

Glass Artivism: Protest, Upcycling, and the Art of Cutting through the Injustices of Gender-based Violence

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Abstract

Despite high levels of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa, existing interventions often struggle due to social stigma, lack of sustained funding, and insufficient community-level programmes to shift entrenched social norms. This article explores how glass artivism can serve as a dual tool for public awareness and environmental sustainability. By focusing on upcycled glass art, this article employs an ecofeminist framework to analyse how the intersections of gender and environment can discursively challenge patriarchal dynamics and make silenced issues visible. Transforming waste through upcycling into artworks encourages transformative, critical thought about waste in relation to the thematic content of the art. Three case studies are presented: Sarah Begg's *From Waste to Worship* (2024), Caitlin Greenberg's *Echoes of Silence* (2023), and Abeer Al-Najjar's *Diaphanous* (2021; 2022). The findings demonstrate that these works leverage the mutable and symbolic qualities of glass to materialise suppressed truths and confront injustice.

Keywords: Artivism, community cohesion, ecofeminism, GBV, glass art, South Africa

Looking through the Window

The central problem addressed in this article is the pervasive nature of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa, necessitating innovative, sustained approaches beyond mere awareness campaigns (Mkwanzani & Nathane-Taulela 2024: 1, 8). GBV encompasses diverse forms of violence – sexual, physical, psychological, and economic, impacting men and women (including cis, trans, and non-binary), and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Underreporting remains a crucial challenge due to stigma, fear, and systemic barriers.

Despite the high levels of GBV, many people touched by violence are silenced as traditional interventions lack concrete action despite a plethora of legislation and policies (Mkwanzani & Nathane-Taulela 2024: 5). Power imbalances, precarious employment conditions, and deeply ingrained sexist cultural norms contribute to the normalisation and silencing of GBV. Key themes in GBV are the intimidatory range of GBV-related acts (on a continuum from everyday sexism to criminal acts) (Kelly 1987) and the fear of retaliation that often prevents victims from speaking out (Buscatto *et al.* 2025: 2, 3).

Glass is particularly relevant because of its unique properties: it can take on any colour (representing diverse cultures), it is fragile (emphasising the vulnerability of victims), it can be dangerous (suggesting the perpetrator), and it can exist as both a solid and a fluid (suggesting an openness to solutions). Furthermore, upcycling glass creates a direct link between the disposability of materials in a capitalist waste culture and the systemic devaluation of women's lives, an alignment central to ecofeminist theory.

Art, by its nature, transforms complex social issues into personal and physical experiences, inspiring reflection and potential action by giving voice to data (Stetz 2023: 192). Govender and Moodley (2025: 22) define activism as 'protesting artistically or arts used as a form of protest'. Glass activism is uniquely positioned for this intersectional discussion because of the material's specific properties: it can take on any colour (representing diverse cultures), it is fragile (emphasising the vulnerability of victims), it can be dangerous (suggesting the perpetrator), and it can exist as both a solid and a fluid (suggesting an openness to solutions). Employing a case study methodology appropriate for developing a deep understanding of complex issues, this article aims to address two key research questions through a critical and interpretive ecofeminist analysis: How does upcycled glass art function as a tool for protest or education, and what critical contributions does it make to discourse surrounding GBV and ecofeminism? and, What kind of discursive or social

consciousness outcomes are evident in glass artivism practice?

Glass artivism is a convergence of art, activism, and sustainability that offers a lens through which to address pressing social and environmental issues. This practice leverages the unique material properties of glass to echo eco-social messages and inspire political action. In a context like South Africa, where GBV persists at high levels, existing interventions against this social injustice (Enaifoghe, Dlelana, Durokifa & Dlamini 2021: 125) often struggle against social stigma, lack of sustained funding, and insufficient community-level programmes to shift entrenched social norms (Mkwanzani & Nathane-Taulela 2024: 1, 8). This article focuses on how glass artivism can serve as a vital tool for public awareness, encourage recycling, promote community cohesion, and stimulate critical thought about GBV, particularly through the creative process of upcycling waste into meaningful artwork.

Art made from recycled materials can be put to many uses. It can mitigate waste accumulation, promote environmental sustainability, and drive socio-cultural change (Asamoah, Adom, Kquofi & Nyadu-Addo 2022: 50). Recycled art enhances environmental aesthetics and encourages innovative repurposing of waste (Fayoumi 2024: 140; Asamoah *et al.* 2022: 31).

Artists redefine waste as an expressive and symbolic material, generating economic opportunities by involving local waste pickers and recycling cooperatives (Asamoah *et al.* 2022: 32). The Waste Not Want Not project in Johannesburg, led by Tamzyn Botha, created a library of waste items sourced from self-organised reclaimers and offered the waste items for use by invited residency artists and a community youth art programme, while successfully provoking library visitors to see waste as a creative resource (Botha & Iqani 2024: 2).

Artists working with waste explore issues of sustainability and ethics when creating artworks, embracing the ‘plasticity and uncertainty’ of materials like recycled glass (Rothwell & Kelly 2023: 11). The global glass art community is increasingly engaging with climate action, responsible consumption, and sustainability, while asking overlooked pertinent questions such as how to reconcile the high energy consumption of glass furnaces with a commitment to environmental sustainability (Rothwell & Kelly 2023: 4). This global engagement with ethical responsibilities highlights that material sustainability is an important consideration for contemporary art glass practice (Rothwell & Kelly 2023: 13). Overall, upcycled glass, used by visual artists, is a sustainable material choice that reduces waste and conserves natural resources, offering a tangible way to engage with environmental issues in this

era in which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment (Fayoumi 2024: 146).

Gathering Shards for Upcycling

A literature review indicates that GBV is a global issue and is addressed by politicising art-based responses. South Africa has a rich history of politicised protest art, known as struggle and resistance art, which served as an instrument of change against the apartheid regime (Pauwels 2022: 124). Protest art is a component of activism, connects diverse disciplines, and conveys ideas about global issues such as equity. Rather than learning oriented towards specific disciplines, a case can be made for a globally oriented and issue-based learning approach to achieve an equitable and fair society (Stein & Murungi 2025). Through an issue-based learning approach, art can build global competency in communicating ideas and taking action (Stein & Murungi 2025; Asamoah *et al.* 2022).

In *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1992) coined the term kyriarchy (a social system of intersecting and interlocking hierarchies of domination, oppression, and submission), which she derived from the Greek words *kyrios* (lord or master) and *archein* (to rule or dominate) while seeking to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of its many intersecting structures of domination (Ferguson 2014: para. 9). Using the kyriarchy is ‘prismatic’, drawing in systems like the patriarchy and shifting the focus from single-axis-based systems.

Using glass art as a protest tool aligns with broader initiatives such as Australian artist Sam Bowker’s 2021 *Metaphors in Broken Glass* exhibition in Lebanon, which used ‘blast glass’ salvaged from Beirut homes to reflect on trauma and accountability (Bowker 2021: 86):

Broken glass is fragile, fast, loud, and dangerous, but it can be salvaged, recycled, and repurposed. It offers an unconventional lens to reflect on trauma, resilience, recovery, and accountability. [...] Visitors enter a room that contains a low plinth, covered in broken window glass from the streets of Beirut, collected by Ibrahim Ammar from the Live, Love, Recycle initiative. This not-for-profit agency salvaged the ‘blast glass’ from within people’s homes to create vessels – known as *ibriq* – for drinking water, olive oil, and wine, each hand blown.

The Bowker exhibition featured the mutable potential of any glass, even the ‘blast glass’ from the war-torn streets of Beirut. From this glass broken by war, ‘symbolic vessels [were made] which had been re-formed in Beirut but broken again in transit’, offering a metaphor for rebuilding after disaster and the ongoing cycle of trauma and renewal (Bowker 2021: 86). The *Metaphors in Broken Glass* project exemplifies how contemporary upcycled glass art can be used for social critique beyond merely beautiful objects.

Highlighting the material’s symbolic potential, Irish artist Sophie Longwill (2023) notes, glass is a paradigm for womanhood, which is constantly prismatic and reflecting reflections. Longwill’s *Let’s Hook Up* series directly confronts abortion, sexual inequality, and sexual assault through life-size, paper-thin glass lingerie sculptures, providing a platform for creative expression and drawing on her personal experiences with GBV in Ireland (Longwill 2023). She works with glass because glass enhances underlying artistic concepts by being ‘fragile yet dangerous, solid yet fluid, transparent yet opaque’ (Longwill 2023):

[Glass], with all its conflicting narratives and expectations, could be viewed as a paradigm for womanhood. It has an emotive quality that accentuates the powerful underlying messages presented in its artistic use.

The active outcome of Longwill’s (2023) glass lingerie sculptural work creates a safe space for dialogue around sexual inequality and GBV, facilitates personal catharsis and collective connection among women, and leads to a visible unburdening of shared experiences:

As [Longwill] opened up about her personal experiences, the women around [her], including family, friends, and complete strangers, came to join with their stories. It was heartbreaking to realise that this too, carrying the burden of these experiences, was a part of everyday life as a woman for so many. However, it was heartening to experience the connections formed, the tears shed, and the weight lifted. These pieces became a way to start the conversation.

Glass’ symbolic potential to stimulate dialogue is also explored in Karen Donnellan and Suzanne Peck’s *Blow Harder* project, which uses the language of the glass hot shop to challenge male-dominated power dynamics and in-

grained misogyny. Donnellan and Peck's *Blow Harder: Language Gender and Sexuality in the Glass Blowing Studio* research project grew from a 2017 lecture of the same name. The project is an example of self-reflexivity of glass artists. Irish artist Donnellan and American artist Peck tackle deep-seated issues within the glass art community, using the language and culture of the glass hot shop as their medium for critique (Rothwell & Kelly 2023: 6). The artefact of their project is the *Sex Positive Lexicon Poster* that challenges the male-dominated power dynamics and ingrained misogyny prevalent in glass hot shops by proposing alternative, inclusive 'neutral', 'feminist', and 'high-brow' alternative terminologies to traditional glassblowing jargon (Rothwell & Kelly 2023: 6). The artists use humour as political activism, demonstrating that challenging 'indoctrinated misogyny is no soft act' (Rothwell & Kelly 2023: 6).

By transforming and reshaping the spoken word within the glass community, Donnellan and Peck highlight the 'mutable potential' of language to expose and then rebuild a more equitable space, demonstrating that glass can also be a vehicle for profound social commentary. The poster acquisition by the Corning Museum of Glass and its viral presence on TikTok underscore its significant impact and reach within and beyond the glass art world (Rothwell & Kelly 2023: 17).

The 2022 Power of Glass Conference in Scotland drew artists worldwide who use glass to explore social and political narratives to actively challenge existing biases and advocate for inclusive environments, including diversity, identity, representation, and gender equality (Rothwell & Kelly 2023: 4). The conference was held to celebrate the Year of Glass and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Rothwell & Kelly 2023: 5). The agenda provides pathways to action through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015. The goals are a global call to action to end violence against women and protect the planet (among other goals) (UN 2015).

A recent example of protest against a lack of intersectionality and erasure occurred during the #RhodesMustFall protests. In 2016, at the University of Cape Town, the transgender activist group TransCollective staged a protest against the lack of inclusion of trans issues in the *Echoing Voices From Within* exhibition that explored racism, patriarchy, and whiteness (Pauwels 2022: 123). The protest highlighted that single-issue protests are not intersectional, and the dismissal of trans concerns diminishes the trans people's humanity. The protest resulted in the closure of the exhibition.

During the protest, placards were placed on top of artworks as a meta-narrative with statements such as:

‘We are saying down with faux inclusivity – please make it clear that we are not welcome here’, ‘RMF [#RhodesMustFall] will never tokenise our presence as if they ever treasured us as part of the movement’, ‘We will no longer tolerate the complicity of black cis womxn in our erasure’, and ‘The transwomen who build RMF are not part of this exhibition’ (Pauwels 2022: 123).

Several performance artists have used glass to confront GBV and systemic oppression, transforming deeply personal experiences into public statements. Yann Marussich’s *Cutting Edge* (2017) uses broken glass to evoke the suffering of human existence (Birinci 2023: 4).

Marussich portrays humanity as a ‘prisoner in a painful world’ by entering a bathtub full of broken glass (Birinci 2023: 4). More directly addressing GBV, Ana Mendieta’s *Glass on Body Imprints* (1972) responded to the rape and murder of a girl (Birinci 2023: 5). Mendieta soaked her own body in animal blood and performed against a glass partition, recreating the victim’s poses in front of an audience. The visceral and confrontational experience made violence against women visible (Birinci 2023: 5). Anna Mlasowsky’s *4 Feet Apart* (2020) demonstrates how glass can symbolise breaking free from oppressive constraints using glass rods attached to dancers’ backs that break as they attempt to interact, freeing them to embrace (Birinci 2023: 5). In *Chorus of One* (2016 - 2018), Mlasowsky uses unbreakable Rhino glass to create a protective cloak (Birinci 2023: 5), using metaphor to make the need for protection against violence visible. These examples highlight how the mutable and symbolic qualities of glass can directly engage with, protest, and transform narratives of GBV and oppression, making silenced issues visible and confrontable.

Art offers opportunities to communicate complex ideas in a medium accessible to a wide audience, helps inform and educate about environmental and social problems, and proposes new ways for sustainability and co-existence. Art transforms complex ideas about issues into something that can resonate with the personal and inspire empathy, motivating physical action. Artistic expressions and personal narratives are tools for exploring social and environmental changes, capable of transforming complex issues on both a personal and physical level. Children who grow up near places of environmental transformation are influenced by ethical and moral discussions that motivate personal change and activate cultural shifts (Craven 2025: 35). Similar influence can occur within a transforming social environment that engages issues of GBV.

Art and arts-based therapeutic methods have proven effective in addressing GBV (Woollett *et al.* 2023: 3). In South Africa, arts-based methods in violence research enable participants to articulate difficult or previously unspoken experiences, providing a ‘safe space’ for personal storytelling, particularly in low-resource settings (Longwill 2023; Woollett *et al.* 2023). The safe and engaging space that art creates for dialogue about challenging topics empowers traumatised women to connect with each other and unburden themselves (Longwill 2023). Regular art therapy supports young people with emotional regulation in contexts of ecological crisis, domestic violence, abuse, and neglect, building resilience and emotional capacity for action (Wardle 2025: 30). Parents and carers are also offered art therapy to support parenting skills and develop an understanding of their children’s needs (Wardle 2025: 30). The materials and images used in art therapy sessions can address and contain complex and multifaceted feelings about GBV (Woollett *et al.* 2023: 4).

Artivism is defined as an organic relationship between art and activism, primarily aiming for social change. Art is uniquely suited to activism:

Art can adopt any particular form and channel a process of transformation, becoming socially relevant and, what is more important, [can open up] the possibility for translating specific responses in a wide array of contexts and situations (Castellano 2020: 438).

Art often has a subversive character, critiquing the perpetrators of GBV and sometimes silencing collaborative, democratic projects that seek to empower stigmatised individuals and communities in art histories (Castellano 2020: 438). Artivism can amplify marginalised voices and challenge injustice, it can transform experiences into political agency and expression, and it can provide tools or instruments for change, ‘particularly for those whose body was or still is a site of stigma and violence’ (Martins & Campos 2023: 234). The use of the body in art is a potent symbol of resistance and struggle, particularly as it is the visible target of GBV.

Mythmaking is considered a crucial creative and theoretical strategy for shaping and defining localised artistic practices, enabling artists and scholars to envision new possibilities for the categories they invent through their work (Sidogi & Greenberg 2024: 37). Storytelling and myth are linked, with myths serving as ‘constructs’ that operate as mediating symbols that enable individuals to perceive and share a common understanding of reality

(Sidogi & Greenberg 2024: 31). Through strategic ‘counter-mythmaking’, glass artivism can suggest a common understanding essential in creating a collective challenge to environmental and social injustices by mythologising the silence surrounding GBV and biodiversity.

Upcycled art plays a crucial role in raising environmental awareness and promoting sustainability (Fayoumi 2024: 138). Both key issues are at the centre of ecofeminism. Artists working with recycled materials prompt viewers to question the sustainability and ecological impact of human activity (Asamoah *et al.* 2022: 34). Artists often express despair about the current state of the environment and make statements about current culture by transforming waste into aesthetically pleasing installations that enhance environmental aesthetics and serve as potent sensitisation tools (Asamoah *et al.* 2022: 34, 45). Art has the capacity to evoke emotions, cultivate empathy, and promote self-reflection about complex environmental changes, offering a universal language that articulates complex multi-sensorial universal messages and making the messages accessible to a wider audience (Asamoah *et al.* 2022: 50).

Despite increasing public discourse and awareness, GBV often remains taboo across many cultures and even at medical facilities. Artists’ voices are silenced if their art addresses topics about which the art industry maintains a taboo. For example, current feminist scholarship and activism against GBV often marginalise the voices and experiences of violence of black trans women, necessitating more nuanced and inclusive constructions of GBV (Buscatto, Karttunen & Provansal 2025: 20; Shabalala & Wessenaar 2023: 60).

A significant concern in the South African glass art community is the persistent dominance of white artists (Sidogi & Greenberg 2024: 30). The white-centric structure of early pioneers of studio glass persists, resulting in a disproportionate number of white artists making glass art, despite efforts to be inclusive (Sidogi & Greenberg 2024: 30). This prevalence of white artists perpetuates the misconception that glass art is a ‘whites-only endeavour’, which hinders glass art development (Sidogi & Greenberg 2024: 36). In order to amplify the voices of more diverse artists, Sidogi and Greenberg (2024: 30) recommend that scholars and artists should challenge and transform the South African and broader African glass art industry by embracing ‘local lexicons and positionalities’. By including diverse voices, the glass art industry can address GBV-related issues in an inclusive, relevant, and collective way.

This article contributes to the threefold gap left for shifting entrenched social norms by existing GBV interventions: social stigma, lack of sustained funding, and insufficient community-level programmes. The article proposes

glass activism as a sustained and sustainable approach to raising public awareness, giving voice to silenced experiences of GBV, and activating social change concerning GBV. This article also highlights the limited research on upcycled glass art's contribution to environmental issues through pollution reduction and community empowerment through waste reclamation in contexts like South Africa.

Refracted Perspectives: Ecofeminism and Glass Art

The theories that guided this research project were ecofeminism and intersectionality. Ecofeminism emerged from the intersections of feminist research and various movements for social justice and environmental health. As a framework, ecofeminism helps understand how artists use their practice to critique existing social arrangements and to envision sustainable futures.

In her foundational work on intersectionality, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex', Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) theorises that experiences of discrimination are compounded at the convergence of intersected issues. Later, in 'Ecofeminism revisited', Greta Gaard (2011: 28) articulates how ecofeminism emerged 'from the intersections of feminist research and the various movements for social justice and environmental health, explorations that uncovered the linked oppressions of gender, ecology, race, species, and nation'. These foundational perspectives are crucial for understanding how artistic practices can challenge deeply entrenched intersected systemic issues. This article draws on these foundations to explore the intersections of violence directed at the environment and at people.

Feminist curatorial strategies are crucial for addressing real-world sexual violence through museums, challenging patriarchal and colonial representations, and moving beyond mere display to actively addressing the perpetration of sexual violence against women (Perry & Krasny 2022: 7). Perry and Krasny (2022: 2) argue that:

A meaningful distinction must be made between historical museums, which may identify sexual violence as a factual historical event and art museums' tendency to treat the content of images of sexual violence as secondary or even irrelevant to their status as artworks.

The ecofeminism framework has the potential to expose such dismissive strategies with its systemic focus. Ecofeminism analyses how gendered expe-

periences intersect with environmental degradation, connecting the degradation of nature with the oppression of women (Iqani & Knoetze 2017). Environmental justice is intrinsically linked to economic justice, and a new economic model is necessary (Panneels 2019: 2). A new economic model suggests strategies of linking individualised, subjective experiences to the broader systems that create those experiences. The goal of ecofeminism is to challenge and transform interconnected systems of oppression – patriarchy, capitalism, and ecological exploitation – by linking the liberation of women with the care and liberation of the environment (Gaard 2011). In this way, the context (eco-social) and its inhabitants (biodiversity) can be acknowledged and heard.

Ecofeminists call for embracing a model that, at its core, reclaims already used resources and protects biodiversity as a treasure, delinking hierarchies of ‘worthiness’ from all forms of life. Used as a framework, ecofeminism helps in understanding how artists use their practice to critique existing social arrangements and envision alternative futures. Younger generations can be developed through artmaking to become change-makers who manifest sustainable alternatives. Children ‘need to use the creative tools at their fingertips with a responsible understanding about how the world works and how they can change it’ (Stein & Murungi 2025) for intergenerational benefit and resource sustainability.

In glass artivism, ecofeminism is particularly relevant when considering women reclaiming domestic materials (like glass) for reuse. Taken a step further, the act of reclaiming becomes upcycling, transforming discarded glass objects into art. Symbolically, the glass object embodies a reclamation, turning materials often associated with consumption, waste, or even the hidden realities of domestic life into symbols of resilience and renewal.

Glass’ ‘mutability’ challenges the utilitarian origins of glass objects and offers a chance ‘for a better understanding of the societies that used them’ (Chinni, Silvestri & Verità 2023: 663). Artists imbue their art with a purpose that can be read for understanding the social context from which the artworks spring. Saarah Begg (2024) describes this process as an ‘alchemy of fire and intention, [where her glass] beads are imbued with a sense of purpose, their once-haram essence transmuted into something inherently halaal-permissible and pure’. Through this alchemy, waste glass undergoes numerous processes that ultimately result in a sacred artwork. Applying the concept of the mutability of everyday objects becoming conduits of cultural meaning through alchemy means conceiving that everyday sexism is many and part of a larger system – a continuum.

In ‘The Continuum of Sexual Violence’, Liz Kelly (1987: 47) crucially conceptualises GBV as a continuum – ranging from everyday sexism to criminal offences like rape. This continuum is not an accumulation of isolated incidents; rather, the incidents form an integrated whole in which they reinforce each other as a pattern embedded in professional and cultural hierarchies (Kelly 1987: 48). Similarly, artworks that address GBV are an accumulation that reveal embedded patterns. Kelly’s (1987) continuum of violence can be symbolically reflected in the endless recyclability of glass.

The ecofeminist framework allows an examination of how glass activism can disrupt these dynamics, give agency to victims, and make these often-silenced issues visible and confrontable (Stetz 2023: 192). Feminism, and by association, ecofeminism, leaves interpretation and critical reflection to the viewer, which is ‘a feminist method to destabilise power hierarchies’ (Minillo & Harman 2025: 1489). By leaving interpretation to the viewer, the democratic and reflective viewer-artwork interaction disrupts dominant, often patriarchal or capitalist, power dynamics that try to fix meaning and control understanding (Doane, McCormick & Sorce 2017: 120).

Analysing Specific Shards

A qualitative case study methodology (Yin 2003) helped develop a deep understanding of glass activism within its real-life context.

The three artists, Saarah Begg, Caitlin Greenberg, and Abeer Al-Najjar, were purposively selected based on three criteria: 1) materiality, specifically the upcycling of waste, 2) thematic alignment with GBV, and 3) cross-contextual perspective, showing glass activism as a universal mechanism that transcends borders.

The artworks were analysed through a critical ecofeminist lens. Using this lens, the physical transformation of glass (the ‘alchemy’ of upcycling) mirrors the social transformation required: relinquish the perceived disposability of women that makes them vulnerable to GBV and reclaim women as valued.

Saarah Begg: Environmental Justice is Social Justice

Saarah Begg is a young artist (b. 1997) of Cape Malay/ Indian descent. Her work *From Waste to Worship* (2024) (Figure 1), was a finalist in the 2024 Sasol New Signatures Art Competition. Her practice centres on an ‘alchemy of fire and intention’, where she transforms ‘humble’ discarded beer bottles (symbols

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of ‘indulgence and excess’) into sacred *tasbeih* (prayer beads). This laborious process involves crushing the bottles and melting the glass into rods to form delicate beads that retain the ‘imprint of its former identity’, effectively reclaiming value from what is often dismissed in a capitalist waste culture.



Figure 1: Saarah Begg, *From Waste to Worship* (2024). 34 cm x 4 cm, frameworked beer bottles (Image: Saarah Begg 2025)

Analytically, Begg’s project embodies an ecofeminist critique of consumerist culture, linking ecological responsibility to spiritual value while challenging the ‘throwaway culture’ inherent in many patriarchal economic systems. Ultimately, *From Waste to Worship* serves as a call to action, encouraging

viewers to reconsider their relationship with the world and find beauty:

As these beads are strung together to form a *tasbeeh*, or prayer beads, they take on a deeper significance. No longer mere remnants of a forgotten past, they become conduits for contemplation and devotion. Each bead represents a prayer, a moment of reflection, a step on the path towards spiritual enlightenment. But *From Waste to Worship* is more than just a physical transformation; it is a call to action. It challenges us to reconsider our relationship with the world around us, to see potential where others see waste, and to find beauty in the unlikeliest of places. It is a reminder that even the most ordinary objects can be infused with meaning and purpose, if only we are willing to look beyond the surface.

Caitlin Greenberg: The Personal is Universal

Caitlin Greenberg (b. 1987) is a South African white female artist and academic. Her practice is informed by her earlier research into the manifestations of the ‘shadow’ and the cultural trauma associated with serial killers who target women.

Her installation *Echoes of Silence* (2023) employs blown glass and mixed media alongside a superimposed soundscape of ‘colliding’ women’s voices to make the invisible trauma of GBV tangible. The glassblowing process itself acts as a metaphor for reclaiming one’s voice, as expelling breath into molten glass transforms formlessness into a materialised agency. The resulting delicate, pressurised spheres and glass scars hold memory, serving as a universal call to listen to the ‘loud chaos’ of suppressed stories that deserve to be heard. By leveraging the material’s ability to be ‘fragile yet dangerous’, Greenberg’s work functions as critical protest art that destabilises power hierarchies and demands acknowledgement of truths often hidden by systemic oppression (Figures 2 and 3).

Greenberg’s *Echoes of Silence* (2023) is a visual and soundscape of super-imposed women’s voices that accentuates the inner clamour of suppressed thoughts and is a universal call to listen to the unspoken, as every silence holds a story that deserves to be heard.

While the article focuses primarily on South African art, the inclusion of Palestinian artist Abeer Al-Najjar provides another crucial global comparative perspective on waste.



Figure 2: Caitlin Greenberg, *Echoes of Silence* (2023). Installation 4m x 5m, mixed media (Image: Caitlin Greenberg 2025)



Figure 3: [Close-up] of the Oom Gert portrait in the installation (Image: Caitlin Greenberg 2025)

Abeer Al-Najjar: Brutal Honour Killings Made Visible

Abeer Al-Najjar is a Palestinian artist and designer dedicated to reviving the ancient craft of Palestinian glassmaking, using her skill to embody reality and highlight social issues (Al-Quds 2023, paras 2, 6). Her work demonstrates that the ecofeminist link between the treatment of nature and the concept of humans-as-waste is global. Al-Najjar's work, *Diaphanous* (2021; 2022), confronts the systemic invisibility of honour killings in Palestinian society (2022.bezalel.ac. 2022, para. 1).

Al-Najjar's work is an example of ecofeminist protest art that leverages glass' symbolic properties to confront the systemic invisibility of violence against women. The title of this work, *Diaphanous*, functions as a critical interpretive framework, highlighting how societies deliberately attempt to avoid revealing and openly addressing the brutality of these killings (2022.bezalel.ac. 2022, para. 4). This societal refusal to see the violence mirrors the systemic degradation argued by ecofeminism, where the oppression of women is linked to the dismissive treatment of nature and the concept of humans-as-waste (Yates 2011: 1679–1681). The work commemorates victims across Palestinian communities (2022.bezalel.ac. 2022, para. 1) and includes workshops designed to actively raise community awareness, linking the artistic critique to practical social action.

Diaphanous (2021; 2022) (Figures 4 and 5) is a call to action, challenging viewers and workshop participants to acknowledge and address societal injustices and the pervasive issue of violence against women (Al-Quds 2023, para. 8; 2022.bezalel.ac. 2022, para. 1).



Figure 4: Abeer Al-Najjar, *Diaphanous* (2022). 120cm x 60cm, glass. (Image: Abeer Al-Najjar 2025)



Figure 5: Abeer Al-Najjar, *Diaphanous* (2021). 160cm, glass (Image: Abeer Al-Najjar 2025).

Fusing the Glass Narratives

In ‘The human-as-waste, the labour theory of value and disposability in contemporary capitalism’, Michelle Yates (2011: 1679 – 1681) links ‘pollution and toxic industrial chemicals’ (pre-consumer waste) and ‘garbage’ (post-consumer waste) to humans-as-waste, when she asserts that ‘intrinsic to capitalism’s generation of objective waste is the logical necessity of wasting human lives’. When conceptualised alongside Liz Kelly’s (1987: 47) continuum of violence model, upcycling disrupts the perception that resources – and human lives – should be ‘trashable’. Upcycling disrupts the perception that resources should be trashable and art about GBV reclaims agency by refusing to be silenced, dismissed, or trashed.

Drawing on insights from the presented case studies, this article suggests that glass artivism has the potential to create a critical space where awareness ignites resistance. While this article does not measure empirical behavioural or policy changes, three themes of transformative impact were found: transformative reclamation, discursive protest, and social and environmental justice.

Begg's *From Waste to Worship* (2024) exemplifies the transformative power of upcycled glass by reclaiming humble beer bottles, transmuting them into sacred, tangible spirituality guides. This challenges consumerist narratives (Begg 2024) and educates viewers to 'reconsider our relationship with the world around us, to see potential where others see waste' (Begg 2024). This directly promotes mindful consumption and environmental consciousness (Begg 2024).

Greenberg's *Echoes of Silence* (2023) exemplifies discursive protests against GBV by making the invisible trauma and suppressed truths visible and tangible (Greenberg 2023). Her work addresses the pressure and constraint of societal expectations under which women are forged, while emphasising that the scars in the glass hold stories (Greenberg 2023). Her art makes clear that 'every silence holds a story that deserves to be heard' (Greenberg 2023), prompting self-reflection and fostering the empathy needed to dismantle patriarchal structures.

Begg's *From Waste to Worship* (2024) aligns with ecofeminist principles, showcasing how the reclamation of everyday, domestic materials (humble beer bottles) can be transformed into objects of cultural and spiritual significance (Begg 2024). This transformation promotes environmental consciousness by advocating for recycling and mindful consumption while imbuing materials with a new, sacred value, challenging the throwaway culture inherent in many patriarchal economic systems (Begg 2024). The project's challenge encourages communities to recycle glass while fostering reflection on deeper social issues, illustrating how upcycled glass art effectively contributes to environmental education and inspires a shift in perception from waste to worship (Begg 2024). Sensitisation to sustainability through art plays a role in sustaining the environment (Asamoah *et al.* 2022: 32).

Greenberg's *Echoes of Silence* (2023) can also be viewed using ecofeminism's systemic lens. Upcycled glass art related to GBV can thus be seen as a form of consumer and human waste reclamation from capitalism and the patriarchy. By embodying the 'silenced voices of women' that speak about the range of their GBV experiences through delicate yet resilient blown glass,

Greenberg (2023) makes the invisible trauma and suppressed truths of GBV visible and tangible. The use of superimposed women's voices in a soundscape creates an 'inner clamour of suppressed thoughts', challenging societal constraints that force women into silence and demanding acknowledgement of what is hidden (Greenberg 2023). The very act of glassblowing (expelling breath into molten glass) is a metaphor for the dual actions of releasing what is inside the body and reclaiming one's voice and materialising agency (Greenberg 2023). The artwork's fragile, pressurised surface reflects the internalised chaos experienced by women, serving as a call to listen and really hear the testament to resilience and to see the breaking free from the fear of judgment (Greenberg 2023). The artwork effectively leverages art's capacity to evoke emotions, cultivate empathy, and promote self-reflection, essential steps in confronting and dismantling patriarchal structures that perpetuate GBV (Asamoah *et al.* 2022: 50).

Al-Najjar's *Diaphanous* (2021; 2022) foregrounds glass art as a medium for ecofeminist protest, inherently linking social and environmental justice. Her upcycling of discarded glass and the conceptual content of her work, which depicts the violent oppression of women (Al-Quds 2023, para. 5), embody the ecofeminist perspective that environmental degradation and GBV are inter-connected forms of oppression. Her intentional artwork title, *Diaphanous*, reflects a quality of glass, making visible hidden violence to critique how societies actively render violence against women invisible (Al-Quds 2023: para. 8; 2022.bezalel.ac. 2022, para. 1). The hiding of the degradation of the environment mirrors the systemic devaluation and silencing of women. By transforming these complex, often ignored, issues into tangible and reflective art, Al-Najjar challenges the prevailing gendered power relations and calls for a more holistic understanding of co-existence, both in patriarchal societies and in nature (Buscatto *et al.* 2025). Al-Najjar's work inspires empathy and action against interwoven forms of structural violence.

Conclusion

While the case-study nature of this research provides deep, 'thick' descriptions rather than broad generalisability, these findings highlight the significant potential for art to ignite resistance. Ultimately, this scholarship creates a critical space where awareness fosters progress toward equitable and sustainable futures. Future work should look toward longitudinal studies to quantify the long-term impacts of activism on policy, specifically addressing the 'invisible

contours' of GBV directed at marginalised groups such as Black trans people, whose experiences remain largely invisible in existing scholarship.

This article explored glass activism as an innovative response to the enduring challenges of GBV alongside broader environmental injustices. Employing a critical ecofeminist framework, this article highlighted the intrinsically interwoven nature of social oppressions with ecological exploitation, linking the oppression of women with environmental degradation and the dismissive attitude towards biodiverse life. By examining the distinct yet interconnected works of Saarah Begg, Caitlin Greenberg, and Abeer Al-Najjar, this article explored glass art's potential for stirring action in the service of social and environmental justice.

Upcycled glass art can be a tool for facilitating critical discourse and transforming complex social issues into accessible, resonant, personal, and physical experiences (Stetz 2023: para. 192). The central discursive contribution of this article lies in establishing glass activism as a dual tool for public awareness and environmental sustainability.

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