

# Bottled Up

*Powell's glass works are bodacious and audacious*

REVIEW BY CATE O'HARA

**T**hey are sexy. They are curvaceous. They are beautiful. They are big.

They are the sexy, curvaceous, beautiful, big glass bottles that comprise *Stephen Rolfe Powell: Breaking Traditions*.

Trained as a painter, later a ceramist, Kentucky-based Powell finds in glass the perfect marriage of the two: paint's translucent, glowing colors and clay's sensuous plasticity. Oh, and he likes fire.

The 11 glass bottles in this show share an immensity of scale, each standing between three and four feet tall, with circumferences that reach as much as two feet at their widest points. Their colors glow softly in the dim gallery. Any genie would be fortunate to have one for a home.

Each has a long slender neck that flows gracefully into sloping shoulders before sweeping out into a one-, two- or three-lobed orb that calls to mind everything from Southern ladies' hoop skirts to ancient fertility goddesses to buttocks, breasts and lips. For example,

"Discombobulating Cleavage Smith" has a full-figured dual-lobed body featuring a tender pink stripe studded with a row of brilliant cobalt blue nipples.

Use of color also unites these "ladies" as vertical stripes from the neck meet horizontal bands of color, often set with spots of another color that fade, one into the next, around the bodies, more intensely concentrated where the bottle is narrowest or two lobes come together and more translucently pastel at the widest points.

"Sanguine Giverny Jones" contains all the Impressionistic blues, pinks, purples and aquas of one of Claude Monet's famous water lily paintings that he made 100 years ago in his garden at Giverny outside of Paris. Maintaining the garden theme, the cobalt and teal of the neck run down in saturated streams above a central stripe set with dots that resemble orange-red bell-shaped flowers, each with a pollen-loaded yellow stamen.

In many of the bottles, the glass itself is textured, adding to the visual interest and calling to mind such things as honeycombs, the veins in marble, the patterns in malachite, bubbles trapped in amber or fossils in a stone worn smooth by flowing water. These textures together with the orderly, changing hues evoke the stratification of the earth or a cross-section of the atmosphere.

The simple, single round lobe of "Promiscuous Nubile Jones" suggests a

glassy geological formation, each stripe offering a different-colored hint of past lives or ancestral memories, while "Dancing Rwanda Montra" is textured with an overall

pattern of whorls, as if we are viewing from above the swirling skirts of an old-fashioned formal waltz where each dancer performs precisely the same moves in exactly the right place.

"Audacious Lemon Lips" travels further afield with its girdles of celestial orbs in yellow, orange and pink, each circumnavigated by a ring of a darker hue. The large deep blue spots of "Laconic Fig Flirtation" emerge from a field of smaller golden dots, like watery planets before the far-away stars.

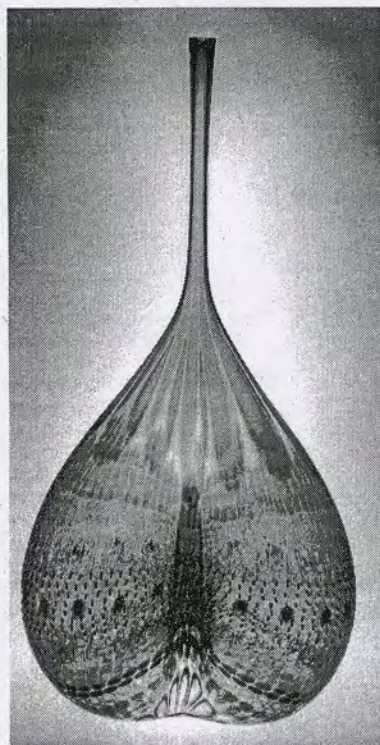
These references to ancient forms and past lives remind us that the vessel is one of the oldest artifacts of human life, and part of

what sets us apart from other animals. To survive, people had to gather, collect and plan ahead. They needed baskets, clay bowls, water vessels and other storage containers. As religions developed, the vessel often took on a spiritual and ritual significance as well.

While far removed from their utilitarian and religious antecedents, Powell's purely decorative bottles carry the memory of ancient peoples and the containers they made. The flattened form of "Catatonic Hallucination Jones," for example, wears around its shoulders a necklace of brown stripes resembling the porcupine quills that native Americans traditionally used for adornment. A series of dark orange marks below subtle aqua circles on the body of "Molten Lunar Lips" suggests archaic pictographs or mysterious hieroglyphs.

Displayed on black pedestals against white light boxes surrounded by black frames, each vase becomes an emblem of serenity— seducing us with its form and color, amusing us with its titillating title and inviting us to linger and experience each glowing color change and the unique elliptical line of the body.

**STEPHEN ROLFE POWELL: BREAKING TRADITIONS** is on view at Marta Hewett Gallery through Dec. 11.



**Stephen Rolfe Powell's  
"Discombobulating Cleavage Smith"**