

THE COLOR OF BEAUTY: Stephen Powell's Glass Vessels

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BY SHAWN WAGGONER

What makes one sunset more lovely than another: If you can answer this question you also probably know what makes each of Stephen Powell's vessels uniquely beautiful.

An artist of international recognition and art professor at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, Powell is recognized as a master of casing blown vessels in a multi-colored, textural veil of murrini. These large vessel forms, sometimes weighing as much as 30 pounds, have captured the hearts of collectors, glass enthusiasts and clients worldwide with their size, form and of course, their brilliant color.

Says Powell, "I hope my color combinations are unique and that they trigger strong emotive reactions. The shapes of my pieces are influenced not only by the human figure, but also by its gestures and posture. A final element that is often overlooked is the texture created by the thousands of colored beads applied to the surface. Each of the murrini's maintains its integrity throughout the process. Museums and galleries may not like it, but I encourage viewers to touch my pieces. In fact, I enjoy catching a viewer occasionally fondling a piece."

Reflected in Powell's work is his absolute love of the process. A self-confessed pyromaniac, glassblowing provides the artist with access to fire - the catalyst for the creation of his art. A former tennis pro, Powell enjoys the intense physical challenge of hot working glass, which increases with the size of the vessel. And most importantly, glassblowing allows the artist to create and present pure, vibrant color though which he hopes to evoke basic human emotion.

My work is mostly about color, says Powell. The artist that have influenced my are most are Mark Rothko, Kenneth Noland, Claude Monet and Georges Seurat. I am also drawn to the physicality and directness of Jackson Pollock. I was attracted to these abstract expressionists because of their search for purity of expression. The term 'abstract' is a misnomer here; I feel they should be classified more as non-representational artist trying for the most pure emotional expression possible through color."

The form and size of Powell's work has evolved on a continuous basis. His early pieces incorporated a striping technique rather than the murrini. In 1985, the vessels were 18 inches in height, and the artist believed he had reached his limit in terms of how large he could work. But work larger he did.

Says Powell, "I wanted to reach a scale in my work where I felt the object was of equal stature to the viewer. I wanted the work to be able to confront the viewer."

The following year, Powell made a shift in aesthetic approach, focusing on what he wanted in the work in terms of color. Gradually he stopped striping the vessels and began incorporating the murrini. At first he picked up murrini in random patches across the surface of the piece until gradually they became the entire skin of the vessel. Powell credits Dick Marquis, with whom he worked at Summervail in the '80's, with his initial exposure to murrini making.

Powell's breakthrough into the upper echelons of the glass world came in 1987 during a show at The Kimzey Miller Gallery, Seattle, Washington, which coincided with the Glass Art Society conference. Ferdinand Hampson, director of Habatat Galleries, attended the exhibition, was impressed with Powell's work and the rest is history. His vessels can now be seen at galleries like Heller Gallery, New York City, L'Eclat Du Verre Galerie in Paris, France, Marx Gallery in Chicago, Illinois, Marta Hewett In Cincinnati, Ohio, and Habatat in Pontiac, Michigan , Boca Raton, Florida, and Aspen, Colorado, to name a few.

Powell first discovered glass while working towards his MFA in ceramics at Louisiana State University. During the summer of 1983, the artist traveled to Haystack Mountain School, Deer Isle, Maine, where he has people blowing glass for the first time. The following summer, Powell served as an assistant in hot glass at Summervail Workshop for Art and Critical Studies in Minturn, Colorado, and he continued to work with glass at Pilchuck the following year as an assistant to Lino Tagliapietra and Dan Dailey.

Says Powell, "It took me awhile to get into glass as there was no studio here at Centre or in Kentucky at all. The only time I got to work with glass for the next couple of years was on these summer programs. I learned a great deal at Summervail from visiting instructors like Lark Dalton, Dan Dailey, Billy Bernstein, Billy Morris and Dick Marquis. I was in charge of the hot shop, and got to work with these people. It was an incredible learning experience."

Upon graduation from LSU, Powell was offered a teaching job at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, where he had done his undergraduate work in painting and ceramics. He started teaching ceramics as a visiting instructor and was only supposed to be there one year. At this time, the school had no glass facility, but with generous donations from Corning Glass, Harrodsburg, Kentucky, and Philips Lighting in Danville, Powell established Centre's glass studio in 1985. And he is still there teaching glass, ceramics and sculpture.

Centre is a liberal arts college with a total of about 900 students. The hot shop Powell designed was located on an outdoor terrace on the top floor of the art building. Though the studio was small in size, he built the equipment to handle large-scale work. Next year Powell and Centre will expand the glass facilities as they move from the roof deck to their own renovated warehouse. Powell is hoping the new studio will be a national model for a school the size of Centre. On sabbatical this year, Powell built a new studio on his Kentucky farm, just outside of Danville. He explains, At Centre's studio, I had to run out into the weather to blow the pieces out because they were so big. If it rained or was windy I lost a lot of work , so I needed an enclosed studio.

He continues, "Just this year, I'm seeing what it's like to work out in my studio in a more secluded environment. It has some advantages, like fewer distractions. But interacting with students helps me understand more about what I do. Working with them and teaching them keeps my mind open."

In fact, all Powell's assistants are former or current students. The most advanced assistant heads the crew and helps train and organize the other assistants as well as handling the pipe at certain stages of the blowing process. The other assistants do everything from assisting in murrini making and laying out murrini patterns to sweeping floors.

"The advantage for all the assistants is that they are around and involved in everything I do from photographing and shipping work to dealing with galleries, says Powell. It serves as an apprenticeship for them, hopefully."

Making, cutting and assembling the murrini comprises the lion's share of the process. The team begins by melting a color bar, Most people have to pay more in shipping than they do for glass, but I don't have that problem", says Powell. "It's a strange glass, but I'm used to it now. It sets up fairly quickly. And I get away with more variants in the coefficient of expansion because the color is on the surface of the piece."

During the blowing process there are several critical points. The color pick-up is the first. Powell rolls the molten gather of clear base glass over a pre-heated metal plate covered with the murrini layout. As many times as I've done it, you would think I'd have it down. But it's very difficult, explains Powell. It's heavy; it's hot. I can't put my hand that far down the pipe to take the weight off. We always are a little small because the beads of color will stop picking up when they hit the other beads. We don't want to leave an obvious seam if we can help it, so we try to join those colors back up. Rarely does that work out perfectly, but we get pretty close.

The most critical point is the last blowout, when Powell has defined the neck area and goes in for that last heat. We're hiding the seam, he says, so someone is trying to direct me, it's dripping down, the neck is starting to find its shape, they're yelling that I'm too far to the left or right, so it's a critical point. If a drop of sweat come off my forehead and hits the piece, it breaks. From that point until we put it into the oven we are at our most intense. I've participated in athletics all my life, and I like the physicality of the process and the way we work the glass, pushing it to its limits. I enjoy the teamwork. I couldn't create my work without a team of people helping me. I would never have made it as a backwoods potter. The annealing point of the Philips glass is 950 degrees F. Once a piece is in the oven, it's held there for 10 to 12 hours. The oven is programmed down to room temperature over another 36 hours. Says Powell, "Three days of cooling may be more than is really needed, but we spend so much time in preparation - making the colors and laying them out - we don't want anything to go wrong. We're lucky to make four to six pieces a week."

Twice in Powell's career he took on the role of designer, and left the execution of his work to others. During a 1990 sabbatical in the then-Soviet Union, the artist worked at the Red May Factory in Vishny Volochok as well as the Lvov Art Institute in the Ukraine. The highlight of his career occurred when the Mukina Institute presented two of his pieces to the Hermitage, the renowned Russian art museum in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg.

But the trip overall was a difficult one. Powell was frustrated by the Eastern European tradition where artists serve as designers and gaffers, and master technicians execute the work. Wherever he lectured, students were shocked to find that he actually worked the glass himself. In addition to the language barrier, there was a tremendous gap in understanding the material and valuing a hands-on approach.

I was determined not to come back and say how lucky I am to live and work in the United States, but that was my attitude when I returned", says Powell. "The role of designer is not one I want to play. I just love the process too much."

The second try at designing was forced upon Powell in 1991. He was working in the studio at Centre College when he tried to open a window to let a bird fly out. The glass shattered, slicing through nine tendons, the ulnar nerve and the ulnar artery in his right arm. Many feared the injury would end his work in glassblowing. But thanks to a skilled hand surgeon, Dr. Morton Kasdan, Louisville, Kentucky, and a lengthy period of physical therapy, he has recovered nearly full use of his hand.

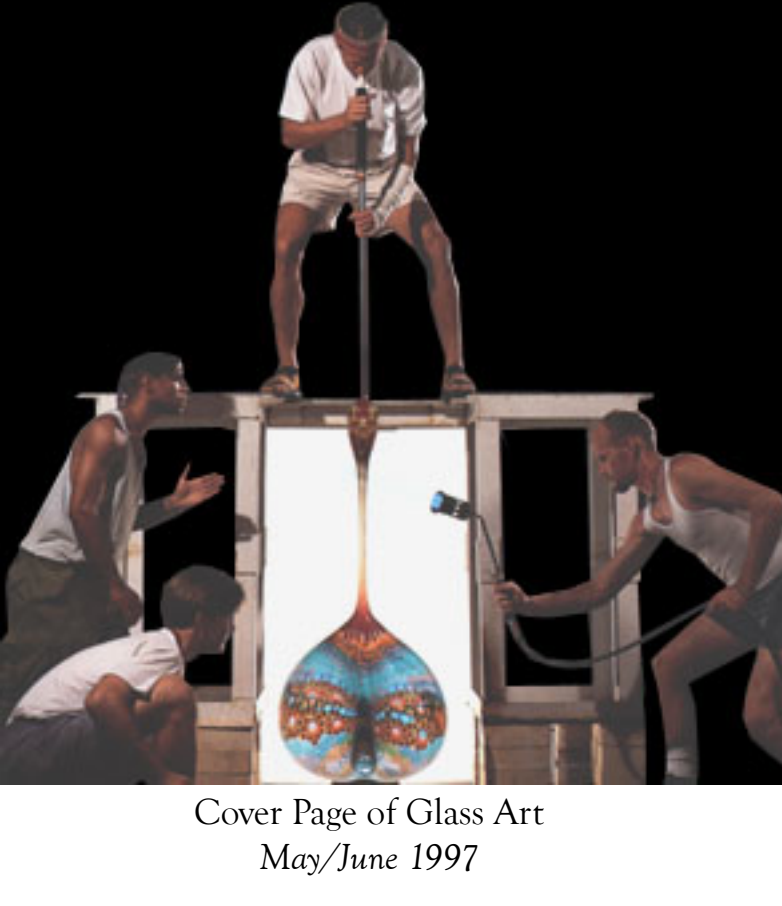
Says Powell, "When it happened, I thought, oh no, I won't be able to work tonight. I had no idea how serious the injury was, and even when I found out, I just never considered the fact that I wouldn't work again. I know other people thought that , but I never considered it an option. Had I not recovered, I would have tried designing again, but would have probably ended up making something with my feet."

Though Powell is no longer struggling with getting accepted into galleries or having his work validated by the art world, there was a time when beautiful objects such as his were not only discouraged, but criticized.

"I came through the art channel at a time where you were discouraged from making beautiful objects", says Powell. "Beauty was not considered a legitimate expression of art. Artists were supposed to challenge the viewer rather than seduce them. Making social statements in art is totally legitimate, but a lot of critics feel that is the only expression worthy of being made. Pursuing beauty is now controversial because it's rare."

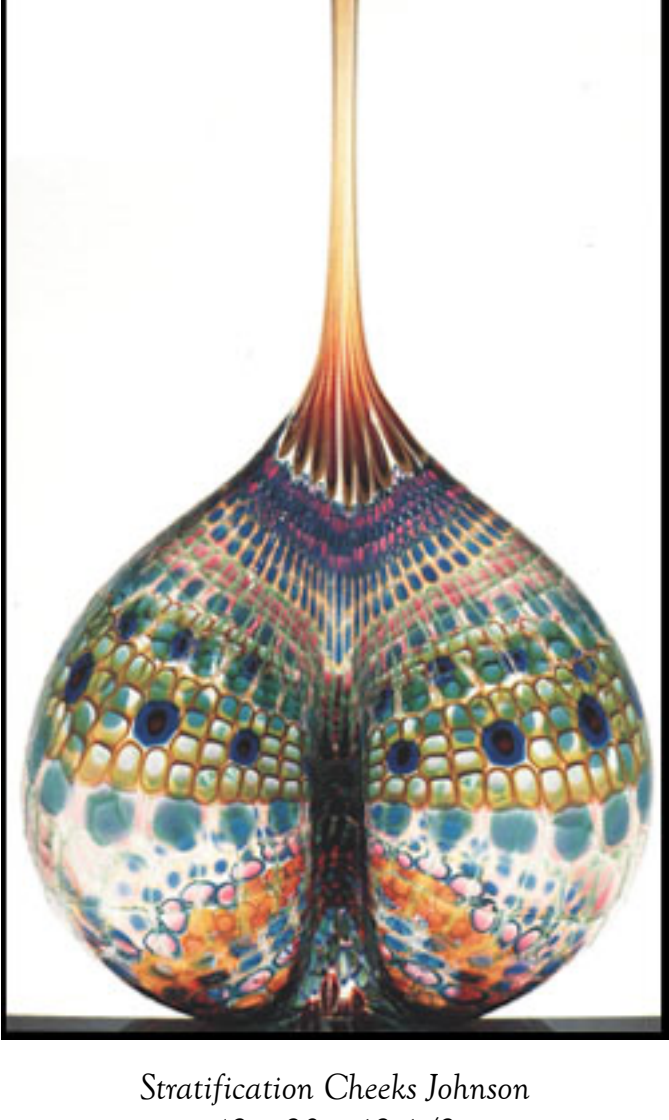
Powell recently returned from Sydney, Australia, where he made work and taught at The Sydney College of Art. His work was exhibited in a one-person show April 3 at The Suzanne Brown Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona, held in conjunction with the Glass Art Society conference. His vessels will also be exhibited during Habatat's International Show opening at the Pontiac Gallery, April 5.

What is cutting edge art today?", asks Powell. "My personal biased feeling is that it is work based on traditional craft. That work goes against the grain of the fine arts world. I've stuck with the vessel through thick and thin despite critical and academic bias against it. The vessel may be the most pure sculptural object since it is void of artistic pretension. The rich tradition of vessels furnishes a timelessness and universality that no other object can. I never wanted my art to push the viewer away; I feel the vessel is a way to bring the viewer in."



Cover Page of Glass Art

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Stratification Cheeks Johnson

42 x 23 x 12 1/2

1994

Assisted by Che Rhodes, Brook White, and Kurt Waechter.



Powell and assistants pick up murrini

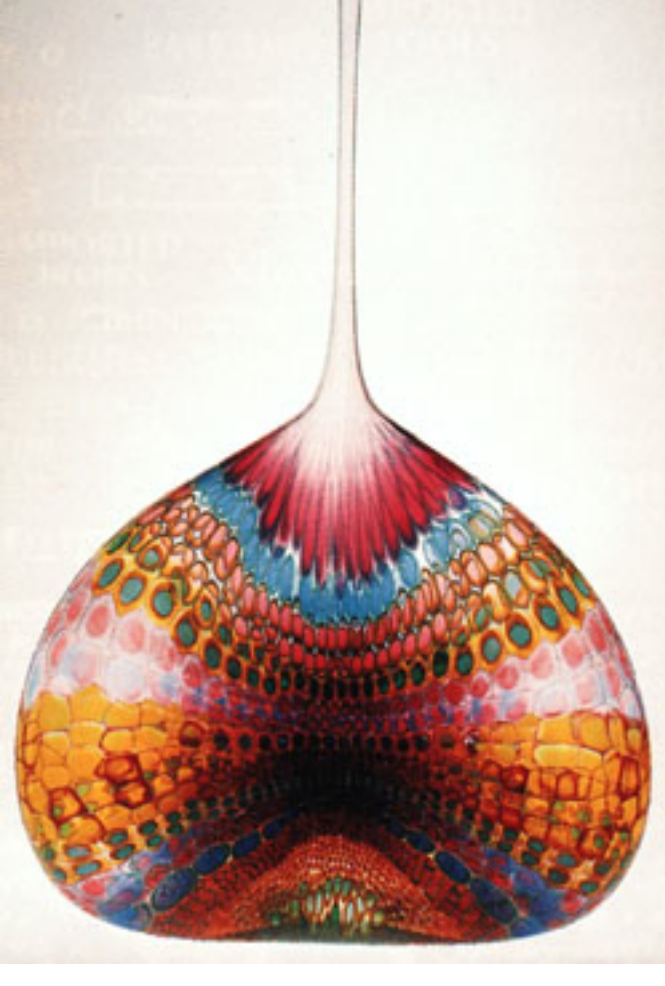


Yellow and Red Buns

12 x 19 x 12"

1986

Assisted by Perry Biddle and Pat Martin.



Tacit Scream Johnson

38 1/2 x 24 1/2 x 6 1/2"

1994



Spacious Mummy Jones

19 x 11 7"

1988

Assisted by Patrick Martin