost not one but two wars to the Soviet Union during the Second World War.

At the time, designers were intimately familiar with glassmaking techniques - at least in the Nordic countries and at many other European glassworks. Their collaboration with professional glassblowers was seamless, and the partnership between artists and artisans was particularly close at Nuutajärvi, where the production of one-off pieces began at Kaj Franck's initiative in 1953. Alongside Franck, all of Nuutajärvi's in-house designers enjoyed generous freedom to experiment. From the company's perspective, one-offs, art glass, and even functional design objects were central to its public image and served as a powerful form of advertising.

Art glass has often been described as the most elegant and emblematic calling card of Finland's wood, paper, and metal industries. The glassworks that produced it - Iittala, Nuutajärvi, and Riihimäki - were all owned by, or closely affiliated with, major industrial conglomerates. Their principal output consisted of consumer goods created by "world-famous" figures - domestic celebrities called not "designers" but "artists".

In the wake of the global upheavals of the 1970s, the energy crisis dealt a heavy blow to the Nordic glass industry. Rising energy costs, higher wages, and the scarcity of domestic raw materials made glass production increasingly expensive, and Nordic glass soon became prohibitively costly. The deregulation of trade further flooded the market with inexpensive, mass-produced European glassware. In Finland, the industry grew steadily more concentrated: Iittala and Nuutajärvi merged in 1988, after which Nuutajärvi gradually lost its distinct identity, eclipsed by the stronger Iittala brand. Riihimäki, for its part, had already discontinued artisanal glass production in 1976. By the late 1990s, Finnish glassworks began phasing out their in-house design departments, opting instead to commission individual pieces from international star designers. At the same time, familiar classics were reissued and updated to suit contemporary tastes.

From Factory to Studio

When the studio glass movement began gaining momentum in the United States - and later spread to Europe during the 1960s and 1970s - conditions on each side of the Atlantic differed profoundly. In America, glass factories offered designers little opportunity for experimentation, prompting the emergence of glassmaking as a field of study within art schools during the 1960s. In Europe, by contrast, glass and ceramics were traditionally taught within the broader framework of design. In Finland, the studio glass movement gradually took root in the early 1970s. From the outset, however, designers had to support their artistic practice by producing functional glassware alongside their creative work. Even into the 1980s, glass continued to be regarded primarily as a material for utility rather than as a medium for artistic expression.

The importance of systematic education in glassmaking became increasingly evident in the wake of accelerating globalisation and the economic recession of the early 1990s, which raised widespread concern about the preservation of traditional craft skills. In response, Finland introduced new practical training programmes for glassblowers in 1993 - programmes that continue to this day in Nuutajärvi. While there was a recognised need to cultivate a new generation of glassblowers, the training offered in Nuutajärvi was broad in scope, and many students did not necessarily intend to pursue factory-based careers.

In 2003, the Lasikompania association - comprising glassblowers, artists, and designers - was founded in Nuutajärvi Glass Village, where it continues today with fifteen members. The following year, the association built its own hot shop adjacent to the school's facilities, since the factory workshop was no longer accessible to artists. Meanwhile, preparations were already underway for the anticipated closure of Nuutajärvi Glassworks, which ultimately came to pass in 2014.

The Lasismi Glass Studio began operating in 2010 on the premises of the former Riihimäki glassworks, continuing the legacy of the earlier JL-Lasi Studio, established in 1994. Several of Lasismi's founders were graduates of the Nuutajärvi Glass School, and the two hot shops have maintained a close collegial relationship ever since.

In this way, two artisanal glassmaking hubs emerged in Finland, each employing artists, glassblowers, and glasscutters. Many artists live elsewhere yet travel to Nuutajärvi or Riihimäki to complete pieces and supervise their execution. Designers, too, frequently have their prototypes made in these hot shops, and some even rely on them for full production runs. Operating a hot shop is costly, however: melting glass at temperatures of around 1,500°C demands a steady flow of commissions simply to meet daily expenses.

Venetian Glass

While Venetian glassmaking traditions stretch back more than two millennia - and the island of Murano boasts a distinguished legacy of nearly a thousand years - Finland, in the far northern corner of Europe, was among the last countries where glassmaking became firmly established, not until the mid-eighteenth century. Yet as early as the 1680s, a short-lived glassworks in the Finnish town of Uusikaupunki - then part of the Kingdom of Sweden - briefly produced Venetian-style glass, though no intact examples of this early production have survived.

The glass sculptures by EGS featured in this exhibition were produced both at the Lasismi Glass Studio in Finland and at Seguso Vetri d'Arte in Venice; the latter, however, represents a legacy of an entirely different calibre. Glass continues to be crafted there by the twenty-third generation of the Seguso family, whose lineage of glassmakers can be traced back to 1397. To suggest that the history of Venetian glass has been one of perpetual glamour would be misleading, yet its enduring global renown is certainly well deserved. Rooted in its Renaissance heritage, Venetian glassmaking embodies a remarkable synthesis of artistry and technique: art glass, intricate mosaics, chandeliers, beads, and mirrors continue to be produced today by dozens of local manufacturers. Venetian glassmaking forms a vital part of the city's rich artistic culture, and artists have created works of glass art there since at least the nineteenth century - and in some cases even earlier. For much of its history, many of these works were designed by the master glassblowers themselves, a tradition that continues to inform the identity of Seguso Vetri d'Arte today.

The history of the Seguso family business has been marked by many vicissitudes. Seguso Viro, established in 1993, was founded to bring traditional Murano craftsmanship into the present day. Seguso Vetri d'Arte, originally founded in 1933, returned to family ownership in 2009. The vast reservoir of glassmaking knowledge passed down from father to son through twenty-three generations carries a deep sense of responsibility to preserve this tradition for posterity. This commitment remains firmly rooted in Murano today, where heritage and innovation coexist in an inspiring synthesis. The young glassblowers at Seguso are Murano natives, ensuring the preservation and continuity of local skills and knowledge. A significant share of the small factory's output consists of bespoke commissions, such as monumental contemporary chandeliers for hotels and public interiors. Collaboration with artists, including EGS, also plays a vital role in the company's practice, allowing age-old techniques to be reinterpreted and carried forward into the future.

From Margins to Museums

If graffiti has often been regarded as a marginal art form, the same perception long applied to glass. Although designers in the Finnish glass industry began creating one-of-a-kind sculptural pieces in the 1960s - works that fully merited the label of fine art - their creations were still rarely deemed worthy of display in art museums.

The concepts of art and artistic identity are difficult to define, and interpretations vary widely, often on a case-by-case basis. It is often argued that to be considered an artist, one must execute every stage of a work - whether a painting, sculpture, installation, or video - entirely alone.

The international studio glass movement was similarly founded on the notion of the artist mastering all stages of production, and a few Finnish artists continued to uphold this tradition. Yet this has never been an absolute condition for a work to be recognised as art. By the 1970s, practitioners within the studio glass movement had already acknowledged that collaboration with a skilled glassblower or other specialist could yield finer results than solitary work. Many glass artists proficient in blowing techniques produce their own pieces while also collaborating with others. Indeed, cooperation lies at the very heart of glassmaking: in practice, no one works with molten glass entirely on their own.

The studio glass movement that emerged in the United States fostered an international culture of exchange, with artists regularly meeting and sharing both knowledge and technical skills. In much the same way, graffiti has always been inherently international, sustained by a global community of artists committed to exchanging ideas and learning from one another. EGS has created works in dozens of countries worldwide and has built enduring friendships with artists across the globe - many of whom shared his early Nytdesire to see graffiti recognised as a legitimate art form. In Finland, however, graffiti and street art received no institutional recognition until as late as the early 2000s. EGS held his first solo exhibition at Napa Gallery in Helsinki in 2009. Reflecting on his subsequent 2012 exhibition, he remarked: "The show did not feature graffiti, but graffiti-based art, which had not previously been given a place in museums."

EGS, Lasismi Glass Studio, and Seguso Vetri d'Arte

EGS had long been eager to introduce three-dimensional form into his practice, and glass proved to be the ideal medium for doing so. Beginning with his first experiments in 2015, he developed a distinctive method of engaging directly with the glassmaking process. The Lasismi Glass Studio provided exactly the facilities he needed, with Joonas Laakso initially serving as master glassblower, later succeeded by Kaappo Lähdesmäki, and Kimmo Reinikka joining as assistant to the gaffer and cold-working team. EGS shapes each piece with jacks, tweezers, and other metal tools, bending the parison into the desired form. In the early stages, the results were often unpredictable. Many of his sculptures continue to draw inspiration from the letter combination 'EGS'.

These early glass sculptures were first exhibited the following year at the Make Your Mark Gallery in Helsinki, a space specialising in graffiti art. Before the opening, EGS showed his glass creations to the late art critic Otso Kantokorpi, who questioned whether the sculptures might be “a little too neat and decorative – along the lines of non-functional design,” as he later wrote in February 2016 in his blog, *Alaston kriitikko* (The Naked Critic). EGS welcomed the remark as a challenge: “Finnish art glass is traditionally associated with a certain purity and polished design. My background is in graffiti, and my paintings are far from polished. I strive to capture expressionistic moments – to evoke spontaneity and a sense of recklessness. I understood Otso Kantokorpi’s comment as a reminder not to forget my own background when working with glass.”

On the eve of his 2020 exhibition at the Finnish Glass Museum in Riihimäki, EGS reflected on his evolving relationship with glass: “I am in the fortunate position of knowing just enough about glassblowing, but not too much. I’ve been twisting and turning glass for five years now, and I still have no idea what I’m doing, but I’m starting to be happy with the results. When I begin shaping a blob of molten glass, I’m never sure which letter it will turn out to be – that’s decided later.” This approach represents a direct continuation of graffiti, a site-specific art in which each letter spontaneously finds its own style as the work progresses. “With glass, as with graffiti, you interact with others, and there’s an absurdly high contingent of chance. Perhaps the most important affinity between glass and graffiti is that, when blowing glass, the artist never has complete control over the final result. That molten lump simply takes whatever shape it pleases.”

Today, after a decade of working with glass, EGS approaches the material with greater command of form and confidence in his technique, allowing him to incorporate an increasingly diverse range of methods into his practice. As glass crosses further into the realm of art, close collaboration between artist and artisans becomes ever more essential.

Years of shared experience have likewise equipped the glassmakers with the confidence and intuition needed to interpret EGS’s sketches with growing fluency. His earliest sculptures were executed in black glass, echoing the palette of his paintings from the same period. Experiments with colour soon followed, many of which were featured in his 2020 exhibition at the Finnish Glass Museum. He typically employs ribbons of colour to achieve rich, vibrant tones but has also explored alternative techniques. Kimmo Reinikka and Kaappo Lähdesmäki both speak highly of their collaboration with EGS: “It has gone really well. Many ideas have been challenging to execute, but that’s part of their appeal. The atmosphere at the studio has always been creative. When you’re working with EGS, you have to let go of all prejudices and reservations.”

For EGS, the opportunity to work at Seguso Vetri d’Arte was like stepping into another world. Although the hierarchy of the hot shop was unfamiliar, the team – known traditionally as the chair – was small, and the collaboration soon proved both smooth and rewarding. His hands-on involvement in the glassmaking process initially surprised his Italian counterparts, yet their working relationship quickly evolved into a mutually enriching exchange.

The preparation for the project was a story in itself. During a visit to Venice in the spring of 2025, EGS immersed himself in the Seguso family’s long tradition of glassmaking, particularly the diverse techniques pioneered by Archimede Seguso and his remarkable works from the 1930s onward. He was especially impressed by the brilliance of the colourless glass used in the Seguso hot shop and by the vivid hues achieved through pigments added directly into the crucible. Inspired by these discoveries, he created his first sketches soon after returning home.

The Seguso team carefully considered the most effective methods to realise his designs, making various adjustments to ensure that the technical execution would serve rather than compromise the artist’s vision. Whereas the new sculptures created at the Lasismi Glass Studio emerged through an intuitive, spontaneous process, the dozen pieces produced at Seguso were meticulously planned and executed.

Although EGS’s glass sculptures have been exhibited alongside his paintings and work in other media, this exhibition marks the first devoted entirely to glass. Displayed side by side are sculptures made in both Finland and Venice – works that, despite their novelty and subtly uncanny character, remain deeply rooted in the legacies of Finnish and Venetian glassmaking alike. Above all, they enrich EGS’s distinctive artistic vocabulary, revealing that both Murano and Finland depend equally on the seamless partnership between master glassmakers and artists.

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EGS (Helsinki, Finland, 1974)

He began painting at a very young age. An autodidact, he was driven by the urge to express his creativity in unauthorized public spaces—an approach he has never abandoned. This practice gave rise to his stage name, EGS: three letters—meaningless in themselves—that have evolved into both a message and the foundation of his art. EGS has developed a visual language, a personal alphabet that tells stories and incorporates cultural, historical, and popular references—particularly themes such as identity, place, and movement—through abstract forms.

He completed his higher education in Helsinki and graduated in 2000 with honors in Graphic Design from the University of Arts in London, where he engaged with an international environment and experienced the creative vibrancy of one of the most transgressive cities in the world.

After earning his BA in Arts, he dedicated himself to studio work, developing a semantic system capable of translating the eclecticism of his public space productions onto paper and canvas. Starting in 2006, he began participating in group exhibitions across major European capitals, and from 2009 onward, he has been featured in numerous solo shows.

Among the various art forms, he also explores sculpture, particularly the creation of three-dimensional glass works. This experience developed almost by chance starting in 2015, when a collective of young artisans acquired the Lasismi glass factory to revive a Finnish tradition of glass design. They invited him among emerging artists to develop a collection together.

Since then, EGS has established himself as one of the leading artists in this medium. Glass, as a material and production process, combines physicality and spontaneity in a way that closely resembles graffiti art, where unpredictability plays a crucial role and unforeseen outcomes often lead to the most engaging results.

Five years later, in 2020, he was invited to realize his first retrospective at the Finnish Glass Museum, a show that highlighted his innovative use of molten glass for sculptural forms.

In recent years, EGS has exhibited in prestigious venues such as the Helsinki Kunsthalle and participated in major international art events, including his city's Biennale, for which he also curated the visual identity in 2025. He has also completed numerous public commissions and his works have been acquired by leading foundations and private collections across the Nordic countries.

His pieces are part of public collections such as the Finnish National Gallery, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Serlachius Museum. His work has been featured in significant publications, including *Abstract Vandalism* (Unruly Publishing, 2015), the monograph *EGS*.

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