

PILLARS OF GLASS

A COMMUNITY OF FAR-FLUNG BUT CLOSE-KNIT ARTISTS
IS LEADING A GLASS RENAISSANCE IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST.

BY RICHARD SPEER

This is not your grandfather's glass art. If you're among those who hear the phrase "glass art" and immediately conjure a gondola-and-goblet fantasia set somewhere between Murano and Disneyland, then you haven't seen what's going on in the contemporary glass scene, particularly in the Pacific Northwest. From Seattle down to Portland and further south into Northern California, the west coast of the United States has joined Australia, the Czech Republic, and yes, Italy, as a guiding light for a new breed of glass artist, largely interested in wresting glass away from its decorative past and propelling it into the future as a medium for conceptual art, fully on par with painting, sculpture, digital video, and installation work. This summer, like a trio of exclamation points, three major exhibitions will skip down the coast, spotlighting the pioneers who made this new approach

possible: master glassblower Lino Tagliapietra at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma (closing Aug. 24); venerable artist and educator Klaus Moje at the Portland Art Museum (May 31-Sept. 7); and innovator and all-around-phenom Dale Chihuly at the de Young Museum in San Francisco (June 14-Sept. 28).

This trio of exhibitions is a flowering whose seeds were planted in the 1960s and 70s at the advent of the American studio glass movement. In 1962, artist Harvey Littleton delivered a seminal lecture at the Toledo Museum of Art, espousing the then-radical idea that independent artists could work with glass in the intimacy of their own studios rather than relying on the elaborate support systems found in large glass factories. The idea caught fire, and the following year, Littleton established the first-ever glass





program in an American university, the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Among the hundreds of young artists the program nurtured were two figures who would play important roles in the development of a glass culture in the Northwest: Chihuly, who settled in Seattle-Tacoma and has been there ever since, and Dan Schwoerer, who wound up in Portland and co-founded Bullseye Glass Company, a major force in elevating glass' reputation as a legitimate medium in contemporary art.

Pilchuck and the power of shared knowledge

For his part, Chihuly, along with art mavens John and Anne Hauberg, founded the Pilchuck Glass School in 1971, and saw the Stanwood, Washington facility become a magnet for up-and-coming artists the world over. During the course of residencies and classes offered each summer, emerging talents rub elbows with established stars, sharing not only technical knowhow, but also a passion for communicating ideas through a medium traditionally known more for sheer, luminescent beauty than for expres-

“VARIGOLA LAMP”

1970

Lino Tagliapietra

BLOWN COLORLESS GLASS OVERLAID WITH WHITE GLASS;

ELECTRICAL COMPONENT

OVERALL: 13" x 18" x 13"

COLLECTION OF VANNA AND LORENZO QUINTAVALLE

PHOTO BY RUSSELL JOHNSON AND JEFF CURTIS

LEFT:

“NEODYMIUM REEDS”

Dale Chihuly

PHOTO: TERESA NOURI RISHEL

COURTESY OF THE DEYOUNG MUSEUM, SAN FRANCISCO

sive capabilities. Through the intensive, elbow-to-elbow environment of these workshops and others around the world that use Pilchuck as a model, today's glass world has come to possess a sense of community hard to imagine in more competitive media such as painting.

“There's a built-in sense of community and collaboration and assisting,” says Washington-based artist Mark Zirpel, known for fantastical, quasi-scientific sculpture and installations. “I think it's just an inherent part of the glass community that they're eager to share, they're very open, and they're not averse to work that's untraditional or idiosyncratic.”

Another Washington artist, Richard Marquis, is one of a handful of studio-glass pioneers who did much to engender that spirit of shared knowledge. Marquis, who now lives and works on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound, went to Italy on a Fulbright Grant in 1969, while he was an art student at U.C. Berkeley. There, on the isle of Murano, he studied under master blowers who grudgingly imparted their centuries-old techniques to the fresh-faced 24-year-old. In the years that followed, Marquis opted to share these techniques rather than hoard them in the insular, vaguely sinister Venetian tradition. Embarking on a series of lectures and workshops in the 1970s and 80s, he helped incite nascent glass movements around the world, particularly in Australia. Around the same time, at the California College of the Arts in Oakland, another Harvey Littleton disciple, Marvin Lipofsky, brought in European master teachers to teach the values of perfectionism and craft to American students predisposed to a more freewheeling, DIY approach. In the years that followed, at workshops and lecture courses at CCA, Pilchuck, and Bullseye, towering figures in glass—Lino Tagliapietra from Italy, Stanislav Libensky from the



“I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED IT, AND TO THIS DAY, IF I CAN DO SOMETHING IN A GIVEN PIECE TO GET JUST ONE MORE STREAK OF REFLECTION INTO THE MATERIAL, I DO IT.”

—KLAUS MOJE

ABOVE:
DAN SCHWOERER AND RAY AHLGREN,
BULLSEYE FOUNDERS, 1973

RIGHT:
“PULL EARL”
Steve Klein
LAMPWORKED PYREX GLASS
PHOTO: HOTEL MURANO, TACOMA

Richard Whiteley
AT THE BULLSEYE FACTORY STUDIOS, 1999
PHOTO: R. JOHNSON

BELOW:
“LAND SPEED ASSAULT VEHICLES” (DETAIL VIEW)
2007

Richard Marquis
BLOWN GLASS, WOOD, BRASS
5" X 22" X 7" (DIMENSIONS VARIABLE)
PHOTO: R. MARQUIS
COURTESY OF BULLSEYE GALLERY





Czech Republic, Bertil Vallien from Sweden, and German-born Klaus Moje from Australia—have fostered a respect for a traditionally grounded, multidisciplinary approach to the medium. Says Moje: “What I try to give students is a balance in their approach: the balance between skill and creativity. Skill is not a four-letter word, you know. Students should go through a very hard drill in drawing, modeling, and sculpting, to learn the language of art—before they even touch a piece of glass.”

Tacoma draws its pilgrims

Many of Moje’s students have been featured in exhibitions at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, with its 13,000 square feet of exhibition space and its distinctive architectural signature, a whimsically tilted steel tower that climbs 90 feet into the air. The Museum is also home to the Chihuly Bridge of Glass, a colorful, art-lined overpass spanning 500 feet, linking the Museum to downtown Tacoma. Both the bridge and the museum itself opened to the public in July 2002 and have become regional landmarks, attracting rank-and-file tourists as well as connoisseurs on glass-art pilgrimages.

Another Tacoma stop for these pilgrims is both a place of lodging and an attraction in its own right. The freshly operational Hotel Murano, owned by Portland-based Provenance Hotels, opened its tony doors with a gala celebration on March 8. Showcasing 46 contemporary glass artists—among them Karen



TOP:

JUN KANEKO IN RESIDENCE AT THE BULLSEYE FACTORY STUDIOS, 2006
PHOTO: J. HART

KLAUS MOJE DIRECTS THE HOT-FORMING OF A “NIIJIMA” VESSEL. BULLSEYE GLASS FACTORY, 1999
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE BULLSEYE GALLERY

LaMonte, Cobi Cockburn, and Steve Klein, along with the ubiquitous Chihuly—the Murano’s permanent collection was handpicked by curator Tessa Papas, whose aim was to create “a cohesive, balanced, truly international collection, with all threads leading back, directly or indirectly, to the island of Murano.” Papas says she was “particularly excited by the work of younger artists who aren’t awed by the ‘beauty’ aspect of glass, but instead use it as just another medium to express their ideas.”

Portland in the center

Geographically and in many ways temperamentally in the center of the 800-mile San Francisco-to-Seattle corridor, Portland, Oregon is no longer viewed as “Seattle’s little sister” in the glass community. While Seattle’s fame initially sprang from the collaborative, wildly demonstrative, swaggeringly macho world of glassblowing, Portland has earned its reputation largely through the more meditative, if no less expressive, practice of kilnforming, in which glass shapes are fused, cast, slumped, and manipulated in other ways, often over repeated firings. Portland’s prominence in evolving the kiln-form medium has earned it a place in the worldwide spotlight this year, as the host city of the annual conference of the Glass Art Society, which will take place June 19-21 (see supplement essay, “Into the Heart of Glass”).

The innovations in kiln-working that have drawn so many young artists to glass, germinated in the shared studio of three erstwhile hippie glassblowers—Ray Ahlgren, Boyce Lundstrom,

“UNTITLED, ROLLING LINES SERIES”
2007
Klaus Moje
GLASS, KILNFORMED ROLL-UP,
WHEEL-CARVED TALLER:
28" H X 5" DIA.
PHOTO: ROB LITTLE
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
AND BULLSEYE GALLERY



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and Dan Schwoerer—who in 1974 started a glass company on little more than a bellbottom and a prayer. Under their guidance, Bullseye Glass Company began finding solutions to the technical questions that were prohibiting artists from expressing themselves in glass. One of the biggest questions of all was how to make glass components—frits, stringers, confetti, and other, more exotic configurations—compatible with one another so they could stand up to repeated firings and not crack while cooling. Schwoerer, who today co-owns the company with his wife, Lani McGregor, eventually established a research department and charged his white-coated, bespectacled staff with solving these and a myriad of other problems, many of them brought forth by artists who flocked to Portland to experience Bullseye’s outside-the-box working methods firsthand. When famed ceramicist Jun Kaneko came to Portland to undertake his first show in glass, he did not know he was asking Bullseye’s researchers to do things that had never been done: to create 7-foot-high planks of solid glass, shot through with multi-colored dots and dashes; and to turn 20,000 pounds of raw glass into a spiraling, 42-foot-long wall of shimmering glass threads. As research and education director Ted Sawyer observes: “Jun Kaneko was one of quite a few artists we’ve worked with who have backgrounds in media outside of glass, and who therefore don’t know the rules or even the possibilities. They just know they want to do something, and it’s our challenge to help them make it happen.”

In Kaneko’s case, after the technical problems were addressed and surmounted at the Bullseye factory in Southeast Portland, the finished pieces were exhibited at the company’s eponymous gallery, of which McGregor is director. Since 1995, Bullseye Gallery, now located in a 15,000-square-foot space in Portland’s loft-and-latte Pearl District, has been a must-see on the city’s monthly “First Thursday” gallery walk. About a dozen blocks away from the gallery, abstract sculptor Henry Hillman, Jr., has a cavernous glass factory and studio of his own, where he starts at the beginning—sand—creating glass out of silica and, after a long gestational process, casting it into the spiraling geometric towers that have become his calling card. Obsessive and prolific, Hillman exhibits his work widely and is represented in Portland by the Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

Wherefore Northwest glass?

Northwest glass artists, whether working on a monumental scale like Henry Hillman or in intimate, highly personal curios such as those created by Portlander Mel George, have gravitated to the region as sculptors once flocked to Florence, portraitists to the court of Charles I, Abstract Expressionists to New York City.

ONE OF THE BIGGEST QUESTIONS OF ALL WAS HOW TO MAKE GLASS COMPONENTS—FRITS, STRINGERS, CONFETTI, AND OTHER, MORE EXOTIC CONFIGURATIONS—COMPATIBLE WITH ONE ANOTHER SO THEY COULD STAND UP TO REPEATED FIRINGS AND NOT CRACK WHILE COOLING.



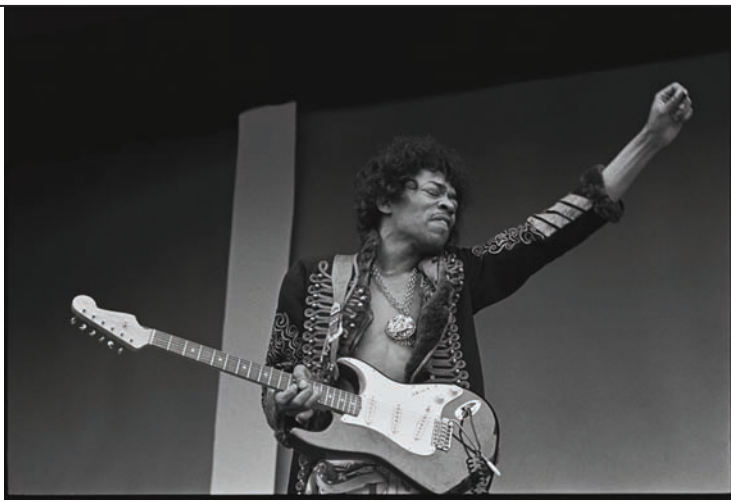
JUN KANEKO • THERMAN STATOM

JULY - AUGUST 2008



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Jimi Hendrix (22" x 28") Platinum/Palladium print

Jim Marshall Marshall in Platinum

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Beth Moon, Elizabeth Opalenik, Michael A. Smith, Joyce Tenneson

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What's the appeal? Richard Whiteley, head of the glass workshop at Australian National University in Canberra, sees Australia and the Northwest United States as complementary nexuses of a movement spanning the Pacific. "This place, the Northwest, has become a powerhouse for sharing knowledge and bringing people into the medium. Organizations like Pilchuck and the Bullseye Company have developed cultures which are very sophisticated and are pushing the material into innovative applications. What that means is that as people come to the material, there's a lot more knowledge around; you're not just throwing things into the kiln and seeing how it turns out."

With glass' ascension into a heightened aesthetic respect comes the challenge to consider the medium in ways that transcend traditional expectations among curators, critics, collectors, the gallery community, and above all, artists themselves. While some have distanced themselves from glass' naturally seductive properties (Richard Marquis often talks about "kicking it down a notch," making sure his surfaces don't turn out too shiny), others embrace glass' long association with the B-word, beauty, in all glass' reflective, refractive, shimmery effulgence. "Awhile ago," recalls Klaus Moje, "I was talking with someone who was saying, 'Glass is so garish, glass presents itself like a whore!' Well, I must say, I love this whore. I have always loved it, and to this day, if I can do something in a given piece to get just one more streak of reflection into the material, I do it."

Exhibition information:

Klaus Moje
(May 31-Sept. 7).
Portland Art Museum,
1219 SW Park Ave., Portland, OR
(503) 226-2811,
www.portlandartmuseum.org

Chihuly at the de Young
(June 14-Sept. 28).
de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park,
50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive,
San Francisco, CA
www.famsf.org/deyoung/index.asp

*Lino Tagliapietra: In Retrospect,
a Modern Renaissance in Italian Glass*
(Feb. 23-Aug. 24)
Museum of Glass,
1801 Dock Street, Tacoma, WA
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