

Alfred University's Karen Donnellan addresses sexualized language of the hot glass studio

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Alfred University Assistant Professor of Glass Karen Donnellan recently lectured at the annual Glass Art Society conference in Norfolk, Va., joining visual artist Suzanne Peck, of Brooklyn, N.Y. for a joint lecture entitled “Blow Harder: An Exploration of Language, Sexuality and Gender in the Glassblowing Studio.”

It's not every day a lecture on art is prefaced by the warning: “This lecture will contain cursing, irreverence, sexual references, laughter, nudity (just kidding), and a feminist agenda.” But Donnellan and Peck's lecture was an overview of the sexually charged and heavily gendered vocabulary of the hot glass studio.

Speaking in her office in Binns Merrill Hall, Donnellan argues the art and craft of glassblowing “has historically been accessible only to cis-male artisans, so it should come as no surprise that the vocabulary reflects the gender of its historical workforce.”

Words like “gaffer,” for example, “are an old-world expression for grandfather.” Other problematic terms include “flashing,” “moile,” and “glory hole.”

The language becomes potentially damaging in a glass studio of men and women, as well as individuals who are gender non-conforming or non-binary, Donnellan continues. And while the language may create a funny, even sexy, social context for artists and craftspeople, Donnellan argues glass artists and studio supervisors at the very least should be sensitive to the gendered and sexualized nature of the vocabulary.

In preparation for their lecture, Donnellan and Peck developed an online survey of glassblowers' experiences of the studio vocabulary, distributing the survey to glass makers around the world.

“We also hosted informal conversations with community members in Philadelphia and New York City in an effort to glean more anecdotal evidence of the problems, and indeed benefits, associated with the language. From the 238 respondents who completed the survey in its entirety, 65 percent thought that the glass blowing studio is a sexual environment. Seventy-five percent answered “somewhat” or “yes” that the language contributes to this sexualized atmosphere, and 38 percent found the language to be occasionally or frequently problematic.”

As one solution to the imbalance of power in the glassblowing studio, Donnellan and Peck offered some alternative lexicons as a way of pushing back against the traditional masculine culture. (She calls some of the alternatives “ridiculous,” others “sensible.”) “Reheating chamber” may be used as an alternative to “glory hole”; “exhale with vigor” may replace “blow harder.”

And she quotes Roxanne Gay: “Vigorously resist the urge to dismiss the gender problem. Make the effort and make the effort until you no longer need to, until we don't need to keep having this conversation. ...

Change requires intent and effort. It really is that simple.”

A faculty member in Alfred University’s School of Art and Design and Co-Director of the National Casting Center at Alfred University, Donnellan earned a Bachelor’s of Design from the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, and an MFA from the Rochester Institute of Technology.

She has exhibited internationally at venues including the Irish Museum of Contemporary Art, Dublin; Tushanwan Museum, Shanghai and Ebeltoft Museum, DK. She is a past recipient of the Pilchuk Emerging Artist Residency and will present new work as part of the International Glass Biennale in Bulgaria this fall.

In 2015, she presented a public lecture in Alfred University’s Bergren Forum series, “The Circle Extends to the Tips of the Fingers.”