



# LIGHTING THE PAST

MARIANNE WEIL

**April 19 - May 16, 2018**

Opening reception  
Thursday, April 19; 5-7pm

Cover:

*Garland*, 2017, Cast bronze and cast glass; 13 x 11 x 7 inches

Back Cover:

*Garland, (detail)* 2017, Cast bronze and cast glass; 13 x 11 x 7 inches

The Art Gallery of the College of Staten Island  
The City University of New York

**A Lesson from Alloys**

**An Untimely Meditation on the Art of Marianne Weil**

**By Charles A. Riley II, PhD**

*And this huge Castle, standing here sublime,  
I love to see the look with which it braves,  
Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,  
The lightning, the fierce wind, the trampling waves.*

—William Wordsworth, “Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm,  
Painted by Sir George Beaumont”

How marvelously (but troublingly) rare these days to be able to say that each time we encounter the work of an artist we are deeply and unforgettably moved. Well before I realized that Marianne Weil, the extraordinary talent celebrated in this exhibition, was actually a neighbor of mine on the North Fork of Long Island, I knew her work from gallery and museum shows where, even amid the cacophony of a group, it sang its plaintive melody in a passionate minor key. It may be old-fashioned to assert that a hierarchy remains in aesthetics that elevates tragedy to the upper echelons while comedy, melodrama, and polemic take their places on lower rungs, but I give priority to seriousness. This may also be Ruskinian projection on my part, but the tragic effects of Weil’s rugged bronze and glass sculpture (*Panoply* with its nodding grimace would be the epitome) engage the heart and mind with a grip that rivals such masters of the past as Rodin, Noguchi, and Michelangelo—all of them poets of the unfinished who mined the varied textures of bronze and stone for all they were worth. The close kinship between Weil and tragic art is based on the classical topoi that she herself invokes in her resonant titles (*Argos Revisited*, what an invitation!) and eloquent writings. For example, she directs our gaze to the past.

*From the vestiges of Paleolithic cultures to contemporary archaeological detritu—remains "seen" as relic and ruin, cultivate relentless sources that inform my work. The impulse for daily invention and discovery forges a powerful continuum—one that generates a continuing narrative for me—unearthing memories and untapped recollections.*

The archaeological suggestiveness of the sculpture brought to mind one of the most moving of all William Wordsworth's poems, a double-barreled response to the death of his brother at sea through a meditation on a ruin (the "rugged pile" of Peele Castle) as mediated by a painting by Sir George Beaumont. Tracking the painting that is the poem's source, I even saw a similarity in profile between the two remaining sides of the battered tower and Weil's divided *Pillars of Fire*, as well as *Argos Revisited* (although the artist herself did not make the allusion). Wordsworth's high-toned poem uses a work of art depicting a ruin by a tempestuous sea to reflect on mortality: "A power is gone, which nothing can restore; A deep distress hath humanized my soul." As with many Romantic poets, the ruin was an ancient fragment that invoked the sublime, much as the storm-blasted tree in the foreground of many Hudson River School paintings will accomplish the same thing. As a poem that is based as much on a painting as it is on a "real" experience of the sea, it poses a massive problem: Can art wield the kind of power, something oceanic for example, that qualifies as tragic? That invocation of the sublime is a key reason I so admire Weil's sculpture, which similarly delves the aesthetic of the ruin and its seemingly ancient origins to unleash a noble language appropriate to a great number of great ideas. As has often been pointed out in relation to her work by other writers, the most important connotation of her sculpture is the timelessness of a real work of art (by emphatic contrast with the vapid ephemerality of too much art in our time). *That* is power. Take the shrouded figure of *Switchback* as an example, and consider the many ways in which its hooded gestures, like a Martha Graham solo, tap the Neo-classical roots of so many Modernist forays out of the shallows and into the tidal drop-offs of Rodin or his inspiration, Baudelaire. As with the major work *Garland*, the syncopations of the tiles and the broken intervals of the forms are visually as well as emotionally demanding.

The other splendid achievement is the extraordinary alliance of glass and bronze. This is a major, highly original and very nearly impossible combination of materials. The only precedent I can think of involves a memory of visiting Judy Pfaff's studio well over a decade ago and talking about her time at Dale Chihuly's Pilchuck atelier and how the glass-blowers there had changed her approach to bronze sculpture. Weil offers a brief account of how the bronze and glass components of her dual works came about:

*Having worked in bronze for many years, one of the hardest materials an artist may employ, I recently embraced one of the most delicate, glass. Thanks to a fortuitous miscalculation in my studio several years ago, I combined molten glass with a previously cast bronze sculpture. The surprising, yet satisfying results encouraged a subsequent new path for my work, one that now incorporates two ancient techniques—lost-wax and sand-cast processes—in combination with a range of non-ferrous metal.*

The apotheosis of that "miscalculation" is the molten flood of gorgeous blue glass that overflows the lip of the vessel in *Twilight*, the sculpture in which the glass escapes the clutches of the bronze like an Ovidian nymph wriggling from the god's embrace. It is such a fluvial, liquid work that it achieves what so much great Modernist sculpture strives for, an impression of kinesis that is completely at odds with our knowledge that the work is static.

Because she is such a renowned teacher, and also because the work has such gravitas, I found myself paying close attention to the artist's writings. Weil compares her process, and in particular to the incongruity of two such disparate materials conjoining, to the scoring of a symphonic work. She is superbly unafraid of a challenge:

*The complexity of my work is like orchestrating a symphony—where many parts compose the whole—casting first bronze using the lost wax process then sand-cast glass. Captured together, copper, glass, and bronze reveal their unique strengths and weaknesses. The improbable marriage and transformation of disparate materials provides an opportunity for reflection on their collective psychological and physical properties.*

This draws on art history not just technically but philosophically. An early step in the history of bronze casting in its primeval stages was the transition from the solid to the hollow core, opening the object to function as a vessel and making a lighter-weight sculpture more portable. I was fascinated by the open spaces in Weil's sculpture, like the gaps of white wall between the panels in a Rauschenberg combine or, closer to home, the cut that so often admits the background through the two parts of a Henry Moore reclining figure. The test case would be *Pillars of Fire*, but I was also inspired by the air in *Quartet*, which reached me in musical terms, more Haydn than Beethoven for its legerdemain, the rests that permit the four voices (violins, viola, and cello) to enter with integrity and then blend erotically. The wire mesh, a glimpse into the substructure that lies halfway between solid bronze or glass and the air of the gap, is a matrix for the interpretive view as well as for the maker. It is no mean feat to put a Haydn string quartet score on a pedestal. The literary cue is an aphorism from William Blake: "Without contraries there is no progression." This kind of bond requires almost reactor-level expenditures of focused energy.

Weil, a recognized master of the sculptural media, has a distinguished history of exhibitions as well as teaching (she is now a professor of sculpture and the studio art coordinator at CUNY/ College of Staten Island). The long list of honors, residencies, and exhibitions presents an enviable international itinerary, from a MacDowell fellowship to stops in Russia, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Switzerland, Scotland, and Ireland. Her public commissions include important projects in Water Mill and Greenport on the East End of Long Island. In addition to perusing the impressive list of solo shows at some of the galleries where I had the good fortune to see her work, including the Kouros Gallery and now Ille Arts in Amagansett, I found it particularly interesting to see that after she left SVA (having taken a degree in sculpture at Goddard College in Vermont) she became an apprentice to both

foundry artisans and stone carvers in the storied Pietrasanta, the sculptor's mecca in Tuscany. That bond with the archaic heyday of the medium adds historical, even geographical, resonance to the determined anachronism of a sculptor forging her classicist path in a Postmodern art world. As she wisely writes:

*Through my investigation of two opposing and visceral substances, I build on past traditions to experiment with techniques that provoke and challenge unpredictable outcomes. My practice is motivated by the opposing strength and fragility of each material—revealed both concretely and in its own metaphorical transformation.*

Just as the exhibition was about to open, a stunning series of monotypes was made that is the absolutely pitch-perfect, two-dimensional complement to the sculpture. While one of them reminded me of the beloved paintings of Fritz Bultman, a protégé of Hans Hofmann's, they were also populated by "figures" that would have made the perfect plates for a livre d'artiste with William Butler Yeats's poetry, those "sages standing in God's holy fire" that the poet pulled from the Byzantine mosaics. As does Yeats, Weil finds a Modern means of sanctifying permanence, thrashing back at decay and time. These are prints that transform literally as well as metaphorically what has already been a metamorphosis. The monotypes take the formal vocabulary of the works from ruins to runes, capacious essays in the heroic mode of their three-dimensional counterparts. I suppose it is the lurid red field upon which these leaping gestures are made, but they suggest to me the fire itself in which the bronze and glass had wed, too hot almost for the paper on which they are printed.

**Author Bio:**

**Charles A. Riley II, PhD** is the director of the Nassau County Museum of Art and is also a curator, author, journalist and educator. In addition to exhibitions at the Nassau County Museum (*The Jazz Age, Picasso, Surrealism*) he is the curator of Western art at the Chimei Museum in Taiwan and has curated exhibitions in Berlin, Amsterdam, Manhattan, and the East End of Long Island. He is the author of 32 books on art, including the recently published *Rodin and His Circle, Free as Gods: How the Jazz Age Reinvented Modernism*, and *The Jazz Age in France, Color Codes, Art at Lincoln Center*, and monographs on Ben Schonzeit, Arthur Carter, and Fritz Bultman. He is a journalist whose work has appeared in *Fortune, Art & Auction, Art & Antiques*, and *Hamptonsarthub*. He has taught at The City University of New York and Clarkson University.

**Artist Bio:**

**Artist Marianne Weil**, Associate Professor of Sculpture at The City University of New York, College of Staten Island, received her BA (sculpture) from Goddard College, VT and MFA (Sculpture) from the School of Visual Arts, NYC. She continued her studio training with apprenticeships to foundry artisans and stone carvers in Pietrasanta, Italy. While on recent sabbatical, Weil collaborated with the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, Greece, to pursue field research for several studio projects (fall 2016) and was guest artist at the Emily Harvey Foundation, Venice, Italy to develop new glass work in Murano (spring 2017). Her latest exhibitions include: ILLE Arts, Amagansett, NY (2017); the Ormond Beach Art Museum, FL (2017); Artist Choose Artists, Parrish Museum, Southampton, NY (2016); *LI Biennial*, Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, NY (2016).

Awards, grants, and residencies include several MacDowell Colony Fellowships, an Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Grant, Hospitalfield Trust Award, Tyrone Guthrie Centre Fellowship, Fundação Valparaíso Grant, Casa de Mateus Foundation and a New York State Council for the Arts, *Community* Connection Grant for a public art installation for the Village of Greenport, NY. A bronze commission for the Village of Water Mill, NY, in collaboration with the Order of the Sisters of St. Dominic, is installed on the Water Mill Village Green, NY. Weil has received five PSC-CUNY research awards for her creative scholarship combining glass and bronze and two travel awards from the CUNY Academy for the Humanities and Sciences.

Publications featuring Weil's work include *Art in America*, *Art News*, *Women's Art Journal*, *the Huffington Post*, *the Brooklyn Rail*, *Glass Quarterly*, *Sculpture Magazine*, *the NY Times*, *Geo Magazine*, *Sculptural Pursuit Magazine*, and the *International Herald Tribune*. Weil is represented by ILLE Arts, Amagansett, New York; her sculpture and prints are included in public and private collections here and abroad.

The artist gratefully acknowledges the American School of Classical Studies, Athens, Greece; the Emily Harvey Foundation, Venice, Italy; and The City University of New York, College of Staten Island for their generous support to create this new work.



Studio image: Photo credit: Steve Fenn

*Panoply of Bronze*, 2017, Cast bronze and cast glass; 10 x 7 x 6 inches





*Via Grotto*, 2017, Cast green glass and cast bronze; 9 x 6 x 3 inches





*Mare Rosso*, 2017, Cast bronze and cast glass; 6 x 2 x 8 inches

*Portico*, 2017, Cast bronze; 18 x 12 x 8 inches





*Quartet*, 2017, Cast bronze; 18 x 12 x 8 inches

*Twilight*, 2017, Cast bronze and cast glass, 17 x 6 x 4 inches





*Dentro di Te*, 2016, Blown formed glass with assembled copper (on steel stand); 16 x 3 x 9 inches

*Pillars of Fire*, 2017, Cast bronze; 12 x 9 x 6 inches. Collection of Drs. Ann Campbell and Stephanie Seremetis, Princeton, NJ





*Argos Revisited*, 2017, cast bronze with copper mesh; 17 x 12 x 8 inches



*Switchback Pass*, 2017, Cast bronze and cast glass, 11 x 4 x 5 inches





*House of Tiles*, 2017, Cast bronze and cast glass; 14 x 7 x 6 inches

**Acknowledgments:**

I would like to extend my warmest thanks to Marianne Weil for sharing her research and artwork with the CSI community.

My deepest gratitude goes to Charles Riley for contributing he essay published in this catalog.

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Further thanks are due to Interim Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences Gerry Milligan for his support in the Gallery as an important center for cultural life at the College.

Finally, I wish to thank the Office of Design Services of the College of Staten Island/CUNY for the production of the postcard, poster, and brochure.

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Miguel A. Aragón

Curator and Assistant Professor of Printmaking

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