

FREDRIKSON STALLARD



Adamson, Dr. Glenn

‘The Heart of Matter’, *Glaciarium*. September 2016

Where do crystals come from? In the primordial mythic imagination, they are associated with divine creation. Such legends were based on wonder and reverence, undimmed by our very modern anxieties about economic value. In India, for example, crystals were thought to have originated when bolts of lightning struck the ground, while the Greeks and Romans believed they were the fallen tears of the Gods. Other ancient myths held that the world sat atop a great sapphire, which accounted for the blue of the sky. The most beautiful story I know is that told by the Inuit: one day, the Northern Lights fell from the heavens and were trapped in the earth. They were freed by a warrior wielding a spear, but he failed to break all the light loose. That which remained is still down here with us, in the form of iridescent crystalline matter.

Patrik Fredrikson and Ian Stallard are the most sophisticated of designers, but their work has something of the energy of these ancient tales, and the pure, primordial amazement that lays behind them. Their curiosity has in the past led them to experiment with many different materials: shining, crumpled metal; intensely hued raw pigment; freshly cut timber. As they have involved themselves in these substances, and worked them in increasingly technically challenging processes such as digitally-modeled and carved acrylic, they have retained nonetheless retained their instinct for essentialism. Even in the most elaborate of their projects they are led by a seemingly unerring sense of rightness, which has little to do with the prevailing winds of fashion.

In approaching their new collaboration with Swarovski, Fredrikson Stallard were always going to go right to the heart of the matter. This is not the first occasion in which they have worked with the company; in the past they have created several lighting designs and installations out of Swarovski crystals, including an immersive space evocative of a mountain forest, and a huge disk that, when lit, takes on the appearance of a full moon brought to earth. For their newest collaboration they were offered an unprecedented opportunity: to develop component crystals for the company, from scratch. They would have the opportunity to shape the material at its source; it is as if they have been invited to shape diamonds that still lay in the earth’s crust.

One could almost have predicted the way that Fredrikson Stallard responded. They delved right to the foundations of Swarovski. First they learned everything they could about the company’s bespoke crystals, both their making and their history. The crystals are a classic example of proprietary technology, a closely guarded secret. They go back a long ways – over 120 years, when the Austrian jeweler Daniel Swarovski patented a machine of unprecedented accuracy to cut lead glass into discrete crystals. The process used by the company today, though of course much more sophisticated, is descended directly from his work.

FREDRIKSON STALLARD

The first step in making a batch of Swarovski crystals involves melting the raw ingredients in a kiln. Fredrikson Stallard describe the space: “the whole oven becomes lined with a sea of solidified crystals, which the workers have to remove from the walls by hand. The bits they chisel out are just rocks, but the surfaces are really beautiful, because the crystal is behaving in the way it wants to behave.” In one sense, that was as much as they needed to know. The Glaciarium components that they developed were based on this experience of seeing the very beginning phase of Swarovski’s complex production techniques.

Of course, there is much more to it than that. The forms that Fredrikson Stallard conceived are not just random chips and chunks, but highly considered and digitally-designed forms. Some resemble prisms, while others look like primordial versions of fancy gem cuts. All of the components, however, share a common vocabulary. They evoke the natural qualities of the crystal as a material, the way that it splinters into shards, and the ripples that articulate its surface. The language that Fredrikson Stallard developed does still refer to the results of random hammering, the smashed up bits of the kiln room, but it has been optimized and controlled through the use of 3D modeling software. Each component crystal sits at an ideal point of hybridity between the inchoate forms of the raw material, and the classic cut crystals that one might find in a traditional chandelier.

Like many effective designs, and despite the complexity of the making, the Glaciarium crystals feel inevitable, almost as if they had occurred naturally and are now being glimpsed for the first time. In the prismatic forms particularly, one can see a distant echo of the moment when Isaac Newton first realized that glass could be used to break up the visual spectrum for analysis. This property of refraction is a particularly important aspect of the project, for while there is an intentional roughness to the Glaciarium crystals, they are also devised to catch and scatter light to spectacular effect. Each of the twenty-odd crystals is a wildly asymmetrical, creative variation on traditional gem cutting.

Maximizing brilliance was important to the designers, not only because of its obvious aesthetic interest, but also because they wanted to suggest the raw visual power instilled in the material. “Raw,” in fact, is an important word in describing the Glaciarium project and Fredrikson Stallard’s work in general. Their work sits right at the borderline between something made and something found; it is the former masquerading as the latter. They are special in their rendition of the idea, but not alone; rawness has been an important factor in recent design. Many of Fredrikson Stallard’s leading contemporaries have also undertaken investigations into the fundamental materiality of design objects.

If one were to pinpoint a historical point of origin for this tendency, a good choice would be the stone furniture of Scott Burton, first made in the late 1960s. In these witty deflections of Minimalism, simple chairs are fashioned by making two perfectly planar cuts into a boulder. The resulting exposed angle is (just) comfortable enough to sit in, and also creates a simple but effective contrast between the stone’s natural, rough exterior and its hard-polished interior. That was almost fifty years ago, and what then seemed like a radically reductive gesture has proven to be generative. Fredrikson Stallard’s own foray into stone cutting is immeasurably more refined than Burton’s, but there is nonetheless a family resemblance. Like the rock chairs, the Glaciarium crystals are the result of decisive intervention, one that helps rigid materiality sing its unique melody. Like Burton, Fredrikson Stallard do not transform or rearrange matter into something unrecognizable, but reveal its inherent character.

This materialist essentialism is updated and nuanced by an equal degree of intelligence concerning the digital, which has of course been the biggest story in 21st century design. Though they are clearly highly attuned to physicality, Fredrikson Stallard never indulge in primitivism, or turn their backs on new technical possibilities. This makes them somewhat unusual among their fellow “raw designers,” most of whom are interested in tooling down, finding new low-tech ways to make objects. While many of these other figures are also working as experimentalists, similarly pushing past the idea of materiality as something to be shaped and instead embracing it as a primary medium of creativity, Fredrikson Stallard are unique in their ability to bring to rawness a quality of classical sophistication.

FREDRIKSON STALLARD

The Glaciarium components are indeed compelling objects in their own right, but of course the whole point is to use them. They are the building blocks for further design, newly invented words ready for use in poems yet unwritten. One of the exciting aspects of the project will be to see what other artists and designers will make of them. Already Fredrikson Stallard have shown something of the possibilities in making their own Glaciarium chandeliers, five in all. Rather than making fixtures that are as baroque as the crystals themselves, Fredrikson Stallard realized that the eccentric forms of their components would best be set off in a rigorously geometrical matrix: two of the chandeliers are strictly linear, the other two perfectly circular. This sense of contrast is heightened by the use of industrial steel to form the housing for the lights. The mounting is designed so that, as in a traditional chandelier, the crystal components can face different ways, and also shiver and shimmer with a passing breeze or movement, bringing life to the play of refraction. In the case of Avalon, arguably the most glamorous of the collection, the stone seem almost to float in space, as the chromed struts of the fixture disappear in the dazzling light.

The Glaciarium collection attests to another, even more subtle skill that Fredrikson Stallard brought to the project: their ability to anticipate a company's needs in a practical and strategic, as well as an aesthetic, sense. Not only has the project resulted in a new "quarry" of components for Swarovski's future use, but as the chandelier design show, it is also extremely flexible. Avalon and its sibling Paradisium are showstopper centerpieces, most suitable for grand rooms, while Superline and Voltaire could be used as accent pieces or to light an irregular modern space. Helios, whose title refers to the sun, is a monumental ring of light. Most important of all for Swarovski is the conceit of the whole undertaking: that the company's deep historic roots and fundamental techniques contain the potential for design that chimes perfectly with contemporary sensibilities.

This essay began with origin stories, the sense that crystals represent a power beyond our reckoning. Wild speculation is one way to channel that energy. Another is to find new aesthetic uses for these precious minerals. Crystals, in the modern imagination, seems to oscillate between the two poles – their sheer gorgeousness is both forbidding and intensely desirable. The thing about good stories is that they keep getting told in new ways, and thereby reframing this emotional complexity. So it is with Glaciarium. In approaching this work for Swarovski, Fredrikson Stallard have found a way to retell the company's story afresh: to literally reframe the materiality of its traditions, and to convey a sense of ancientness, all the while speaking clearly to our own technologically advanced and visually sophisticated age.