



glass

The UrbanGlass Art Quarterly

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COVER
Stephen Rolfe Powell's
Murrini Maelstrom



The artist closely examines his cast-glass and murrini work *Manic Lascivious Sigh* (2016).
PHOTO: POWELL STUDIO

Murrini Remixed

Stephen Rolfe Powell's Zoomers panels recast the magic of traditional Venetian technique in a decidedly contemporary, expressive form.

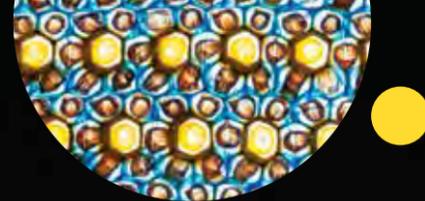
BY WILLIAM V. GANIS

Using a Venetian, non-objective language, Stephen Rolfe Powell reinterprets the stained glass panel form. His newest works, Zoomers, possess his idiomatic colors and compositional intricacy even as they rewrite his more-familiar blown works. Illuminated from behind, the panels' bright colors beckon; up close, viewers are held in thrall by their complex patterns and spatial paradoxes.

The Zoomers are a result of Powell's attempts to make brightly hued panels for an architectural setting, the University of Kentucky Hospital in Lexington. Powell experimented with a few processes, including "filleting" his blown vessels and kiln-firing them on supporting glass so they slumped into a panel. Unfortunately, the results read as vestiges, almost pictures, of his usual vessels, and he returned to working directly with murrini. His first test panels, however interesting their effects, were evocative of blood and cells and proved too attitudinally dark (and perhaps depressing) for the hospital. Powell ultimately created a four-by-10-foot wall, in four sections, titled *Intoxicating Osmotic Zoom* (2016), using the brighter colors of his iconic works. (The hospital had installed two of his vibrant Screamer vessels, seemingly in conversation, years earlier.)

Experiments with the panel form led Powell to further explorations. His first Zoomers, including the hospital commission and *Manic Torrid Rothko* (2016), tend to be more static. For the most part, the murrini stay in place, much as they were assembled on the plate before firing. While the resulting panels are visually pleasing and evocative of textiles and Moroccan zellige tiles, their patterning retains the familiar millefiori mosaic look of ancient Roman bowls and countless Venetian objects. A few interesting passages, mostly at the edges of color fields where Powell allowed some liberal spacing, point to more interesting expressive possibilities where the bits of cane turn and elongate as they melt.

Manic Torrid Rothko, 2016. Cast glass and murrini. H 48, W 30 in.
PHOTO: POWELL STUDIO



TOP TO BOTTOM Adam Haigh chopping murrini with the murrini-chopping machine designed and built by Powell's friend Ray Hazard; Powell photographs a panel just before firing to document how cast blocks of clear glass are placed on top of the murrini to create patterns of flow; Mitzi Elliott and Adam Haigh laying the final murrini in place before firing.

distended by blowing, the patterns of the Zoomers tend to be more intricate and the pigmentation more dense. The surfaces that are oriented "outward" toward the viewer are fire-polished in the kiln, but Powell leaves the rear surfaces rough and grinds the edges to straightness. He encases the works in a metal frame containing bright, recessed LEDs that create uniform luminescence behind the glass panel.

After his first panels, Powell embraced a tweak to the process that fosters expressiveness and unpredictability. Before firing, Powell staggers blocks of clear glass—cut from sheets that he has earlier kiln-made—atop the grids of composed murrini. By changing the size and thickness of these blocks and by shifting their spacing, he can alter the effect they have on the cut cane beneath. With the melting clear glass moving and spreading over the uniformly set murrini, works such as *Frazzled Stormy Vertigo* (2016) seem a study in fluid dynamics. The blocks of clear glass, melting from above, spread the murrini and create uncanny foreshortened orthogonals that orient to the relatively clear spots that were the centers of the clear-glass blocks. The melting glass leaves the murrini in these light "centers" standing straight at right angles (like looking down their barrels), while the other murrini become more and more pushed, turned, and (because we are seeing more of their sides) colorful. Seeming to fall into perspectival depth, as if they were the broken weapons in Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano* (ca. 1438–40) that orient toward a vanishing point, the murrini patterns illusionistically heighten the real space of the thick glass. Just as surprising, the melts from the blocks of clear glass eventually run into one another and create dense borders that delineate hyperbolic, millefiori "cell" patterns—such as the honeycombs of *Flirting Insatiable Mania* (2016)—that themselves seem dimensional and that repeat throughout the panels' compositions. Pushed by the melt of two or three clear blocks, the murrini at these "cellular" fringes are condensed, blended, and dark, and these dusky edges (because of an inevitable comparison to stained glass) at first register as metal comes.

The overall glass surface reads as picture plane, and a fascinating schematic ambiguity arises. Viewers can read the work as a rabbit/duck of sorts, seeing the work as a planar "virtual" image because of transmitted optics, while also understanding that there is physical depth. While the effect is subtle, there is an elusive fixity of image. With shifted shapes and colors, seeing the same patch from an angle is very different from viewing it straight on; the resulting bewilderment is one of the rewards for intimate looking.

The pulled cane making up the murrini is colored by frit that, when stretched, becomes a filament and adds "painterly" marks that seem like an imitation of brushwork, with each murrina a pointillist dab or pulled stroke. For his 1974 senior exhibition at Centre College in Kentucky (the same institution at which he now teaches), Powell made a body of oil paintings in which he borrowed the pouring and intense colors of post-painterly abstractionists

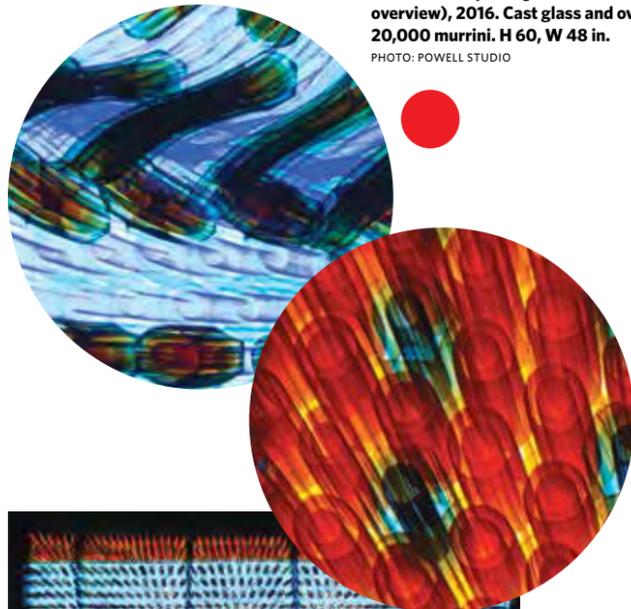
The Zoomers arrest the process that Powell has engaged in for decades for his Teasers, Whackos, and Screamer. It's worth noting that Powell's studio pulls its own cane, using technically compatible colors, and cuts thousands of murrini from these. Powell envisions his color combinations within and among these varied murrini. Depending on the effects he wants to create, he and his assistants might lay out about 2,500 tightly packed murrini on a metal plate for one vessel. Of course, for the vessels, the glass bits are rolled up and melted into a cylindrical gather of clear glass; the patterns are then distorted through glassblowing, gravity, and other shaping techniques. After thousands of attempts, Powell has learned, with some predictability, how the murrini will behave when blown. In his pipe-made works, the vessel walls are relatively thin, and one usually one sees a double layer of color—the near and far sides of the translucent vessel.

The Zoomers, on the other hand, are fused in large, custom-built kilns, and the melting clear glass, pulled down by gravity, affects the murrini. The resulting panels are approximately three-quarters of an inch thick, and a five-by-four-foot panel is comprised of more than 20,000 murrini. Because the glass isn't

such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. James Yood later called Powell, because of his kaleidoscopic glassworks, the “finest color-field painter in contemporary art.”

Powell’s use of color adds complexity to the spatial effects; what may at first appear as a field of red is revealed, upon closer inspection, to be made of red cased in yellow murrini and interspersed with complementary bits of blue cased in cyan. Much like the Divisionist painters, Powell sets up a situation for simultaneous contrasts: Stimulated by a bright color, the retina produces a ghostly, complementary afterimage. Powell’s patterns abet “vibrations” of luminosity that, with subtle shifts in looking, cause the perception of even brighter colors. Coupling these

Frazzled Stormy Vertigo (details and overview), 2016. Cast glass and over 20,000 murrini. H 60, W 48 in.
PHOTO: POWELL STUDIO

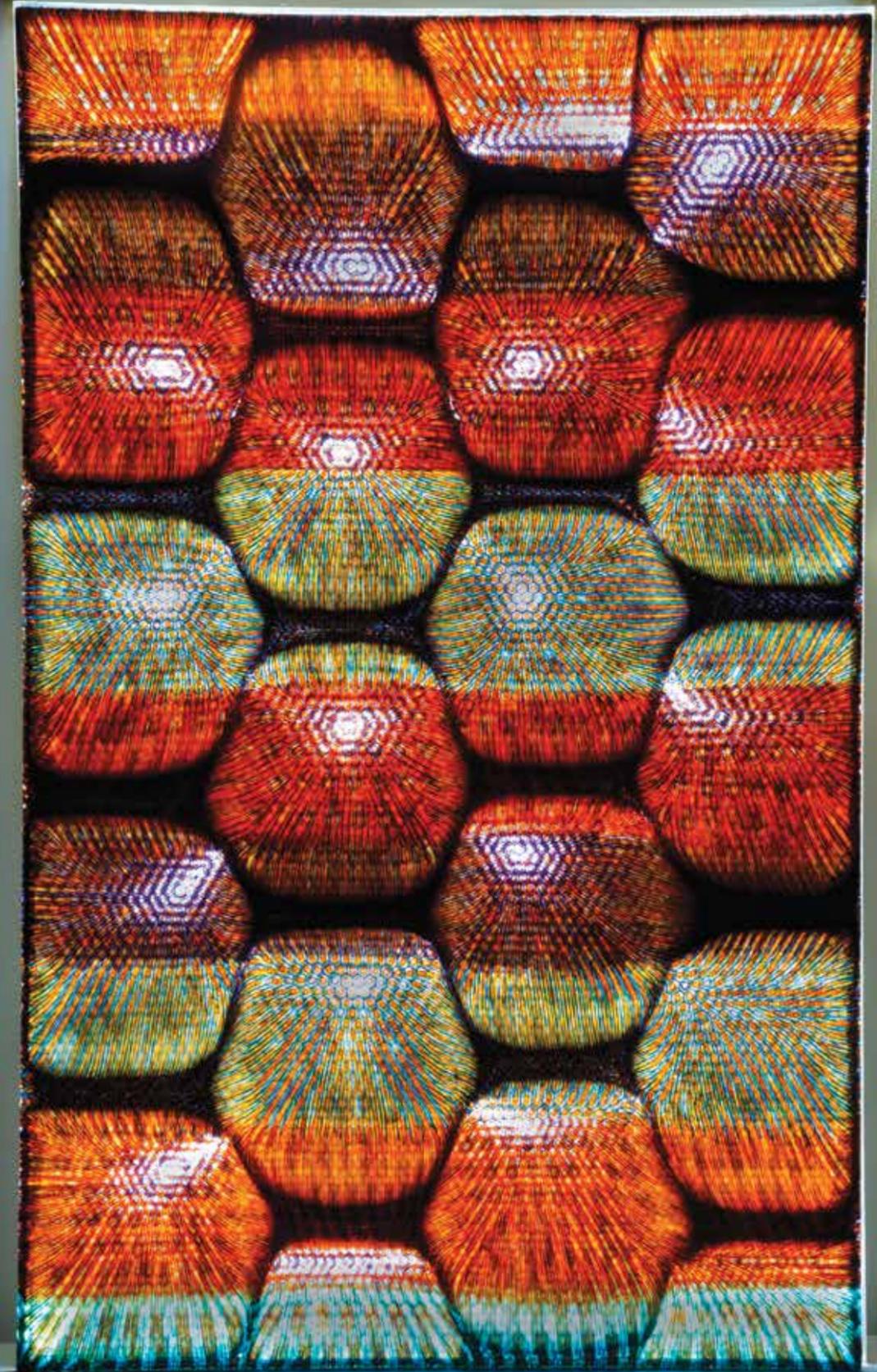


references with their canvas-like size, the Zoomers have as much to do with painting as with glass. While the works are non-objective, they still work with illusionistic space. And like the paintings of the Washington Color School artists so important to Powell, there’s a perplexing tension between the glassworks’ physical and pictorial expressions (viewers’ eyes waiver between the matter-of-fact material expression and the spatial illusions and retinal images). With their ambiguous space and bright colors, the Zoomers also evoke psychedelia; they have the flowing forms of Wes Wilson gig posters and the illusionistic riddles of Victor Vasarely’s prints. Powell’s floating, colorful cylinders peel away into indeterminate space like LSD tracers; he gives permanent form to liquid-light shows.

The Zoomers relate to many recent works by other artists who address flattened glass panels and their painterly aspects. Powell’s mentor, Lino Tagliapietra, has consummately experimented with this form, producing impressively diverse works through kiln-casting murrini, rods, and frit, among other Venetian elements. These panels (exhibited in metal armatures so they can be viewed from both sides) have been exhibited at the Heller, Schantz, and Hawk galleries, among others, and are the focus of the 2016–17 show “Lino Tagliapietra: Painting in Glass” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Canadian artist Steven Tippin makes panel works that have a technical affinity to the Zoomers insofar as Tippin examines the possibilities for the expressive marks rendered by melting murrini. With a reserved palette usually featuring one hue set against black and clear, Tippin’s work contrasts with Powell’s psychedelic intensity. Like Powell’s panels, Marc Petrovic’s *Avian Tablets* (2011) speak to the process of laying out murrini in patterns that anticipate being rolled up on a gather and further hot-formed. To Petrovic, the panels are “deconstructed” versions of his birds.

Powell’s newest Zoomers have rods composed in staggered colors, much as in a Gene Davis painting. And while these works don’t have the enthralling sense of depth of others in this series, the glass melts into compelling wave patterns. Given the thoroughness of his investigations with his earlier series, whether one considers the many permutations of a light-transmitting Echoes bowl or an erotic Teaser vase, Powell will undoubtedly play out the formal, conceptual, and expressive possibilities of the Zoomers. Varying colors, thicknesses, patterns, and the spacing and size of the murrini and clear glass, are just the beginning of the possibilities. While many of the technical challenges have been overcome, Powell and his studio are still in an experimental phase with this series. With more experience and understanding of the forces brought by gravity, materials chemistry, and heat transfer, Powell will be able to better wrangle the chaotic energies. Compelling as they may be, the Zoomers so far seem like a foretaste of the mature work to come. ■

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Sultry Naive Zoomer, 2016. Cast glass and murrini. H 48, W 30 in.
PHOTO: POWELL STUDIO