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FEATURED

## Emma Varga's wild and precious life

By Mike Schoeffel The Biltmore Beacon Aug 15, 2019 Updated 53 min ago



“Sarasota;” Emma Varga’s work captures the fleeting beauty of the natural world within glass panes. “I take photos of things that touch my heart, and they end up in a piece of glass,” she said.

Emma Varga

Emma Varga knew she had to get out. It was the early 1990s, and Varga, a professional glass artist, was living in war-torn Yugoslavia. She hadn’t been able to create for years due to political unrest, and feared for the safety of her two children.

Escaping wasn't easy, though. Sanctions made it difficult for Yugoslavians to travel out of the country. Plus, money was tight. Yet Varga managed to scrounge up enough funds to book a flight to a faraway country — Australia — that she believed could become her future home.

Why Australia?

“Because it was on the other side of the globe,” she said.

It was apparent to Varga, even before the plane landed, that Australia was where she wanted to be. She recalls flying into Sydney under “beautiful blue skies...and an absolutely stunning purple-and-red sunset over the mountains.” The country's most recognizable piece of architecture, however, sealed her decision to become an Australian.

“Before landing, I saw the [Sydney] Opera House. That was the moment I decided that this is the place I wanted to live,” she said. “Once you fall in love that way, you have an open heart. So when I finally moved, I wasn't homesick.”

Varga is still living in Australia, near the beach, 25 years on. She quickly became a working artist again, frequently exhibiting in America. She currently has a show at the Bender Gallery in Asheville titled “Wild and Precious Life.” The solo exhibition, which runs through the end of August, is a celebration of the beauty Varga perceives in the natural world.

“I take photos of things that touch my heart, and they end up in a piece of glass,” she said.

Miles Bender, of Bender Gallery, is honored to have Varga's work on display. He believes her creations are valuable not only for their surface beauty, but also their statements about environmentalism.

“[This exhibit] debuts some exceptional sculptures that are breathtaking in their complexity and approach, leaving one with a simple thought: ‘How can we make sure this will be around for generations?’” he said.

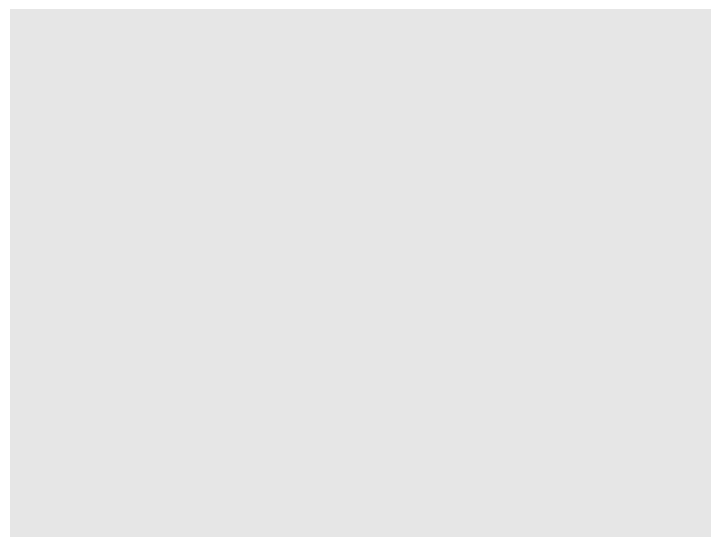
“It is the momentary and fragile existence of nature that Varga wishes us to contemplate. Being made with glass...gives the sculpture an underlying feeling of the fragility of nature itself.”

Varga's love of the natural world began during her childhood in Yugoslavia. Her homeland was relatively peaceful when she was a kid. Growing up in a small town, she enjoyed ample opportunities to explore lush flora. "It was the perfect childhood. I remember the riverbank, the forest. I loved to run around and climb trees," she said.

It was apparent early on that she possessed artistic talent. But glass art wasn't prevalent in Europe at the time. So Varga began with ceramics. Then in 1973, during a school trip to a factory, she came face-to-face with her fate. She remembers opening a door to an adjoining glass factory and feeling a sense of destiny.

"I knew this was what I wanted to do," she said. "The pictures I had in my head, the things I was dreaming about, were all transparent. That's my kind of world."

She eventually reached an agreement with the glass factory that allowed her to use its facilities for sculpture work. This understanding lasted for 15 productive years. During that time she became part of Europe's pioneering class of glass artists, as it were. She, and her work, traveled throughout the world in a touring show known as "New Glass," culminating in a 1979 appearance at the Corning Museum in New York. Varga called that show "one of the most important glass exhibitions in the world."



"Tropical Red"; " Kiln formed glass by Emma Varga

"I was a young artist, and it felt good to have my work accepted," she said.

Forty years after that groundbreaking exhibition, her glass sculptures can be seen right here in Asheville (for the rest of the month, at least). Her show opened at the end of June, to overwhelmingly positive praise.

"Generally, the public is in awe of the amount of work that's involved in the process of creating [her] sculptures," Bender said. "They're moved by her desire to give them something more than just a beautiful object — a narrative that says 'If we are not careful, the things depicted may not be here for our children and grandchildren to enjoy.'"

During those war-torn years in Yugoslavia, Varga began to doubt whether she'd be able to create professionally again. She'd loved the country during her youth, but it was no longer the place she'd grown up. It had become dangerous, constraining and antithetical to artistic pursuits.

Moving to Australia completely changed her future. She calls the relocation "the best decision of my life." It took a few months to adjust to the freedom of her new country, considering what she'd been through in Yugoslavia.

"I had a lot of ideas, but there was a sadness, because of the confusion with the war," she said. Her listlessness didn't last long after arriving in Sydney, though. The unceasing beauty of the sun-drenched, beach-laden continent ensured that.

"You can't be confused too long with the beach and the sunset," Varga said. "Very quickly, I came into a creative energy. When you go through a lot of trouble, you're shaken. That pain gets digested, and when I connected with the visuals around me [in Australia], I just exploded with art. I made an enormous amount of work."

That burst of creativity has carried through the present. And now folks in Western North Carolina have an opportunity to view Varga's work, which has been shown all over the globe — from Japan to Serbia to Germany and countless places in between.

Months ago, Varga was attempting to pin down a name for her Bender Gallery exhibition. She toyed with "Into the Green" and "Blue World." Then she came across a poem, titled "The Summer Day," by Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet Mary Oliver.

Varga, admittedly, doesn't read much poetry. But this particular piece encapsulated her own artistic vision. "[Oliver] was connected with nature in a way that spoke to me," she said.

The last four lines of the poem go like this:

*Tell me, what else should I have done?*

*Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?*

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do*

*With your one wild and precious life?*

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thebiltmorebeacon@gmail.com