

ARTS ENTERTAINMENT

BLOWOUT

Millennium exhibit celebrates blood, sweat, and tears of hot glass **By Kara Fitzgerald**

Stephen Rolfe Powell's glass vessels seduce their viewers. The smooth, curvaceous bulbs hint at erogenous zones and taunt the senses. Buttocks, breasts, and testicles are represented in a sensual and erotic manner, causing many viewers to want to fondle his creations (an impulse, but not a practice, he welcomes). And with names like "Undulating Groan Jones," "Teasing Buns Johnson," and "Lucid Lips Smith," you can hardly blame the curious viewers.

"I've never been interested in representational art. I appreciate it, but I've never wanted to make pieces that tell a story or make a political statement because, for me, that's too easy," explains Powell as to why he chose the vessel as his sculptural form.

"I've always been fascinated with what are called abstract expressionists—which I think is a misnomer because they're not really abstract, they're nonrepresentational. The use of color is not abstracted from anything. Color and form can make a statement on their own."

Beauty is Powell's ultimate goal when creating a piece, even though he says, "That's still a dirty word... it's 'ugly and controversial and shocking.' Look at Dada and surrealism...the shock value is the key issue and so maybe in a way doing things that are beautiful is controversial."

"The search for color is what my work is mainly about," Powell says of his passion for glassblowing.

Created by thousands of murrini beads, the hot oranges and reds, cool blues and purples, and luscious greens and lavenders form a textured mosaic on the vessels' surfaces. They swirl around the glass like cotton candy, the process being similar to a taffy-pull, exploding in random places with bursts of unexpected colors. He is one of the few people in the country who has mastered this technique which ultimately results in something like a stained glass window effect.

"I was a painter at first in ceramics, but glass just offers ways to deal with color that

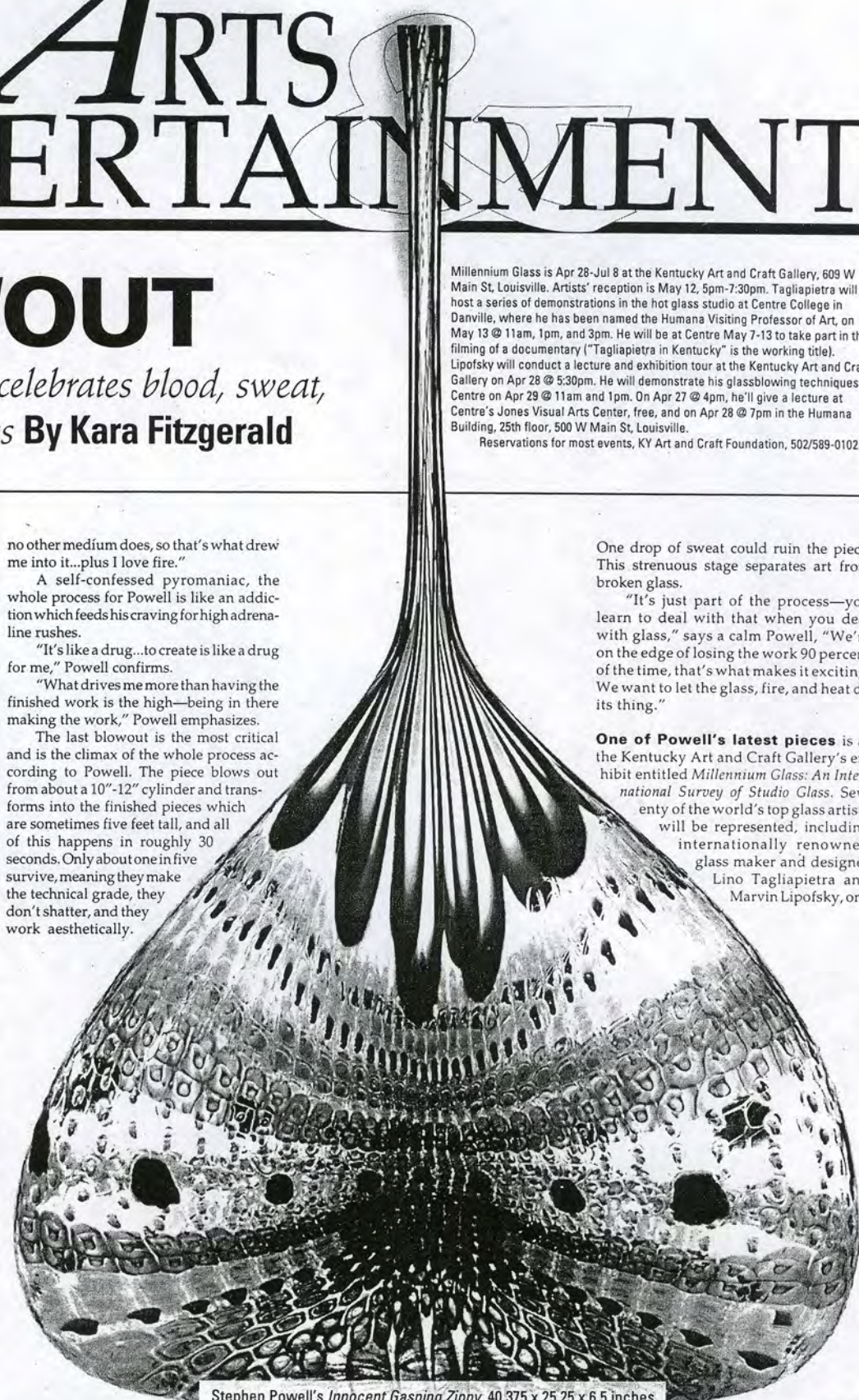
no other medium does, so that's what drew me into it...plus I love fire."

A self-confessed pyromaniac, the whole process for Powell is like an addiction which feeds his craving for high adrenaline rushes.

"It's like a drug...to create is like a drug for me," Powell confirms.

"What drives me more than having the finished work is the high—being in there making the work," Powell emphasizes.

The last blowout is the most critical and is the climax of the whole process according to Powell. The piece blows out from about a 10"-12" cylinder and transforms into the finished pieces which are sometimes five feet tall, and all of this happens in roughly 30 seconds. Only about one in five survive, meaning they make the technical grade, they don't shatter, and they work aesthetically.



Stephen Powell's *Innocent Gasping Zippy*, 40.375 x 25.25 x 6.5 inches.

Millennium Glass is Apr 28-Jul 8 at the Kentucky Art and Craft Gallery, 609 W Main St, Louisville. Artists' reception is May 12, 5pm-7:30pm. Tagliapietra will host a series of demonstrations in the hot glass studio at Centre College in Danville, where he has been named the Humana Visiting Professor of Art, on May 13 @ 11am, 1pm, and 3pm. He will be at Centre May 7-13 to take part in the filming of a documentary ("Tagliapietra in Kentucky" is the working title). Lipofsky will conduct a lecture and exhibition tour at the Kentucky Art and Craft Gallery on Apr 28 @ 5:30pm. He will demonstrate his glassblowing techniques at Centre on Apr 29 @ 11am and 1pm. On Apr 27 @ 4pm, he'll give a lecture at Centre's Jones Visual Arts Center, free, and on Apr 28 @ 7pm in the Humana Building, 25th floor, 500 W Main St, Louisville.
Reservations for most events, KY Art and Craft Foundation, 502/589-0102.

One drop of sweat could ruin the piece. This strenuous stage separates art from broken glass.

"It's just part of the process—you learn to deal with that when you deal with glass," says a calm Powell, "We're on the edge of losing the work 90 percent of the time, that's what makes it exciting. We want to let the glass, fire, and heat do its thing."

One of Powell's latest pieces is at the Kentucky Art and Craft Gallery's exhibit entitled *Millennium Glass: An International Survey of Studio Glass*. Seventy of the world's top glass artists will be represented, including internationally renowned glass maker and designer Lino Tagliapietra and Marvin Lipofsky, one

BIO

Stephen Powell's life reads like a script for a great movie.

He's one of the most prominent glass artists in the world and *Kentucky Monthly* named him one of Kentucky's top 20 artists of the 20th century. He was one of eight Americans chosen for Venezia Aperto Vetro 1998, a prestigious glass exhibition in Venice.

And his career was dramatically almost destroyed in a well-publicized accident.

In 1991, a window pane shattered as he was attempting to free a bird from his studio space, severing Powell's tendons, a nerve and an artery in his right hand. After a complicated surgery and months of physical therapy, Powell was in front of the fire once again and his work reached a new height. Even when "glass got him" it didn't deter him from his art for long.

He is an associate professor of art at Centre College, holds the Cantrell Professorship in the Humanities and was recently named 1999 Kentucky Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Powell graduated from Centre in 1974 and after earning an M.F.A in ceramics at Louisiana State University, he returned to Centre to teach, and ultimately built their glass program from the ground up. (He coached tennis in his spare time.)

Initially, he made do with space on the roof of the Norton Center for the Arts, but recently moved to a state-of-the-art glass studio that is currently one of the finest in the country.

As for why someone with his international reputation opts for the relative obscurity of a small town like Danville, as opposed to more metropolitan digs, Powell says, "I certainly miss living in a wet county and having restaurants and more cultural things closer to me, and I've had some offers to leave—but it just happens that there's a Corning glass factory eight miles from me and a Philips glass plant near Centre...terrific resources, and Centre has been so supportive.

"Glass has it all, it's so physical...and the fire and what you can do with the color. I can't really imagine doing anything else." —KF

of the very early figures in the contemporary glass movement.

"To be able to work with these two artists [Lipofsky and Tagliapietra] is the ultimate. I admired them when I was struggling to show work anywhere," recalls Powell.

"We're on the edge of losing the work 90 percent of the time—that's what makes it exciting. We want to let the glass, fire, and heat do its thing." —Stephen Powell

"I actually assisted Lino at a school called Pilchuck in Seattle, but I don't even think he probably knew who I was. Of course, he'll say that he remembers me 'cause he's such a gentleman," chuckles Powell.

"When I'm talking to my students about the feel of his pieces, and they have a real sensual quality about them, I generally compare his work to Georgia O'Keefe paintings."

For the exhibit, artists were asked to design a glasswork reflecting their views of the new millennium. Powell has been working with Brion Clinkingbeard, Kentucky Art and Craft Director of Exhibitions and Curator, and Adele Light, a glass collector, in organizing this event.

"We wanted to do a special show for the millennium and we had some good resources, so we thought 'let's invite the best artists in the world,'" says Clinkingbeard, "We're mostly surprised that almost everybody we asked said yes. We're really trying to promote the art form."

"The show's going to be a knockout," affirms Powell, "This event is certainly the highlight of my teaching career." ■

May

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Friday

**MAIN
STAGE**

7:15 - 7:45
8:10 - 8:50
9:10 - 9:50
10:15 - 11:45

verizonwireless
STAGE

7:15 - 8:00
8:15 - 8:55
9:10 - 10:05
10:30 - 11:45

CityBeat
STAGE

7:15 - 7:55
8:15 - 9:00
9:20 - 10:00
10:30 - 11:45