



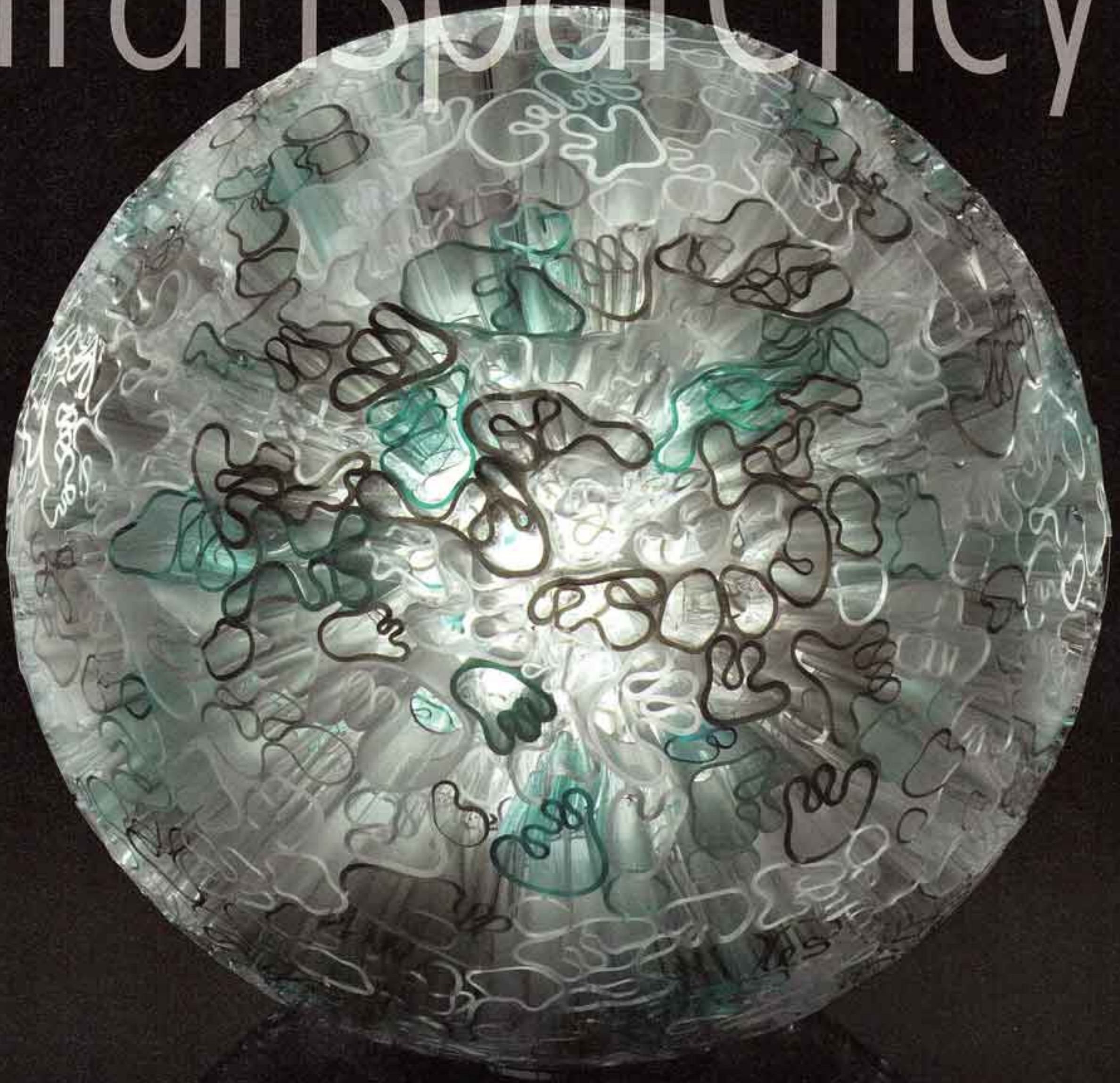
# FULL

There is tremendous vitality in glass today, as artists explore new techniques and leave functionality behind for the realms of pure sculpture and even conceptual art.

**By Dan Hofstadter**



# Transparency





Glass is now one of the major art media used in the United States, being remarkably receptive both to concept-driven works involving long planning and forethought and to pieces that spring from an intuitive grappling with possibilities at the moment of creation. Studio glass—that is, glassmaking as an artistic rather than a craft activity or a form of mass

production—was initiated in the 1960s by Harvey Littleton, Dominick Labino and Dale Chihuly, but they were soon followed by a host of other artists and training programs; a number of museums of studio glass opened across the country; many more modern art museums began to acquire studio glass; and at least six valuable journals were founded. At the same time, the number of businesses devoted to the manufacture of glassworking tools, colors, new furnace designs and so forth rapidly grew.



This page, from top: John Paul Robinson, *Resonant*; David James, *Nebula*. Opposite, from top: John Paul Robinson, *The Old Man*; Joel Philip Myers, *Kaleidoscope Blue X*, 1990. Previous spread, clockwise from left: Kevin Gordon, *Blue Red Southern Light*, 2009; Jeannet Iskandar, *Between Fragment and Whole*, 2011; Carrie Iverson, *Resonance*.

Many galleries are now devoted exclusively to studio glass or exhibit glass as a major part of their program. For more than four decades, for instance, the Barry Friedman Gallery, in New York, has been in the vanguard of those who sponsor advanced modern design, including works that cross into the realm of fine art. The former Czechoslovakia was long the traditional center of cast glass, and Friedman has shown two renowned older artists educated there—the late Czech sculptor Franticek Vizner, known for cast or ground pieces in deep, velvety colors, mostly vessels that appeared functional but required to be accepted as sculpture, and Vaclav Cigler, who, now in his 80s, was the virtual founder of Slovak art glass and creator of meditative and profoundly influential geometric pieces. Among historic American figures Friedman has also championed Joel Philip Myers, who as head designer for the Blenko Glass Company in the 1960s originated more than 400 items before leaving the firm to experiment further and set up his own studio. Myers, who has a painter's sensibility conjoined to enormous glassmaking experience, founded the glassblowing program at Illinois State, where he taught for almost 30 years. After he retired in the 1990s, he began a daring series of mostly ovoid forms sup-

porting multi-colored, inlaid glass shards juxtaposed in inventive color combinations.

With respect to glass sculpture, Carole Hochman, who manages the gallery, expresses the hope that “people will one day be concerned not so much with the material but rather with deeper questions like, Does it speak to them?” She notes, “We’ve

always been about mixing media—and that’s catching on. And we’ve always worked glass, which we see as sculpture, into a wider context. Of course this view needs time to reach maturity, and to reach a younger audience. But once some of the big contemporary collectors’ material gets deaccessioned, and more people get to see it, the collector base will be broadened.”

Friedman also shows Laura de Santillana, who was born into a family long associated with a Murano glass-producing company. De Santillana still works primarily in Murano, where she uses a variety of tech-

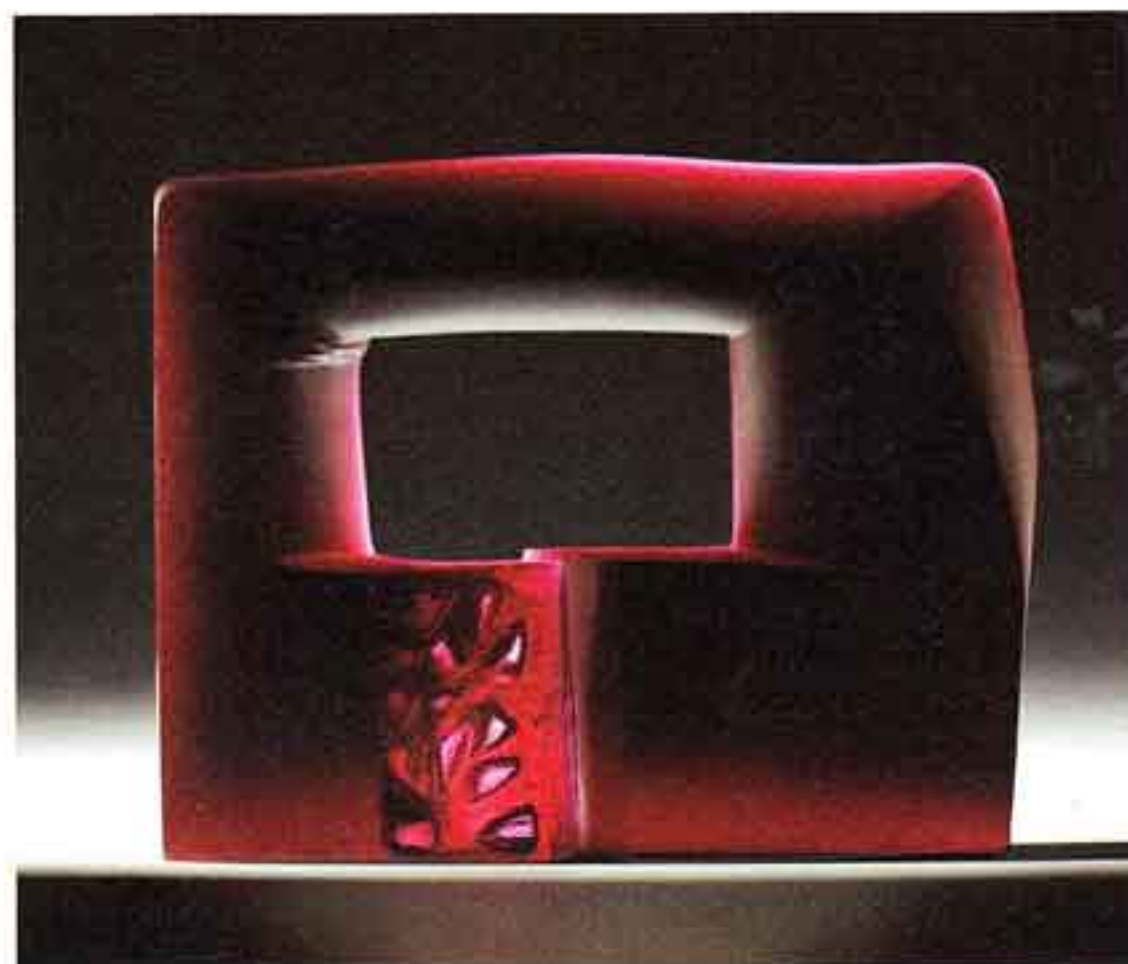


niques to craft vessels and plaques which, while remaining distinctly sculptural, use glass as a sort of field for color expression. Also promoted by Friedman is Toots Zynsky, who has recently concluded a major exhibition at the Corning Museum of Glass in upstate New York. Zynsky, an artist of international reputation who has been developing her *filet de verre* (or glass thread)

technique for almost 30 years, produces objects which are a curious mix of three art forms: the vessel as a sculptural prototype, glass threads as a form of super-heated textile, and good old drawing and painting, in the sense that her vitreous strands can be manipulated like lines or brush strokes. The vase-like results resemble products of nature: floral, sensuous, musically swirling. A major new body of work by Zynsky is currently available at David Richard Contemporary in Santa Fe.

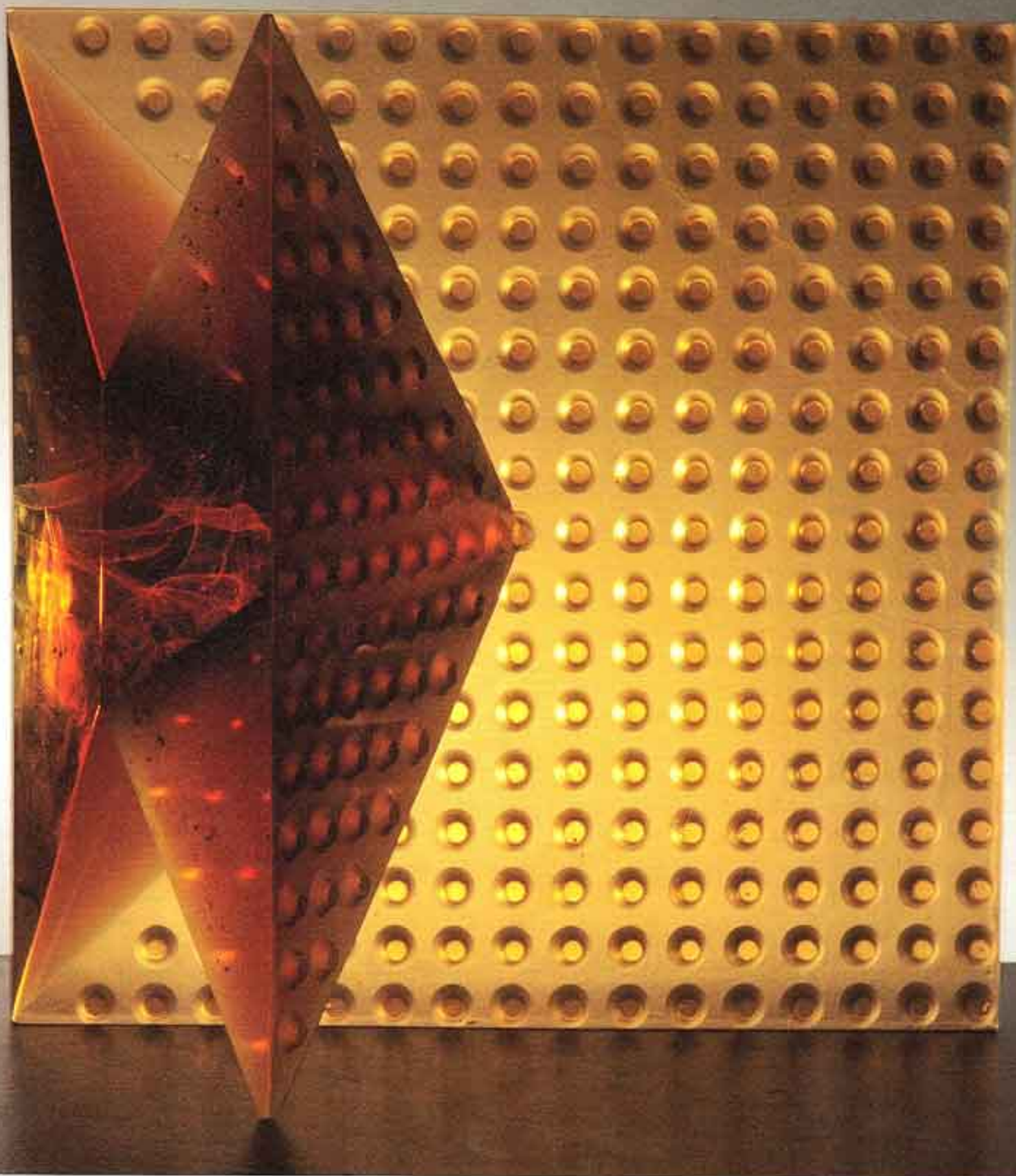
The Heller Gallery in New York has been committed to promoting glass sculpture since its founding in 1973. "It's been a slow process—sometimes agonizingly slow!—but it's happening," says owner Michael Heller. "It's a recognition that this work is not a handicraft, and it's been led by the artists themselves and by curators and collectors—well, by a number of factors, partly institutional ones." Heller recalls that the initial group of collectors tended to be "material-centric," whereas now studio glass items are often bought by general art collectors, people who buy anything they love and value.

Beth Lipman, who shows her work at Heller, is one of America's studio glass artists best positioned to transcend the division between the glass and fine-art communities. The ambitious Lip-



From top: David James, *Portal*, burgundy; Clifford Rainey, *Fragmented Shadow of Time*, 2007.





Vladimira Klumpar, *Origami in Topaz*, 2009

man, who makes, on a huge scale, amazingly detailed pieces that arrestingly engage the American way of life, is presently working toward a major exhibition at the University of Minneapolis's Weisman Art Museum; she has for some years been preoccupied with glass still life, which she realizes by means of blowing, fusing, molding and "slumping" in the kiln. Lipman went to the Tyler College of Art, in Philadelphia, where she got obsessed with food imagery, and then studied in Rome. Later, scrutinizing a lot of Dutch still lifes, she became fascinated by "what those artists were depicting—the excessiveness, the affluence, the decadence," as she puts it, which she relates to our own mass-consumerism. Her sculptures, which mimic Dutch still life rather freely, depict

an almost unimaginable profusion of edibles and vessels, some delicate, some derelict. "I practice a form of non-judgment," she says, "where everything has its place." It's a vision that blends superfluity and fragility.

Another of Heller's artists, Vladimira Klumpar, who is Czech, studied in Prague but has often lived abroad. Her work reveals her tremendous control of the medium, especially its light-holding and light-refracting properties, and also her understanding of both organic and geometric form. Yet another strong artist represented by Heller is Josepha Gasch-Muche, from Germany, who for about 14 years has been showing deceptively simple, geometrically-shaped "paintings" composed of minuscule

shards of broken glass. "The works are created out of optically pure, uncolored glass," she says, "that I break with the aid of pliers into small, irregularly shaped pieces and shards. They are then structured into geometric figures on a wooden support painted either white or black. The arrangement of the shards of glass requires a precise concept through which I can control the presence of light. Sometimes the glass surfaces of the objects seem velvety and silky, other times they develop a variety of sparkling light reflexes."

Gasch-Muche has made art with many materials in her lifetime, but in a stroke of luck she discovered glass in a glass factory near her studio in 1998. "After an extended period of experimentation," she says, "I developed the fascinating possibility of painting and modeling with light. Glass became my medium for the depiction of light. Depending on the viewer's position and perspective, dynamically vibrating, moving visual puzzles are produced. The works alternate in the most incredible forms and colors, even though I do not use color pigments of any kind except the non-colors of black and white."

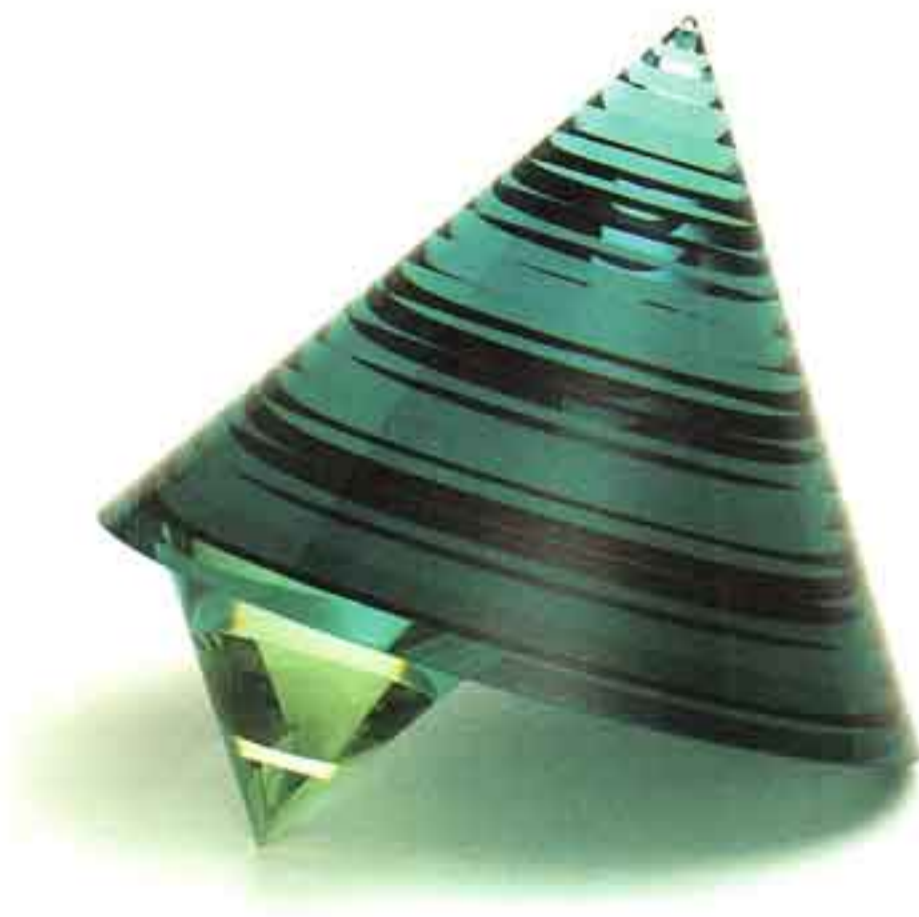
Jeannet Iskandar is a Dane who has recently been creating ovoid or spherical pieces formed by meandering, ribbon-like elements. She, too, shows at Heller. In her sculptures a severe unity can also be perceived as a kind of theme with variations, a restatement



ment of similar but ever-changing forms. "All of my pieces consist of individually shaped, smaller blown components that I have cut, ground, sandblasted and tack-fused together to create a larger shape or three-dimensional pattern," she says. "In my work I try to unite the two opposite terms, complexity and simplicity, in one expression." She says she draws inspiration from the mathematical constant pi and Maurice Ravel's musical masterpiece *Bolero*. "What has fascinated me with those two different units has been the simultaneous complexity of the structure in which they are built and also the simplicity of their expression." It's the presence of variation within a very calm pattern that fascinates Iskandar: "Simi-

larly, I seek a both organic and meticulously composed expression where ethereal constructions of suspended light and line meet in a confluence of rhythm and repetition."

The Imago Galleries, filling a vast, museum-like building in Palm Desert, Calif., outside of Palm Springs, present a number of outstanding glass artists. One is Karen LaMonte, who at first looked to her Czech predecessors for a means to bypass glass-blowing for the possibilities afforded by casting. After studying at the Rhode Island School of Design and finding herself fascinated by the vitreous simulacra of fabric enclosing some tiny glass sculpture she'd made, she moved in the late 1990s to Prague, the traditional

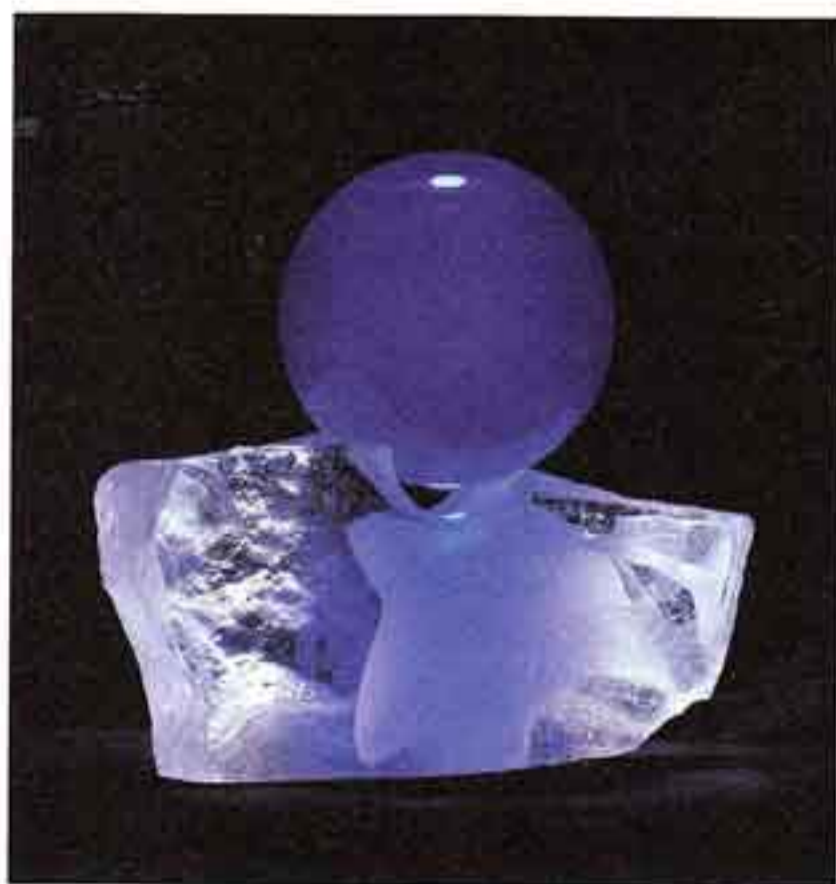


Clockwise from top: David James, *Tsunami*; Vaclav Cigler, *Cone Sculpture*, 1999; Laura de Santillana, *Permafrost*, 2007.

center of glass casting. There, with the devoted help of Czech technicians, she created the piece titled *Vestige*, her first life-size, hollow glass dress. It took her the better part of a year. Produced using the lost-wax process on a daunting scale, it was nothing short of a major technological invention, and the prototype of much of her later work.

As well as these haunting, translucent glass dresses, LaMonte makes other types of glass pieces, including a kind fabric-derived monotype and various low reliefs and mirrors, as well as standing bronze kimonos. The dresses remain central, however; they hark back to Greek fragments and to the drapery-obsessed sculpture of the 18th-century Italians Giacomo Serpotta and Giuseppe Sanmartino. These shimmering garments embody the evanescent interplay among anxious human desires: for self-display and self-concealment, for fashionable *bon ton*, for the postponement of aging and the cancellation of mortality.

If you've ever been captivated by "slow food" you may well go for Matt Eskuche's carefully wrought, slow-trash sculpture. Eskuche also shows at Imago, and his subject is the poetry of consumer waste, the delicacy, humor and sublime stupidity of crumpled paper and plastic when replicated in glass. A native of Pittsburgh whose often hilarious, trash-mimicking pieces were recently shown in the Racine Art Museum's *Windows on Fifth*



Gallery, Eskuche uses borosilicate tubing to elevate glass from a craft to an art while simultaneously devoting that art to crafting rubbish, a paradoxical exercise. Using a variety of materials beside glass, and often painting the whole a unifying white, he employs numerous transformational strategies to create tableaux of weirdly attractive refuse which overflows from garbage cans, table-tops, even antique cabinets.

Also represented by Imago is Clifford Rainey, who heads the glass program at the California College of the Arts, in Oakland. Rainey, who is originally from Northern Ireland, has long tried to incorporate social concerns into his

work, in a non-literal way. Rainey, who has been exhibiting internationally for 35 years, is a glass sculptor properly speaking, with a fully developed personal conception of the figure, but he uses other materials than glass in his work. Though various fetishistic objects recur in his imaginative repertoire—an altered Coca-Cola bottle is one—the human body (generally headless) holds the place of honor: it is sometimes mutilated (a reference perhaps to the "troubles" of his native land), sometimes merely wounded, bound, bandaged or wired optimistically into quasi-wholeness.

Rainey also shows at the Bullseye Gallery, in Portland, Ore. Managed by Lani McGregor, this is the exhibition space of the Bullseye Glass Company, which for almost 40 years has produced



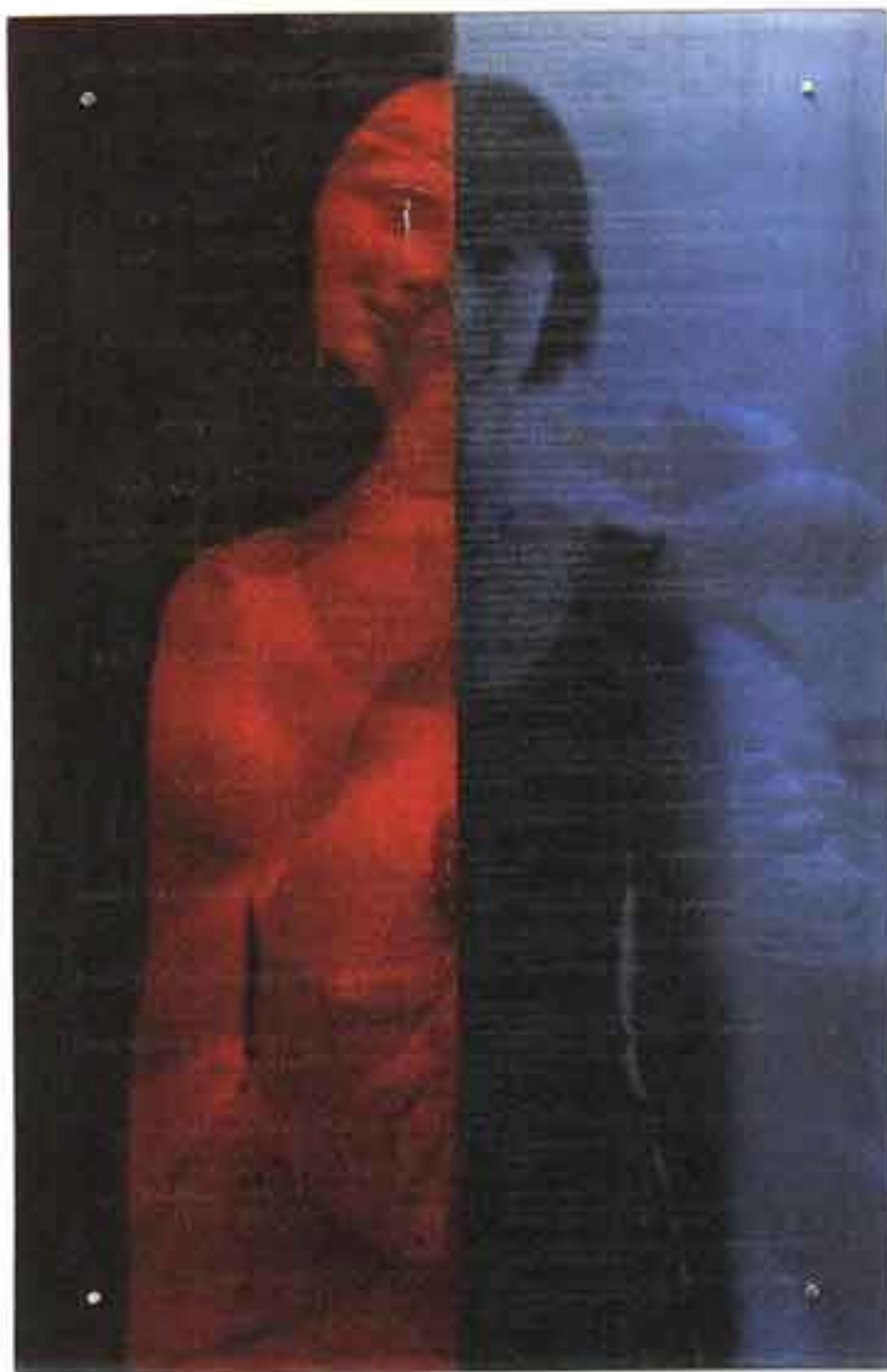
Clockwise from top: David James, *Heaven and Earth*; Frantisek Vizner, *Green Bowl With Line*, 2008; Toots Zynsky, *Ambito*, 2009.

colored glass for architectural and artistic use. The gallery shows the work of artists exploring the potential of kiln-formed glass, and also facilitates their progress technologically. Lani and her team are also deeply committed to furthering teaching programs in glass art. "When we started," says Michael Endo, the assistant curator there and an instructor-technician, "there was no customer base. We weren't meeting a need, we were creating one. Most people didn't know what kiln-formed glass was. So education was essential—we were creating and still are creating our customer base." Bullseye has educational resource centers in San Francisco and Santa Fe as well as Portland, and it's always trying to attract a younger audience. "We're battling against the stigma of 'craft,'" Endo says, wondering why anyone would question whether the work of, say, Klaus Moje, a veteran artist whom Bullseye shows, belongs to the advanced art community as well as to the studio glass crowd. (Moje is the German-trained founder of the internationally preeminent Glass Workshop at the Canberra School of Art at the Australian National University.)

Two very young artists sponsored by Bullseye are Carrie Iver-

son and April Surgent. Iverson studied creative writing at Yale and painting at the Chicago Art Institute; in Chicago she won created the Emmy-winning Façade Project, in which images of the faces of American casualties in the Iraq War were displayed to passers-by on the El. Concerned with means whereby her concerns with social and medical issues could be given visual, metaphorical form, Iverson, who in her earlier printmaking showed a notable gift for the monotype, has found a method of translating printmaking techniques into glass in the kiln.

April Surgent, who is only 28, studied glass-blowing in Detroit when she was 16; finding it too limited for her purposes, however, she left to get a degree at the University of Canberra, Australia, which has the best kiln-formed glass program in the world. Like a number of other contemporary glass artists, Surgent is fascinated by glass as a medium with a peculiar relation to memory. She uses the cameo-engraving technique to conjure images out of layers of fused and colored glass. Her pieces have a photographic look, but the photos she takes are used only as reference, and none of the layers is photo-sensitive. She takes her own photos, manipu-



This page: Kate Baker, *Untitled Diptych (Cipher Series)*, 2011. Opposite: April Surgent, *Into the Surface*, 2010.

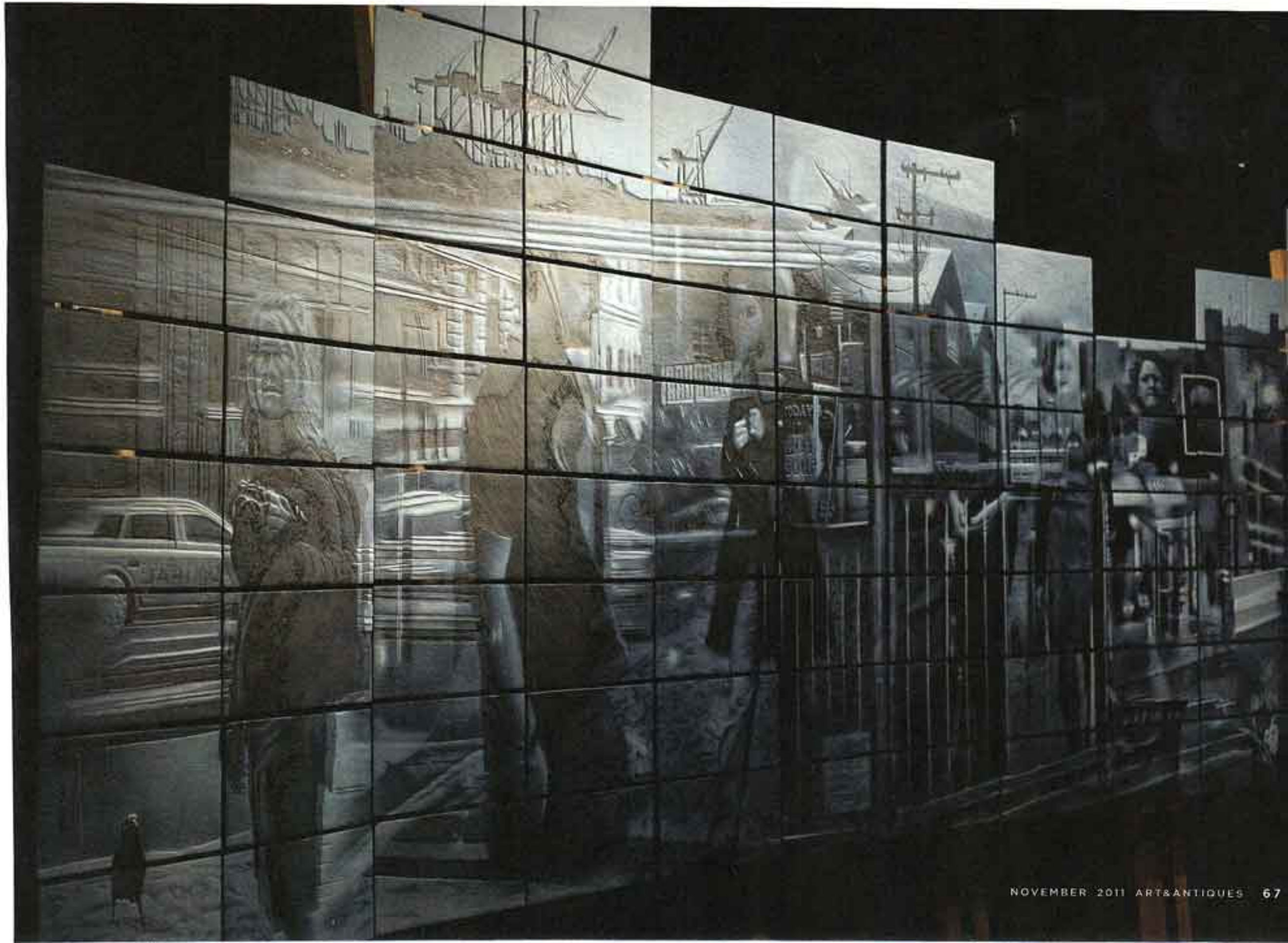
lates them a little, and once she has a final composition kiln-fuses three panels of Bullseye glass at the same size as the photo. "One is white-opal," she says, "and one is pale, and the back one is dark. Then I take the photo and I copy it freehand on the top layer, or, if it's really complicated, trace the main lines with carbon paper and then continue drawing freehand. Then I use an engraving lathe and I cut into the panel." How deep she goes determines the value or tone she will get.

Surgent says that a "huge, huge influence" has been Jiri Harcuba, the eminent Czech glass engraver, who is now in his 80s, whom she's worked with and later taught with and whom she regards as her mentor. Harcuba, as Surgent points out, was originally trained as a factory apprentice to "do the same conservative thing over and over" before discovering a gift for gestural, quasi-abstract work, and "though he never would think I'm a great engraver or anything," she adds modestly, he liked it "that I was doing something new with engraving." Surgent has also been influenced by unknown glass engravers whose work she has across, and by the WPA photography of the Depression years.

Among the great historic exhibition spaces serving many glass artists is the Traver Gallery, which William Traver opened in Seat-

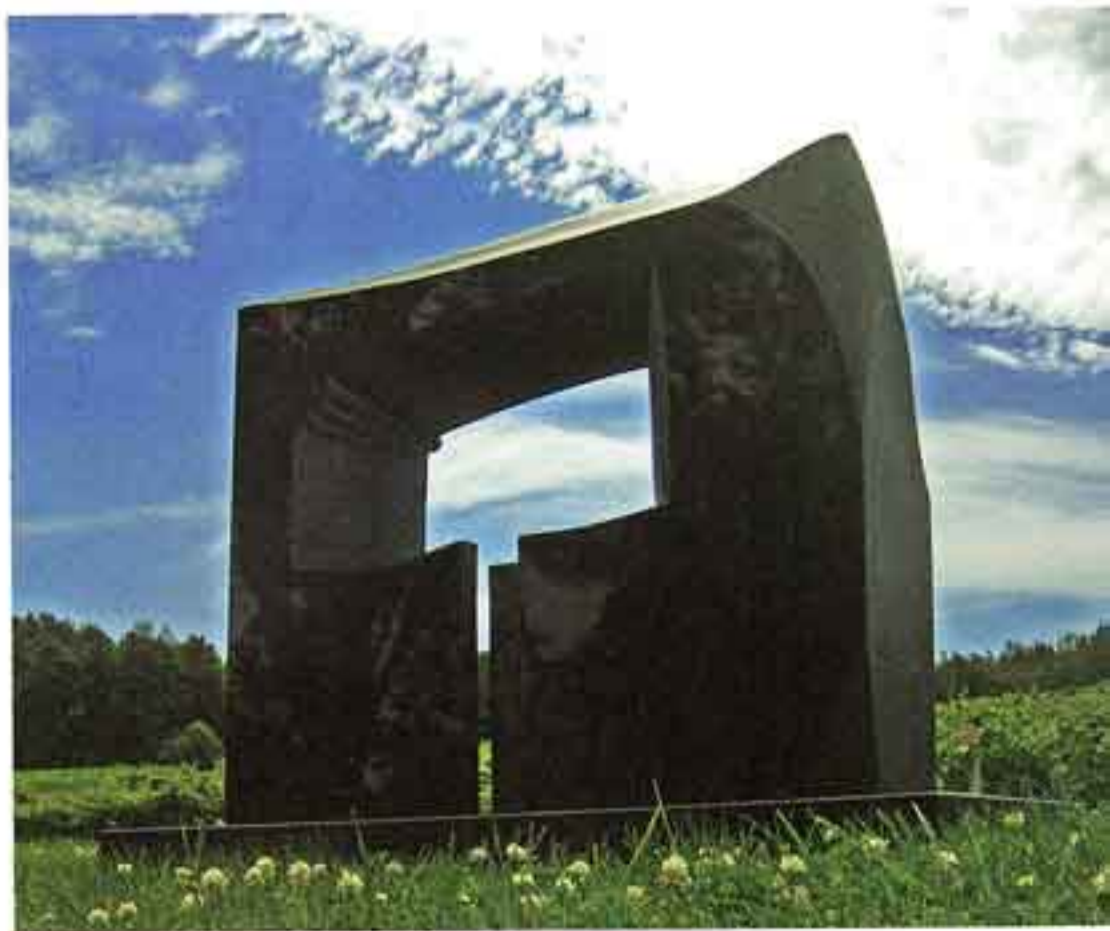
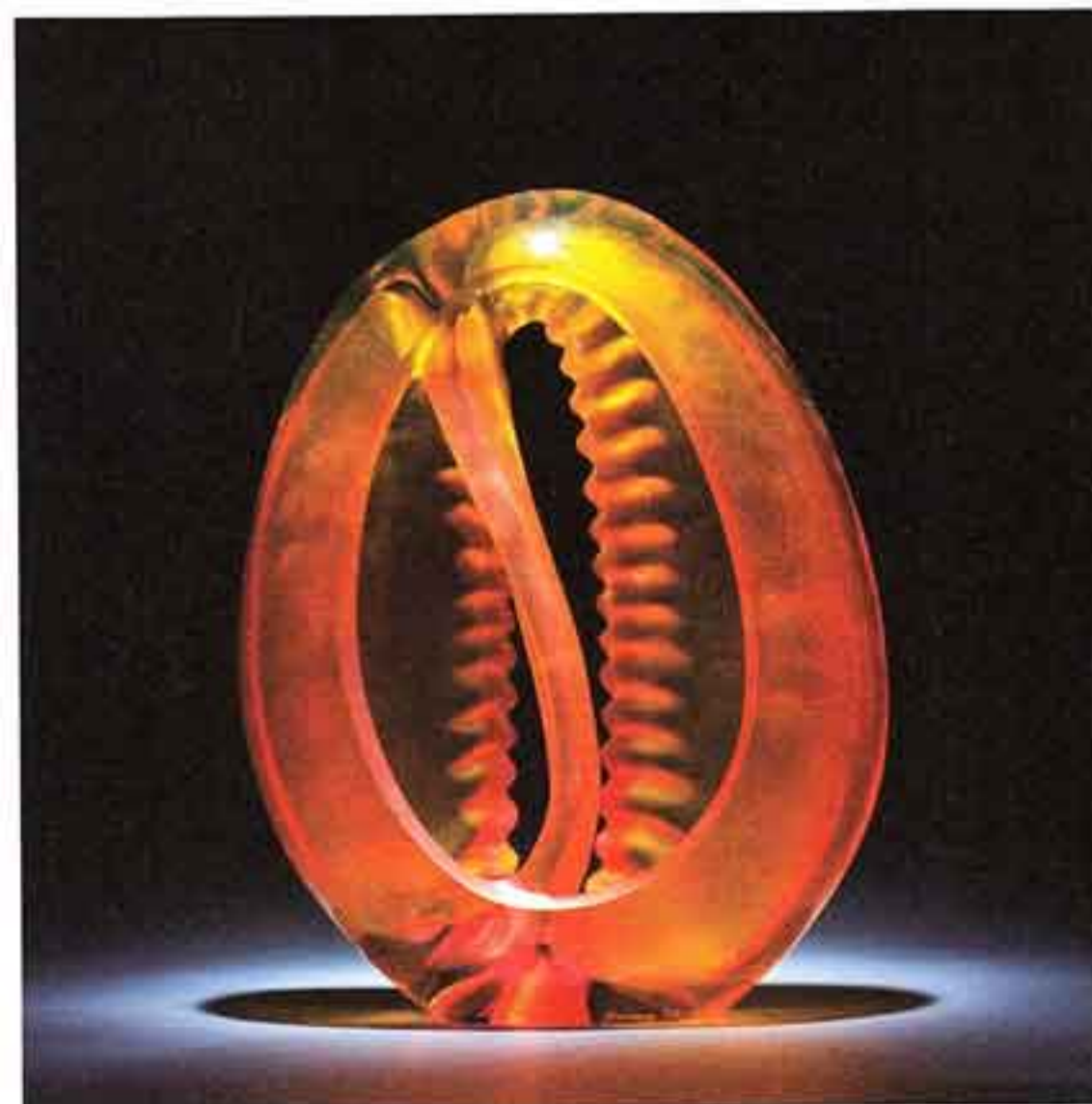
tle in 1977 and which is intimately associated with Seattle's Studio Glass movement and the Pilchuck Glass School, near Puget Sound. About 10 years ago William's daughter, Sarah, took over the direction of the gallery, but she has maintained the same aesthetic direction and is pleased that it's stayed in the family. "We're really encouraged by the enthusiasm we're seeing among younger artists," she notes. "It has a lot to do with the precedent established by Dale [Chihuly] and Lino [Tagliapietra, the great Italian glassblower], who helped build a collector base." More recently the De La Torre brothers have encouraged quite a few younger artists, like Edison Zapata, to think more broadly about how glass is used, about how you can bring the vernacular of one culture with you into another."

The De La Torre brothers are Einar and Jamex, who show their work at Traver. Though they hail originally from Guadalajara, one of Mexico's most conservative cities, their work thumbs its nose at practically everybody. ("I got kind of nervous when we showed our work recently back in Guadalajara," Einar says.) The De La Torres attended Long Beach State University in the '80s, where they got hooked on glass, and "by 2000," he says, "we were known for what we did together." Using blown glass in tandem with molds





This page, clockwise from top left: Karen LaMonte, *Geisha*; Preston Singletary, *Lure of the Exotic*; David James, *Portal In granite*. Opposite, from left: *Tanque You* and *Death of Craft*, both by Einar and Jamex de la Torre.



and epoxy resin, and often coating finished pieces with clear plastic, they take all the clichés of Pre-Columbian and Mexican Catholic devotional and folk art and spoof them by combining them with pop culture imagery, Japanese anime, wiggled-out versions of altarpieces, and candy-colored, monster-like idols. “Those figures are loosely influenced by the Mexican drug trade, and at the same time by bloodthirsty Aztec imagery,” Einar told me. “There’s an analogy there—some people talk about *narco-piñatas*. Frankly, we have no choice but to be cynical about what’s happening in our country.” The wonderful vicious idols are rather like the “wrathful deities” of Tibetan Buddhist iconography in that they do not crave propitiation but rather serve as purgatives, drawing all the bile and frustration and gallows humor out of our own souls.

Oeno Gallery, in Bloomfield, Ontario, Canada, represents a number of glass artists, exhibiting their work alongside sculpture and painting. Owner Carlyn Moulton cites David James as one artist who eschews vessel-based forms in favor of pure abstraction. The Ontario-born artist is a former journalist and management consultant who was introduced to glass art in the 1990s while on a trip to Germany, where he met the glass artist and teacher Irwin Eisch. Moulton says that James is interesting because he works simultaneously in cast glass and stone, motivated by a desire to



see the same form in different scales. “He does his sculpture first in glass, then has it fabricated in granite,” says Moulton. “I have these beautiful lead crystal small pieces of his, which are still massively heavy, and the versions in Belfast black granite are 6 to 8 feet high and weigh three tons. He wanted to feel the work on a larger scale, and the only way he could do it was in stone.”

The Blue Rain Gallery, in Santa Fe, directed by Leroy Garcia, is heavily committed to native American and regional art. The gallery sponsors a number of glass artists, including Preston Singletary, a sculptor of Tlingit ancestry, who is known internationally for work which generally incorporates a Northwest Coast Indian design sensibility. Yet Singletary, a virtuoso craftsman who may



work both very large and very small, is also steeped in traditional European skills, having studied at Kosta Boda, in Sweden, and in the Venetian island of Murano. Singletary moves easily from glassblowing to sand-carving to inlaying—he’s interested in the stories that a piece can tell as you move around it or scrutinize its shadows when it’s lighted—and he’s been keen to translate an aesthetic traditionally tied to woodcarving into the new medium of glass. At the same time, he doesn’t see himself as merely an “ethnic” artist, but, more cannily, as a bridge between traditional Northwest Indian design and the “primitivist” strain in modernism. At the SOFA Fair in Chicago this month, Blue Rain will be presenting a collaborative show of glass work by Singletary and his longtime friend Dante Marioni, titled “Primitive–Elegant.”

And the work goes on. Despite the artists’ and gallery people’s intermittent frustration with the task of presenting studio glass as a field of expression not dissociated from serious art as a whole, much of this material seems at least as challenging as the most ambitious sculpture or painting. And you recognize the makers’ daring mentality. “I experimented and experimented!” you hear one say. Or, “I broke lots and lots of glass!”