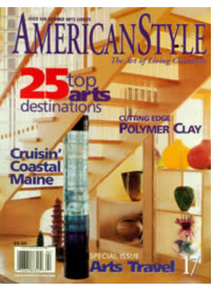
From "American Style", August 1999)
BY LEE LAWRNENCE



The drive into Danville in central Kentucky seems almost designed to prepare you for the works of glass artist Stephen Rolfe Powell. Especially if the drive occurs at the edge of evening, when the greens of the grass, the blues in the sky, the oranges, yellows and pinks of the wildflowers glow as though illuminated from within. The same luminosity and interplay of colors characterize Powell's vessels, just as the formations in the rocks lining the road resemble the textured patterns Powell creates with murrini.

These form the skin of long-necked, lobe-shaped vessels, which he christens with zany names like "Tangerine Cheeks Smith" and "Bodaceous Cleavage Johnson." As the names indicate, there is nothing pretentious about this tall, rangy man with graying hair and soft blue eyes. "I never say I'm an artist-I tell people I work with glass," he says.

In the house he designed with his wife, Shelly, Powell displays some of the results to best advantage on individual shelves opposite floor-to-ceiling windows.
But it is their essential components, not the objects themselves, that take center stage in Powell's home: light, color and more color still, from the purple and yellow bathroom to the red love seat in the living room.

And from the blue, green and purple glass columns flanking the entrance to the collection of glass art that includes a glass and metal sculpture by Powell's former student, Che Rhodes, and works by Kate Vogel and John Littleton, Billy Bernstein, Emilio Santini and other established glass artists with whom Powell has studied or taught.
Powell uses his collection to expose students to the myriad possibilities inherent in a medium Powell himself discovered late, as a graduate student in 1980. Although he was pursuing a masters degree in ceramics, he found himself spending so much time exploring this new medium that, he says, "I basically had to quit glass the last year to get my MFA."

He subsequently took a teaching position at Centre College in Danville, the same traditional campus where he had done his undergraduate work. One of the first things he did was to build a hot shop. He contacted Corning Glass and Saint Gobain, both of which donated equipment. It is a tribute to Powell's easy, friendly manner as well as to his commitment that the hot shop still runs on donations from Philips Lighting and Corning.

Powell's commitment at this point in his career is as much to glass as it is to teaching. Last summer, for example, I ran into him at Corning, where he was taking a two-week class with Bill Guttenrath to learn traditional Venetian techniques. "I didn't come up through that path," he explains. "I think it made me a better teacher."

Being able to "give back" is clearly as important to him as carving out time for his own work. Except for a honeymoon, which Powell admits barely managing to take, marriage has not impinged on his addiction to work. Neither has the birth of his son, Zachary Hawk, for whom Powell has already ordered a miniature blow-pipe and glassblowing jacks.

The baby was just weeks old when Powell introduced him to the hot shop where he spends Thursday and Sunday evenings creating the murrini glass pieces for which he has become known around the country and abroad. Powell's pieces are so large-sometimes exceeding 40 inches high and 24 inches wide-that they require the help of at least three students turned assistants. But for all his reliance on teamwork, he retains full control over the process, from the blowing and shaping to the finishing work, which he does in the studio behind his house. This is also where he photographs his pieces.

Twice in his life he had to delegate, and he has vowed never to do so again. Once, while lecturing in the former Soviet Union in 1990, he was asked to direct a team of gaffers at the Red May Glass Factory. "I didn't like working by proxy," he says. "I felt too removed from the work."

Not long after his return, Powell again faced the possibility of having to rely on someone else's hands. One morning, in an attempt to shoo a pigeon out of his studio, he smashed his right arm through a windowpane. He didn't realize the severity of his injury until he glanced at the headlines in the local paper the next day: "Artist's career in jeopardy." He had severed nine tendons, an artery and a nerve, and the headline hit home. But three months later, Powell was back at work. "It's the only time I've done small pieces," he says.

Today the scar is hardly visible, and the pain, though persistent, shows no sign of slowing him down. Like a football captain calling the plays, he huddles with four young men, clad in blue jeans and loose T-shirts. Single-mindedly, the team marks the steps from oven to bench and back, the choreography culminating with Powell leaping atop a platform.

He instructs his assistants to set in place a two-pronged contraption into which Powell will lower the massive gather and blow until the glass billows between the prongs, giving the vessel Powell's hallmark lobes.

Throughout the rehearsal, orders and corrections cut through the roar of the furnace and the blare of rock music. "No," one assistant tells another, "he pivots and you basically go under me." Finally the team relaxes. They stretch out and chat as the strident rhythms of music out-blast the fire's roar.

In the controlled confusion, it is easy to lose sight of a key element: the pattern. Slices of colored glass rods-murrini-spread across a metal plate. Powell designs and sets up the pattern, then turns the painstaking task of assembling the rows of murrini over to an assistant. For larger works, the pattern can consist of up to 3,000 pieces.

The first gather from the oven glows apricot as Powell swings it in front of him on the way to the bench. By the time he has repeated this seven times, he is wielding a gather the size of a large watermelon. Between the pipe and the molten glass, he is hauling some 70 to 75 pounds.

The occasional shouts cut through the din with ever more frequency (and urgency) as Powell makes his final moves toward the platform. Legs apart, the blow-pipe now falling straight to the ground, he blows and the bubble beneath him swells as his assistants sweep blowtorches back and forth to keep the gather from cooling too quickly. When all is finished, the long-necked vessel will cool down in a temperature-controlled container for three days. If it doesn't crack and if the murrini have melded seamlessly, Powell will send it off.

"Believe me," Powell says, "glass keeps you humble." Indeed. He had to abort one of his attempts this particular evening. As he tells Shelly the next day, "The bubble collapsed. Maybe the color was too far down the piece. Who knows," he says, shaking his head.

Powell and Shelly make a good team. "She's the practical one," he says. She's the one who added a low-sided tub in the house to bathe Boo-Boo the Anatolian Shepherd and Pocahontas the Labrador (named in honor of Powell's ancestor). When a gallery calls, she handles the negotiations, much to Powell's relief.

The only thing that is not clear is how they make time for one another. Certainly Thursdays and Sundays are out of the question, since it is midnight by the time Powell plops down in front of a pizza.

"This," he says pointing to the meatless topping, "is as healthy as it gets." Upstairs, in a room with vivid green walls, Shelly is asleep. Close by, Zach is doing the same, wearing pajamas that probably have a spot of purple, his father's obsessive preference.

Between bites, Powell speaks of movies ("one of my greatest escapes"), of tennis, which he slips away to play with buddies in Lexington, and of his father, a playwright who was passionate about his work and who always had "pots and handmade things, If I'd gone off to become a lawyer or an accountant, he would have abandoned me," he says, smiling. His father died in 1988, "before I really took off," says Powell. "He would have loved to have seen this."

"This" began with an undergraduate degree in painting, a medium which continues to provide the framework for his work in glass. Inspired by color field painting-"my hero of all time is Mark Rothko"-he yearned to create work to which people would respond viscerally. "I like looking at something with pure reactions, no filter," he says.
When he began working in glass, he created vessels in a single color to which he added stripes. But he wanted more color still. He studied Richard Marquis' work and that of Italian murrini masters, but in the end it was painting that most inspired him. "I looked at Seurat, at pointillism," he says, and this eventually led him, through experimentation, to develop his present technique.

Why not pursue painting? Well, he tried that, but sitting in a room alone with an easel depressed him. As much as he loves being outdoors alone planting, pruning, walking, when it comes to creating art the teamwork of glass galvanizes him almost as much as the medium itself. He trusts and learns from the process, refining it and taking his cues from the work itself as well as from the occasional happy accident. The first time he pulled color through the neck, for example, it was unintentional. The first time he applied the murrini, "it was a really pleasant surprise that it created this sort of membrane," adding unexpected texture to the glass. Who knows what twists and turns are ahead as he embarks on his first installation of hanging pieces for the performing arts center of the University of Kentucky in Lexington.

"I'm thinking of doing something pretty different," he says, then quickly adds, "still in my style though. Probably still with murrini, but probably on a larger scale for viewing from a distance." There is no telling what changes this new challenge will inspire, but there are two things you can count on: under his faded jeans Powell will be wearing purple socks, and his work, no matter what direction it takes, will glow with color and light