



## Sylvia “Lilla” Tabasso Illuminating Nature’s Process

*by Sara Sally LaGrand*

A Latin term *vanitas*, meaning vanity, has become synonymous in art as a symbol of the transience of earthly life and the inevitability of death. Most notably it’s found in still life paintings with rotting fruit and dying flowers, a practice made famous by Flemish painters in the 17th century. It’s hard not to think of this when viewing the bittersweet glasswork of Italian artist Sylvia “Lilla” Tabasso. Her work mimics the process of nature from the realistic and subtle variations of color in flowers in full bloom but also of the fading and wilting of dying petals, dry branches, and decayed leaves.



### **Celebrating the Full Cycle of Life**

Tabasso's work evokes a sweet kind of pain. The flora sadly shoots out from concrete crevices, an impossible and unexpected presentation. Sometimes browning blossoms languish in dirty water of a transparent vase, as in her entry in the 2016 exhibition *Lifeforms*, also aptly named *Vanitas*. Her entry not only made it into the participant category, but the traveling exhibition as well.

Founder and curator of the *Lifeforms* exhibition, artist Robert Michelsen recently described Tabasso and her creations. "Unlike most artists who create work based on life forms, Sylvia celebrates death and decay as an integral part of the cycle of life. Her pieces exude a visceral realness that is gripping and moving. It engages the view in a dialogue instead of straightforward representation." He finds her work not only challenging but mysterious as well. "Her work appears so natural that it could easily be mistaken for an actual life form. That she creates her work from a medium as challenging as glass makes it all the more compelling"

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### Finding Inspiration in Venice

Tabasso holds a degree in biology from the University of Milan, Italy, although she never worked in the field. She was born in Milan and still lives there. The artist finds, however, that art and artists not typical to the Milanese culture and traditions most inspire and inform her work, such as the glassworkers of Venice and the exquisite work of Bohemian masters Rudolf and Leopold Blaschka.

There are no glass schools in Milan, Tabasso lamented, so she started her journey in glass far from her childhood home. She began to experiment after a trip to buy beads in Venice, where she viewed the fantastic work she found there. “I started working with glass in 2001. I could not go to Venice to study because of the work I was doing for my family in the antique business.”

In the beginning of her glass practice, it was a matter of trial and error as she first made floral sculptural beads for jewelry designs before jumping fully into sculpture. “I started as a hobby with the jewelry and little glass beads from Venice, but during a trip to Murano, I bought some blown glass beads and felt that I wanted to make my own pieces. I set up a workshop in my family’s antique shop and worked there for two years before leaving to work on glass full time.”

With no formal glass training and no opportunity to study with the masters, Tabasso began melting glass, figuring it out as she went along. Then her twin girls were born, and now nine years later, much of her life is consumed with raising her children. However, she doesn’t let that stop her, and her work continues to thrive.

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### **Illustrating How Nature Prevails**

Sylvia combines the concrete with the glass flowers to illustrate that despite everything, nature will prevail. This concept is important to her. She likes the juxtaposition of thriving in an impossible place. Often, her work harkens back to a time when the hyperrealism of still lifes gave shape to extreme realism. In 2018, Tabasso's work was featured at *Homo Faber*, an exhibit on the island of San Giorgio in the lagoon near Venice. This major cultural exhibition, organized by the Michelangelo Foundation, ran from September 14–10, 2018, and was dedicated to the very best in European craftsmanship.

Jean Blanchaert, curator for the "Best of Europe" section of *Homo Faber* says of Tabasso's work: "Lilla Tabasso descends on her mother's side from the Piva family, great antique dealers in Italy. Throughout her life, she breathed in the beauty, quality, and authenticity in the furniture, in the paintings, and in the objects displayed by her grandfather, her uncles, and her mother in their galleries in Milano. At university, though, she chose to study biology, and later she started with her extraordinary lampwork technique."

Blanchaert continued: "As the curator of the section 'Best of Europe' at *Homo Faber*, the best contemporary creations of craftspeople and artists were exhibited. One of the first names that came to my mind was Lilla Tabasso. I think that the result of her work is a mixture between her roots, her studies, and her talent."

## Pleasant Surprises

Famous Italian artist Lucia Santini says of Tobasso's art: "The first time I saw the works of Lilla Tabasso for an exhibition at the Murano Museum of Glass, I think I was struck, literally. With my eyes I looked for who could be the maker of such a great wonder. There was a woman in front of the counter. It was her—a woman, finally! And not Venetian, but Milanese. That was my second surprise.

"It was so strange, and I had—I don't know why—a subtle satisfaction, that it was someone from outside. I believe that Lilla gives emotions that really touch the viewer. Lilla reminded me of the wreaths of Botticelli's *Primavera*, I believe she made me slip back to the first time I saw the works of Blascka."

Lilla Tabasso is represented by Gallery Caterina Tonon Arte Contemporanea in Venice, Italy. You can find her work by visiting [www.caterinatognon.com](http://www.caterinatognon.com). GA

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*Sara Sally LaGrand, award-winning artist and author, has had the great fortune to study glassmaking with many gifted teachers, both in America and Italy. She holds a BA in Glass Formation from Park University, Parkville, Missouri. Honors include awards from Art Westport, State of the Arts, The Bead Museum of Washington, D.C., Fine Line Gallery, Images Art Gallery, and the Kansas City Artists Coalition.*

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