

The Evolution of an *American Glass Artist*

By Heather N. Russell-Simmons
Photography Courtesy of Stephen Powell

Artist Stephen Powell is a prodigy of the American Glass Movement. "We don't work in a traditional way," he explains. "We find our way." For Powell, the way to a successful career as a renowned glass artist and the H.W. Stodghill, Jr. and Adele H. Stodghill Professor of Art at Centre College in Danville, Ky., began as a painting major at Centre College and developed further as a graduate student in ceramics at Louisiana State University. "I fell in love with glass the first time I saw it at LSU."

With a painter's background, Powell was interested in the interaction of color and light. He discovered an immediate and fluid responsiveness that allowed him to explore that interaction in ways no other medium offered—through the transparency, opaqueness and translucence that glass transmitted and reflected. "And it had fire," said the self-proclaimed pyromaniac.

Powell's love of fire is satisfied in the Centre College hot glass studio where a furnace runs at over 2100 degrees Fahrenheit to maintain 900 pounds of molten glass. He is known for multi-colored, large-scale blown glass sculptures that balance whimsical forms and exquisite patterns.

His work calls for a team of four to five professionals and students to create. "Most of my work in the studio is preparation," he said. He begins with thousands of murrine, or color beads, created from multi-colored long molten glass canes that are cooled and chopped, turned on their sides to present cross-sections. Powell then arranges them on a steel plate to create unique color palettes.

Next, Powell uses a steel blowpipe to gather 25 to 30 pounds of glass from the furnace and forms a cylinder. The cylinder, with an outer layer of molten glass, is then rolled over the murrine pattern, fusing the murrine to the outer surface of the cylinder.

After much shaping, heating and cooling, the process frenetically climaxes when the piece goes from a small spherical form to the large finished sculptural form that can, in many cases, approach four feet in height. "I have about a 20 second window," said Powell, "where the process develops into a moment of truth."

As a professor at Centre College for over 30 years, Powell teaches his students to evolve. "There are parameters you have to work in," he admits. "But you can still discover new things."

Powell's evolution can be seen across his Teaser, Whacko, Screamer and Echo series. "Teasers were upright and symmetrical," said Powell. "With Whacko, we decided to push the process toward asymmetry, and get away from traditional techniques." From there, Powell maintained asymmetry by developed Whacko's elephant trunk-like features into a curved element for the Screamer series.

Echo is a series of bowls created specifically to shine light through to create refractions of color on the surface below the piece. "We've gone full circle," said Powell. "The aesthetic decision to explore color and light interaction was consistent, but not the technique."

"The process of making glass is what got me into this," said Powell. "I'm more driven by the feeling I get making something than the satisfaction of having a finished piece. Even after all these years, glass is still fascinating and challenging."

Powell's work has been exhibited around the world, including: the Venezia Aperto Vetro in the Palazzo Ducale in Venice, Italy; the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tn.; the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Ky.; and, through January 28, 2017, the Maria Hewell Gallery in Cincinnati, Ohio.



1 The artist, working on a piece from the Bombasite Moxie Group (at right).

2 Blown Glass with Murrine
38.25 x 28 x 19 inches
Screamer Series, 2007





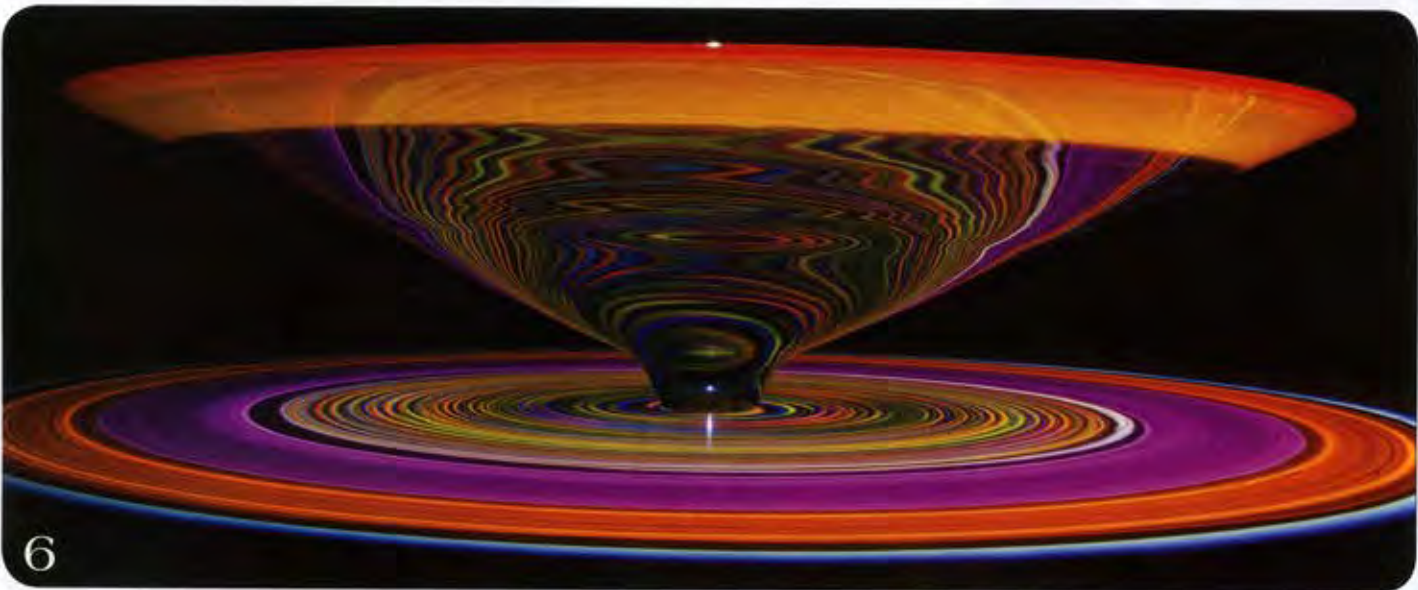
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3 Autumn Jealous Cleavage
Blown Glass with Murrine
38 x 18 x 18 inches
Teaser Series, 1988

4 Startled Frenetic Tease
Blown Glass with Murrine
35 x 23 x 16.5 inches
Screamer Series, 2007

5 Lascivious Torrid Cleavage
Blown Glass with Murrine
41.25 x 25.25 x 14.5 inches
Teaser Series, 2002

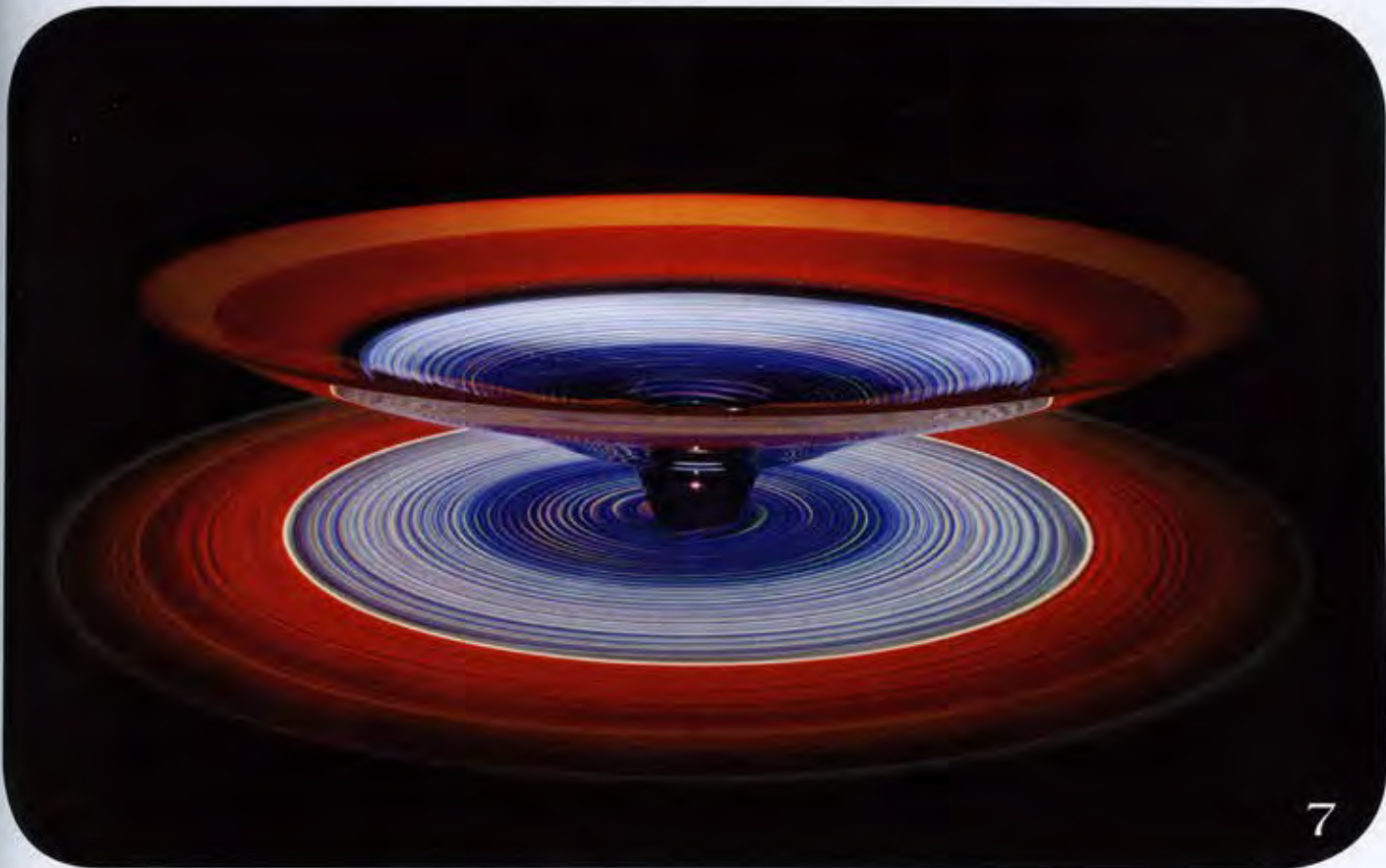
6 Zydeco Flirting Cyclone
6.75 x 28.25 x 28.25 inches
Echo Series, 2013

7 Lurid Naïve Tornado
6.75 x 28.75 x 28.75 inches
Echo Series, 2014

8 Pushy Violet Throb
Blown Glass with Murrine
29 x 24 x 19.25 inches
Whacko Series, 2005

9 Red Eye Hawk
Blown Glass with Murrine
40 x 20.25 x 20.25 inches
Teaser Series, 2001

10 Licking Purple Manic
Blown Glass with Murrine
35.5 x 26 x 6.5 inches
Teaser Series, 2001



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