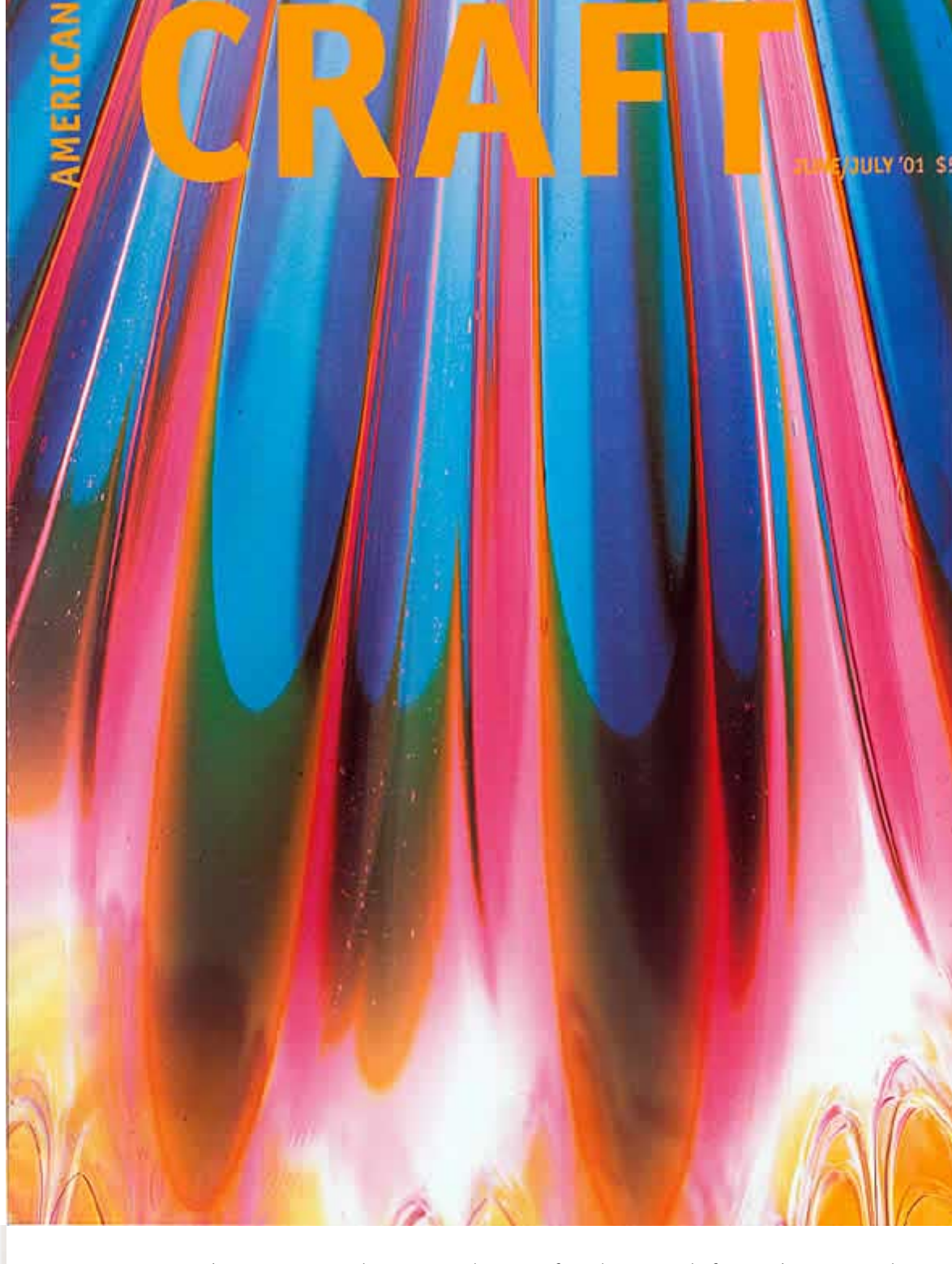


From "American Craft", June/July 2001)

BY JAMES YOOD

Many art media concern themselves with color and light, but at the end of the day these are the trump cards of glass. In no other medium do color and light so suggestively interweave, shifting, changing and endlessly cross-pollinating. Among the most nuanced seekers after the eternally sensual and elusive mysteries of light and color in glass is Stephen Rolfe Powell, whose upbeat vessels for more than a decade have bubbled, blistered and erupted in fugues of chromatic suggestion. He can be seen as an accomplished color-field painter, though he neither paints nor makes color-fields. Instead, his world provides globular prismatic bursts, an irrepressible ebullience of hue and a tintinnabulation of tincture that maintains, as Van Gogh put it, that "color expresses something by itself."

But what's the point of color without form? The pointillist play of Powell's blots of pure color is tremendously energized and reinforced by the very shapes they come to sheathe and define. He makes vessels, round and bulbous, curvaceous and ribald, replete with generous intimations of the sensuality of the human body. Their lobes and swellings inevitably suggest buttocks or breasts or testicles, the soft and vulnerable zones of sexuality, in a warm eroticism heightened by the fantastic color scheme. The weight of these lobes, the sense of their being pulled down by gravity, is countered by the exquisite tension of Powell's attenuated and elongated necks, which strain upward in some Parmigianino rhythm, as if these vessels were simultaneously bulb and sprout. Through these forms Powell makes color volumetric, enhancing its possibilities.



## STEPHEN ROLFE POWELL



Stephen Rolfe Powell at the blowpipe assisted by (left foreground) Paul Nelson, (background) Che Rhodes and Brook White; 1996, photo/Kate Phillips of Studio K. OPPOSITE PAGE: Flirting Tangerine Johnson, 1999, blown glass, 38 by 24 by 6 inches, assisted by Brook White, Chris Bohach, Paul Hugues, Nathan Watson and Josh Harris.

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Powell then rushes over to a platform about five feet off the ground, and holding his pipe absolutely vertical lets the glob of glass pull downward, creating the thin neck and the swelling body simultaneously. Concurrently, he blows air through the pipe into the vessel, causing its exterior to swell, providing pressure to expand outward at the same time that gravity is creating downward pressure. In most instances he will drape the hot vessel between two or sometimes three vertical metal bars, themselves heated to 750 degrees, that will pinch the glass into the lobes that demarcate his work. Even at their heightened temperatures, these metal bars cool the glass they touch (which is around 2,000 degrees), freezing the murrine in tighter diameter and denser coloration than those in the lobes. When everything goes well (and like many artists who work glass at this scale-up to five feet-Powell has a failure rate near 80 percent), the process, from picking up the murrine to the final cooling in the annealing oven, can take as little as five minutes of frenetic activity.

That's the process. The product is another matter. In liquefying his beads, having them go from a solid to a liquid state and then back to a now diffused and disseminated solid, Powell creates an effect not unlike that of watercolor. And, of course, his aim is to make color sing a kind of psychedelic lyric from the 1970s-there's a wonderful retro feel to this work, a groovy tie-dye rhythm and color scheme that is at once vigorous and insouciant. While he employs many different colors, certain tones dominate-cranberry reds and plum purples, apricot orange/browns and lemon yellows-a fruity palette of pleasure, played out across these surfaces in infinite variety, no two murrine ever precisely the same. Transparency, translucency and opaqueness are critical issues for him, and his long practice has led him, particularly regarding translucency, to crystallize color as few others can. Much of this Powell can firmly control, but some crucial little bits he can only influence, heat and gravity having a will of their own.



Pyronic Marilyn Monroe, 2000, blown glass, 52 by 22 1/2 by 11 1/2 inches

His titles exude the "keep-on-truckin'" amiability that is at the core of his work. Usually three words long, these curious names-Tangerine Cheeks Smith, Piranha Gasp Johnson, Purple Zippy Mania, Naive Laughing Cheeks, Undulating Groan Jones, Purple Aloof Cleavage, Pyronic Marilyn Monroe-are important to Powell for their free-and-easy patter. A word or two in a title does describe some aspect of the piece-a shape or color or feeling-but the total effect recalls the 1970s sensibility in which this artist was formed.

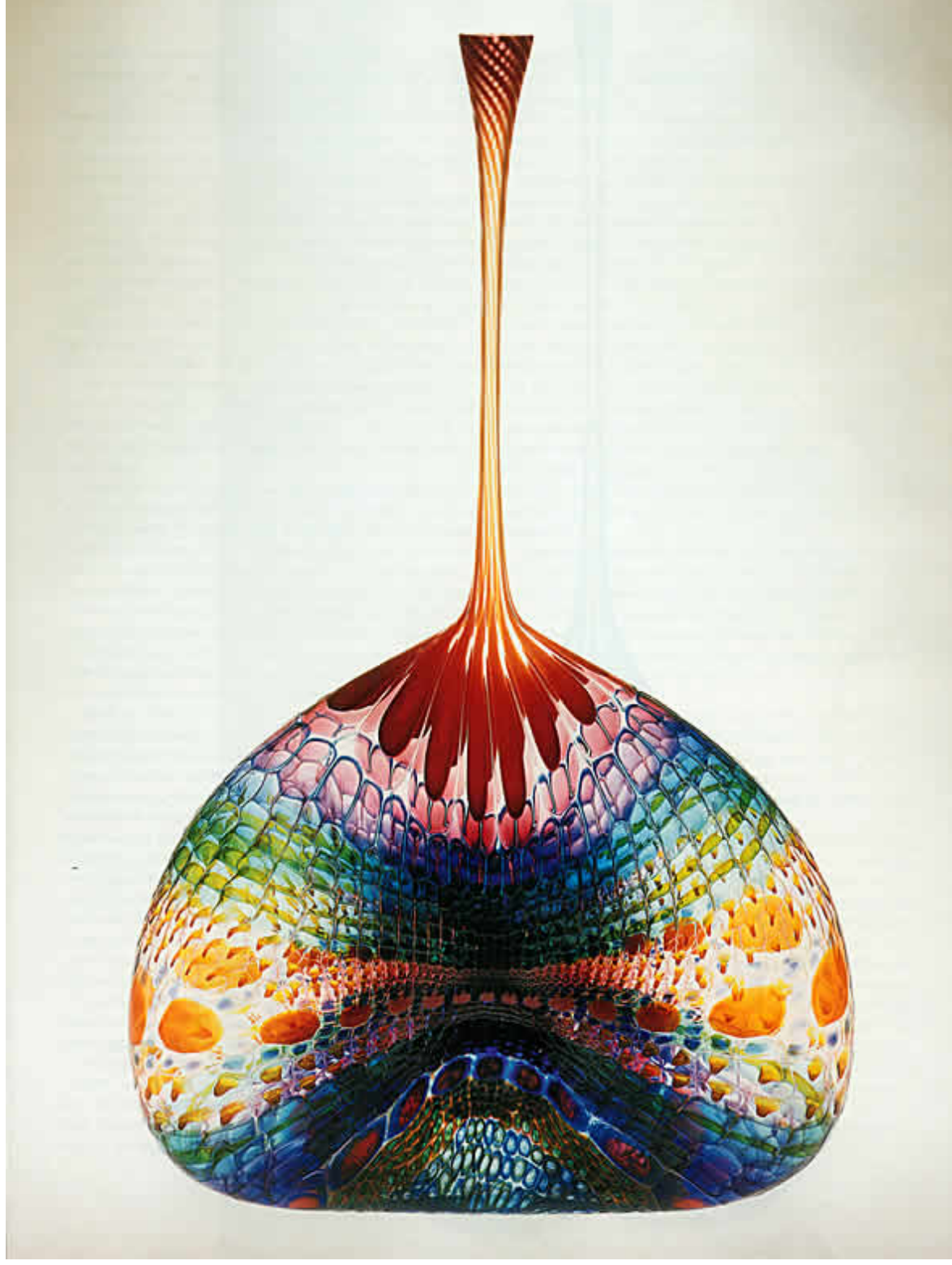
Things are good for Powell-his work is successful in the marketplace, he enjoys teaching and lives with his wife and two sons on a 44-acre farm outside Danville. He recently co produced a documentary on the Muranese glass master Lino Tagliapietra's visit to Kentucky and is looking forward to an exhibition of his own work at Galleria Rossella Junck in Venice next year. There is not an iota of fatigue or closure in his commitment to his quest, to have color sing again, to create in glass some vestige of the pursuits he sees in artists such as Mark Rothko, Claude Monet, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Georges Seurat. Colorists, it is sometimes observed, are born not made Their pursuit of subtlety and beauty, their search for the optical exhilaration that begins where language ends and taste begins, certainly stretches as far as Stephen Rolfe Powell's cooling pools of breathtaking color in Kentucky.

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Heat causes this inspired congealing of color and form-heat and the materiality of glass. Powell's vehicle is his distinctive use of the Italian murrine technique. Murrine are small bits of glass, almost beadlike, sometimes as tiny as a seed, sometimes (but rarely in Powell's work) as large as an inch or so. He and his assistants-Chris Bohach, Paul Hugues, D. H. McNabb, Brent Sommerhauser, and Laura Ward-make murrine by hand, melting a larger bar of colored glass, overlaying that with another color, and then heating and stretching it like taffy for some 30 feet or more, until the glass is no thicker than one-eighth to one-half inch. This is cooled and chopped into thousands of murrine, the raw material from which Powell will cull his color. He then lays the murrine in carefully composed rows on a 10-by 20-inch steel plate that becomes his palette and his composition in a rudimentary form; he can only approximate what the chromatic sequencing of rows will be in the finished piece.

Powell lays out up to 2,500 murrine or more for a single work, little pastilles of color that literally fulfill the title of Vassily Kandinsky's book Point and Line to Plane. The points of condensed color are set into lines and soon become volumetric and planar on his vessels. Powell gathers a great deal of clear molten glass on his pipe (his pieces can weigh around 30 pounds), blows a smallish bubble within it, and then rolls his hot glass over the murrine, which themselves have been heated, though at a lower temperature. The murrine are instantly picked up by the hot glass and begin to "melt," to expand, sometimes from the size of a pea to that of a pear. Color that had been no more than a dot now becomes a dollop, a little orb of tone clustered among its brethren in wavy and somewhat cellular rows, making tesserae in space.



All this work is accomplished in Powell's studio in Danville, Kentucky, where he is a professor of art at Centre College. Born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1951 and raised there, Powell attended Centre College as an undergraduate. (His family, their tradition insists, are direct descendants of Pocahontas, and his middle name is taken from John Rolfe, the English colonist in Jamestown who married her in 1614.) His original interest in art led him first to ceramics, and an early concern with the vessel. He attended graduate school at Louisiana State University to study ceramics, and began to dabble in glass, mostly during the summer, in places like the Penland School of Crafts or Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Internships at the Summervail Workshop for Art and Critical Studies at Colorado Mountain College completed the process of moving Powell to glass, but certain aspects of ceramics-the vessel and a molded quality to his forms-remain with him. Seeing Richard Marquis's work around 1983 introduced him to the possibilities of murrine, and soon afterward, always seeking ways to exploit the dispersal and arraying of color, Powell began the body of work that holds him to this day. He returned to Centre College, this time to teach, in 1983, and built its first glass studio in 1985.

There have been subtle shifts in his work, as Powell tries to push the edges of his process and explore new strategies. The necks of his vessels, which a decade ago were modestly tapered, have recently been stretched close to breaking point and often are as long as the bodies they surmount. He has tried to create larger murrine to ease the transition from neck to body, to have the color of the neck ooze into the body in some handsome attenuation. And his color too is intensifying, as he shifts from translucency to opacity within the same piece.

