



THE MAESTRO OF MOLTEN GLASS



Stephen Rolfe Powell, one of the world's foremost glass artists, creates magic in a small-town Kentucky studio

By Vickie Mitchell | Photos by Kirk Schlea

Artist Stephen Rolfe Powell sometimes thinks about where his career might have gone had he devoted more time to the drums or taken the piano lessons he's sure his parents offered when he was a child growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, in the '50s and '60s. He does, after all, love music. "I'd be a musician," he said.

Instead, the Centre College art professor is a rock star in a different genre, studio glass art. Using blowpipes, molten glass, and thousands of bits of colored glass called murrini, he's composed magical, multicolored abstract vessels that suggest voluptuous backsides; big, fat birds; and

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Saturn's rings. Bands of ever-changing Centre students have been his accompanists, as he has become known as one of the maestros of glass art.

"He is one of the pillars of the contemporary glass movement," said glass artist Duncan McClellan, who sells Powell's work at his Duncan McClellan Gallery in St. Petersburg, Florida.

Che Rhodes, one of Powell's former students, agrees. Like his professor, Rhodes is now an artist and an educator, leading the glass arts program at the University of Louisville for the past 13 years. "Just the other day I picked up a 2012 issue of Glass magazine, the premier publication in the field of glass art. 2012 was the 50th year of the

studio glass movement, and the magazine had picked the 50 most influential artists." Of course, said Rhodes, Powell is on the list, as is Powell's mentor and friend Lino Tagliapietra, considered the world's finest glass artist. In the book *Stephen Rolfe Powell, Glassmaker*, published in 2007 by the University Press of Kentucky, Tagliapietra wrote that when he first saw Powell's work he wondered, "To which Venetian Maestro can I attribute such artistry?"

A LARGER REPUTATION, A BIGGER STUDIO

For most of his career, Powell split his time between a small studio on his farm

near Danville and the studio he and his student assistants built at Centre. There was no glass-art program when Powell arrived to teach at his alma mater in 1983, and he literally built the now-esteemed program's first hot shop using materials donated by local glass manufacturers and manpower from students.

A few years ago, like the band that becomes so famous it can finally move out of the garage, Powell was able to consolidate his studio work under one very large roof, and he moved his studio to the abandoned Coca-Cola plant on Danville's edge. At 23,000 square feet, the building he bought is about a half acre in size and almost 20 times as large as his old studio. He jokes



Once a Coca-Cola plant, Powell's 23,000-square-foot studio accommodates a modern gallery and workshop.

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that his wife, Shelly, was relieved to have his studio finally out from under foot.

Through renovations accomplished in stages, the low-slung, vanilla brick building has become a modern gallery and workspace, stripped of the mauve wallpaper and popcorn ceilings of the 1980s, its industrial roots restored. Floors are polished concrete, walls are white, ceilings are high, windows are wide. "I never imagined I would have a space this big and nice," said Powell, still a little awed by where he's landed.

It's a space where his luminous, richly hued glass seems at home. Against white walls and in front of bright windows, Teasers, Screamers, Whackos, Echoes, and his latest series, Zoomers, are effusive and radiant in colors of the sky, sea, and sun. On the drabest days, they make Powell's studio the brightest spot in town.

The studio space is seriously large and has allowed Powell, for the first time, to put everything he needs to do his work — and more — under one roof. There are office spaces for Powell and office manager Mitzi Elliott. A gallery, which is not open to the general public, is primarily used to mock up shows or to show off work to collectors who visit the studio, but it has been used for special events, as well. In a room not much smaller than Powell's old studio, assistants polish and do other finish work on glass pieces. Near the back of the building, there are a hot shop and two enormous ovens, used for the Zoomers series.

In addition to all the workspace the studio has its playful side. For example, plumbing meets fine glass art in the large restroom Powell designed. Curved glass tubes like those he uses for his Screamers series have become spigots for blown-glass sinks and showerheads for a rainfall-style shower. The shower floor is cast glass and lighted from below. In a huge space he and Elliott jokingly call the "great room," two pool tables give staff a way to unwind. In the former loading dock, now used for indoor parking and storage, there's an indoor basketball court.

GLASS MAKING BUILDS MUSCLE

Physical fitness, it turns out, is critical to glassmaking. Those physically demanding aspects — from working with four-figure temperatures to hefting 20 or more pounds of molten glass on the end of a metal rod — drew Powell to glass and away from ceramics, his

Clockwise from top left, called murrini, these bits of colored glass form the basis of Powell's work; Powell relies on assistants such as apprentice Adam Haigh to help in the studio; Powell "strip gathers" glass that will become a sphere to go on a Zoomer; the finished work belies the physical effort that goes into its making; a blow torch is one of the tools of Powell's art.

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Nostalgic Gasping Dusk, Lascivious Torrid Cleavage, Lemon Lurching Mania, Teasing Frantic Lurch, Intrepid Yearning Gaze. Who coins the creative and colorful names for Stephen Rolfe Powell's large and lusciously hued glass art vessels? "I control the names," he says.

Most of the pieces have three-word monikers, like people. "We all have three names, mostly. I do," Powell says. "It's just a normal naming thing."

But the names, like Powell's art, certainly aren't typical. They are funny, suggestive, superlative. "They make me laugh," said artist and gallery owner Duncan McClellan, who sells Powell's art at his gallery in St. Petersburg, Florida.

For Powell's Teasers series — undulating vessels that look like colorfully clothed backsides and breasts — words like cleavage, buns, and cheeks pop up in names. Puffer, craning, and trumpeting are some of the avian terms he's chosen for pieces in his Wackos and Screamers series, which look like birds with thin, graceful necks and fat, round Technicolor bodies. Names are also inspired by something that the piece suggests to him, for example a sunset or a scuba dive. Sometimes, they exude a personality that he cleverly describes through a name.

Over the past couple of decades, Powell has produced hundreds of pieces, and he admits he does have his favorites. About 90 of them, in fact, which he owns. He's starting to question his attachment a bit. "What am I going to do with them?" he said. "They're like children in a way. I need to let them go."

area of study in graduate school at Louisiana State University. He has always been athletically inclined; not only did Powell study art when he was a student at Centre, but he also was a top player on its tennis team.

He has continued to play the sport each Wednesday night for the past 30 years with a group of men at the Lexington Tennis Club. "It helps me keep my sanity," he said.

But it also helps keep Powell in shape. Moving a blob of molten glass to and from a hot fire as it is shaped into a vessel requires strong arms; tennis helps, especially as he's recovered from serious injuries to both arms. The latest was a compound fracture of his left arm, caused by a fall on a water taxi ramp while he was in Venice visiting Tagliapietra.

He makes sure his student assistants keep fit as well. "When he came to the gallery to do a demonstration, he brought his team," said McClellan. "He put them through stretching exercises, and he was right there with them, doing jumping jacks."

ABANDONING THE SOLITUDE OF CERAMICS

The need to work with others pushed Powell away from the solitude of ceramics. Like doubles tennis, glass art requires teamwork and collaboration.

"Glass requires community; you have to help," he said. "I didn't want to be a backwoods potter, so I created this situation where I totally depended on other people, but in a good way."



Powell and assistant Mitzie Elliott inspect a portion of a curved freestanding panel that is a signature of his new Zoomers series.

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Powell's art extends to the curved glass sinks and spigots in the large studio restroom.

John Irvin Jr., a Lexington attorney and one of Powell's tennis partners, has watched him on the tennis court and in the studio. He marvels at how Powell and his student assistants work harmoniously through the many small steps one of Powell's pieces requires, like making the long, pencil-thin lengths of murrini, cutting them into small bits and arranging them in patterns that when heated and blown give Powell's work its color, pop, and textures.

"The process is not happenstance, yet it is sort of a moving work that you can't completely control in any way," said Irvin. "When you see the background work, you appreciate the final product a lot more."

SCHOOLING FUTURE ARTISTS AND EDUCATORS

In the early years of Powell's career, the age difference between him and his student assistants was a few years, not a few decades as it is today. That led to a tightknit group that could often be found in the hot shop in the wee hours of the morning. "We just wanted to make work, and we worked on a regular basis," Powell said.

"If there was a group that had the most impact, it would be my early assistants. We were tight. They trusted me, and I didn't really know what I was doing," he said.

Some would argue otherwise. As Powell was making art, he was also subtly schooling future studio artists like Brook White, who now runs Flame Run Glass Studio in Louisville, and artist educators like Rhodes and Patrick Martin, who runs the glass program at Emporia State University in Kansas.

Even though Rhodes and other students sometimes puzzled over Powell's seemingly far-out ideas, they quickly learned he wasn't prone to pipe dreams.

"He has this little tiny pond on his farm, and he started talking about wanting to get a jet ski for it," said Rhodes. The pond's diminutive size, abundant stumps, and other hazards made the

idea seem a little crazy, even to college students. But Powell got the jet ski, and the students hopped on. Not only did they jet ski but "before the week was over, we were water skiing on the pond," said Rhodes. "There was no grasp of the concept of impossible for him in terms of something he wanted to accomplish."

ZOOMING INTO THE FUTURE

Now, with his larger studio and the luxury of time his current sabbatical affords, Powell can delve deeper into his work.

He's preparing for a trip to the Italian island of Murano, home of Italian glassmaking, in May. There, he'll join Tagliapietra and



Changing shapes reflect the progression of Powell's work.

in Lexington custom built. Without the new studio space, making Zoomers would not have been possible. Its size opens new artistic possibilities.

"It gives him the freedom to do whatever it is that he wants to

1,500 glass artists from around the world at the Glass Art Society's conference. Powell is vice president of the society's board.

He'll also spend more time in the studio, perfecting the process of making his new Zoomers series. Although these pieces continue to use murrinis, which have come to define Powell's work, they mark a shift as well.

"It is the first series that is not blown glass," he said.

Instead, the pieces are baked in two gigantic ovens that Powell designed and a friend

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do, with no limitations," said Rhodes. "He doesn't have something confining his work physically. He needs a big space."

And although the curved, freestanding panels seem a departure, Zoomers actually magnify his previous works, echoing and enlarging his distinctive colors and patterns. The idea for them came from blown-up detail photos of Teasers, Screamers, and other three-dimensional pieces like those pictured in the University Press book about his career.

"With these panels, I think there are a lot of different possibilities for shapes and flow patterns," Powell said. "We've just barely started."

Critics at a show in Chicago last year applauded the pieces, and shortly after, Powell and his Zoomers were the cover story of Glass magazine.

"I'd say one of the Zoomers I saw was certainly in the top 10 pieces of glass I have seen in the last 15 years, if not ever," said Rhodes. "It is a little different approach than what he was doing 20 years ago when he relied on more of a crew. Now he has adjusted the approach to making work to suit his environment and his situation. But if you look at what he is trying to do with color and the sensation of color, what is at the heart of that, what is driving it is still in there. The vehicle has changed, but there is a very powerful concept driving it that's present through every series."

Experimenting with new processes is Powell's passion. As in the past, after working with the Zoomers for a year or two, he probably will move on to another concept and challenge. He's found that like making music, making glass is a fluid process, a matter of nailing down a tune, then moving on to compose another melody. **KM**



"They're like my children in a way," Powell says of his creations.

SEEING POWELL'S WORK

Although Stephen Rolfe Powell's glass art studio in Danville is not open to the public, you can see his work in several public places in Central Kentucky.

The Kentucky Artisans Center near Berea displays Powell's work, and a chandelier-style piece Powell created using 365 glass bulbs hangs in the Danville Public Library. To the southwest at the Maker's Mark Distillery in Loretto, one of Powell's Screamers is displayed near the gift shop. Its colors echo those of a Maker's Mark bottle; Powell etched the distillery's logo in the glass pieces he uses to add color to his work, creating an abstract logo in the blown glass vessel.

In Lexington, several Powell works are cheering patients in two major hospitals. UK Healthcare's Arts in Healthcare program purchased two Screamers for the Surgery Waiting area in the UK Chandler Hospital's Pavilion A. "The art in Surgery Waiting is by Kentucky artists who have made a reputation for themselves," said program director Jackie Hamilton. The Arts in Healthcare program also commissioned Powell to make glass panels from his Zoomers series for a cafeteria wall in Pavilion A.

Four of his Screamers recently took up roost in a high window at Baptist Health's Cancer Care Center on Nicholasville Road. The hospital commissioned the installation.

On Quality Street in downtown Lexington, you can see Powell's work without getting out of your car. A bright blue Teaser grabs eyes from its perch in a big side window of Gray Construction's headquarters in the old Wolf Wile building.

For more information, visit www.powellglass.com