

OFF OF AFRICA — OUR EXECUTIVE EDITOR REPORTS FROM THE ISLAND NATION OF SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

MONOCLE

A BRIEFING ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS, BUSINESS, CULTURE & DESIGN

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BOATS AND COAST SURVEY



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REPORT
Lagoon makers

Yet despite this resilience the gales of the past decade's financial downturn rocked the boat more than ever. In many furnaces the fire fizzled out; over the past 12 years, 7,000 employees became 1,000. "Now that there are fewer people working in the industry it's harder to find real talent," says Antonio Ceschel, Carlo Moretti's general manager. "Not everyone has the chromosome of a maestro."

Murano is not content to become a museum to a lost craft. With experimental designs and ambitious expansion plans, a new generation of artisans and entrepreneurs are rekindling the island's almost millenary tradition.

"If you don't innovate you disappear," says product designer Riccardo Berrone, who is sitting in between a collection of colourful vases and tall UFO-shaped ornaments from the rich archive of 157-year-old company Salviati. Around him in a narrow office on the Fondamenta Radè, in the island's eastern corner, are Venetian friends Federico Bovara and Luca Coppola, London-based designer Chiara Onida and design professor Marco Zito. With them, 33-year-old Berrone has founded Breaking the Mould, a collective blowing new life into Murano's glass-making customs. "We were drawn to this material by its intrinsic qualities," says Zito, who teaches product design at IUAV University in Venice. "Its main fault – fragility – is also its most fascinating quality."

Born out of a university project five years ago, Breaking the Mould initially approached Salviati with a request to realise its innovative projects and experiment with materials that are alien to the island. "We blew glass into industrial-grade textiles, we blew into leather – and burnt so much of it," says Coppola, who also works with Berrone and Bovara as part of graphic-design trio Aut. "We failed so many times but that was the most interesting part of the project." Eventually they settled for a pairing with high-performance ceramics.

Following popular exhibitions in Berlin, London, Venice and Milan, Salviati brought the young designers into the fold. Now their fresh ideas will redefine the historic glass studio's entire catalogue.



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They are working with Salviati's team to draw from the company's archive and find forgotten pieces that are ripe for an update, bringing in consultants from Austria, the UK, Turkey and Italy. "We are carrying out an archaeological dig to unearth examples for the future," says Coppola while 54-year-old glass-blowing maestro Andrea Santuri replicates pieces selected from the archive that will serve as prototypes to be reconfigured by the collective's team. "We are reappropriating Salviati's past to push the material's limits."

Importing foreign know-how has never been Murano's approach – and nor will it be the island's salvation. Luckily, growing up in the island's workshops, some young Muranesi have both familiarity with glass and the crackling spark of new ideas. Thirty-year-old Stefano Bullo completed his first stained-window composition – an elaborate floral design – when he was only 14 and later trained as a painter at Venice's Fine Arts Academy. But window-making pulled him back: in 2014 he took over Vetrate Artistiche



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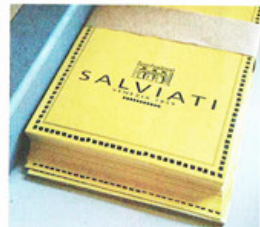
- 01 Vases waiting to be polished
- 02 Handle with care: steel straws reach 80C
- 03 Breaking the Mould collective and (right) Salviati's Monica Crescente
- 04 Salviati vases
- 05 Past collections
- 06 Salviati was founded in 1859
- 07 Designer Chiara Onida with Breaking the Mould's vases



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Murano, the company his mother and father had founded 30 years before.

Today, from his workshop on the narrow backstreet of Ramo San Bernardo in the centre of the island, Bullo patiently fits transparent and rose-tinted mouth-blown glass segments onto lead frames in a precise geometric jigsaw. His work applies a contemporary-art background to his parents' ancient trade. During last year's European Glass Experience exhibition he teamed up with video artist Ester Marano to create an installation projecting film onto glass sheets, which were made by glass-fusion expert Nicola Moretti.

It is with Moretti that Bullo is devising a project that he's aiming to release at next year's Salone del Mobile. "I realised the artistic potential of this medium," he says. "My parents used to make very traditional windows – either octagonal or art nouveau style. I want to move into figurative designs. I'm working on original patterns, I want to use glass dots like pixels."

For the time being Bullo combines this design-led work with restoration projects. His hands move quickly and precisely as he works on some imposing windowpanes for the Palazzo dei Camerlenghi at the very foot of Rialto Bridge. His knowledge, it seems, lives in his hands. "There's a concept here called *rubar con l'ocio*: stealing with the eye," he says. "Nobody teaches you anything."