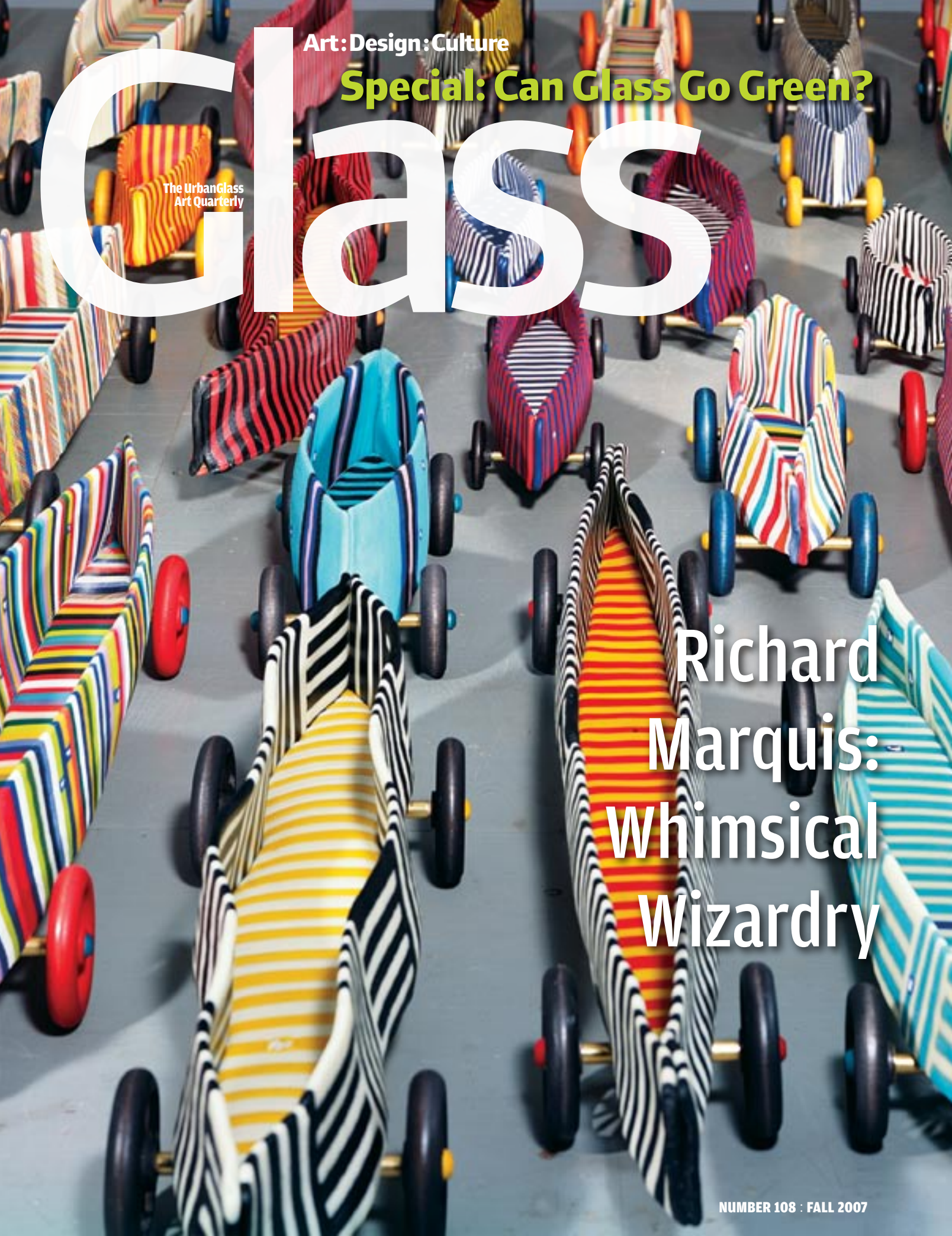

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Richard Marquis: Whimsical Wizardry

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The Wizard of Whimsy

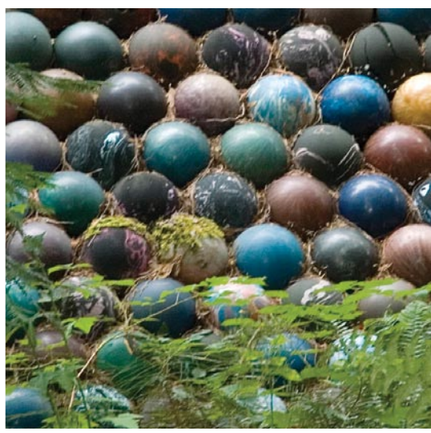
By Richard Speer

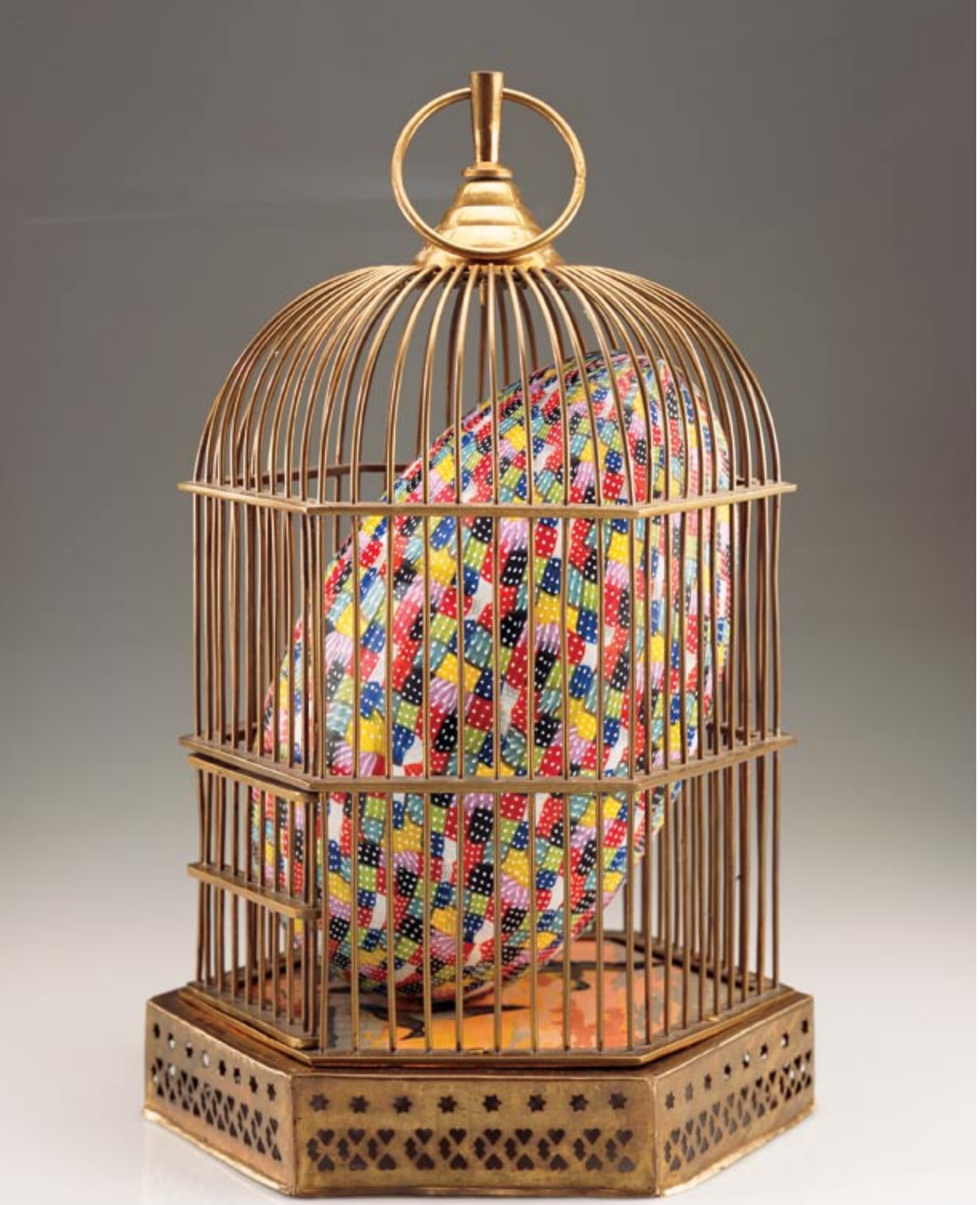
Richard Marquis is shooing a wayward chicken out of his house—"a silver Sebright," he clarifies, that has wandered away from its coop. "Go on, get out!" he admonishes, and at length the fowl complies. Two yellow Labs, Nell and Willie, amble by indifferently as Marquis returns to the picnic table where he is being interviewed. A large bird cage, four canaries twittering inside it, rests on the table's far end. Marquis starts to say something about the birds but is interrupted when a formidable tabby cat jumps onto his lap. "It's like living at Dr. Doolittle's!" he says of this menagerie of a home on Whidbey Island, just off Seattle in Puget Sound. He has lived here since 1982, when he arrived from California a shaggy-haired 37-year-old already known as one of the Studio Glass movement's most innovative and technically accomplished pioneers. Today, 25 years later, he has become something of an elder statesman in American glass, albeit a droll, even impish one. Over the years he has honed his whimsical, irreverent style, refining the elements of a unique visual vocabulary. As his work has taken on more polish, Marquis at the height of his powers stands poised on the brink of something that just might be completely new. But he's not ready to talk about that, at least not yet.

He volunteers a tour of the studio a stone's throw from the house. "You won't find too much of my work lying around here," he says. "I don't like looking at it. If I look at it, I keep thinking about what's wrong with it, and if I do that, I never finish it. The other advantage is that if I don't keep anything here, there's no reason for collectors to come around."

Original photographs this page and opposite by Vanessa Calvert

Richard Marquis's island retreat, overflowing with memorabilia and animal life, reflects the artist's masterful juxtaposition of highbrow technique and whimsical subject matter.





Whatever adjective you use—"private," "insular," perhaps even "reclusive"—the fact is that Marquis receives relatively few visitors here at the airy, rustic home he shares with his wife, Johanna Nitzke Marquis, herself an artist and noted gardener. With its blossoming lilies and old-timey sheds, this place is a refuge for Marquis, a time-warped repository for the antiques and collectibles from which he draws inspiration for his work. It is a portrait of the artist's studio as memory lane.

And what memories reside here. It was back in 1969 when Marquis, a U.C. Berkeley student on a Fulbright grant, traveled to Venice to study glassblowing from the masters on the fabled isle of Murano. His experience there was no fairy tale, however. "People were not nice to me. I was a foreigner, 24, but looked 18, and it was a pain in the butt." Nevertheless, he soaked up the time-honored techniques—*murrine*, *millefiori*, *zanfirico*—like a sponge and returned to the States using and generously sharing with colleagues and students all he had learned in Italy. In everything from marbles and non-functional teapots to blown-glass tributes to *Venus de Milo* salt shakers, he integrated Venetian technique with techniques of his own invention, techniques he returned to study further on frequent trips to Murano. "Artists are problem-solvers," he says. "We create our own problems, and hopefully we solve them."

The products of these innovations were increasingly sophisticated statements, often built upon a visual pun or the juxtaposition of high-brow technique with the whimsical iconography of the mass-produced. During the 1970s his designs became less pretty and more offbeat. Because he had emerged from the ferment of 1960s Berkeley, many assumed that these wilder designs had been inspired by drug trips, an assumption he insists is not true. "I didn't really do too much of the hard psychedelics. Outside of wearing bellbottoms, I wasn't really influenced by that movement." As the 1970s gave way to the eighties and nineties, Marquis's works grew in reputation and value and made it into public collections, including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Carnegie Museum of Art, and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Here in the studio he is pointing at a row of five wristwatches wrapped around a piece of wood. "You'll see a lot of this sort of thing in here. I like multiples."

Which is, as they say, an understatement. Crammed into every crack and cranny of the sprawling shed he uses as a studio are the knickknacks and collections that feed his prolificacy: boxing gloves by the dozens, ballpoint pens by the hundreds, English settler memorabilia and Mexican "siesta" figurines, lanterns, puzzles, model airplanes, and every Wheaties cereal box he has finished over the last eight to ten years. He used to pick up these sundries at garage sales but now buys them on eBay.

OPPOSITE
Egg in Cage, **2007. Blown glass, granulare technique, found objects. H 17, W 11, D 9 ½ in.**
PHOTO: RICHARD MARQUIS

THIS PAGE, TOP
Witch's Hat 07-1, **2007. Hot slab construction, wheel-ground glass. H 12 ½, W 11 ½, D 11 ½ in.**
PHOTO: RICHARD MARQUIS

THIS PAGE, BOTTOM
Basketweave House, **2005. Fused and wheel-carved glass, murrine and batutto techniques. H 6 ¾, W 11 ¾, D 11 ¾ in.**
PHOTO: RICHARD MARQUIS

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"This is Reddy Kilowatt." He picks the iconic plastic figure up off a table. "I've always kept the things I collect with me in my shop, and gradually they started to mingle with my work." He presses onward into the room where the magic happens, pointing out the two furnaces and glory holes. "This studio is state-of-the-art … for the 1970s." Because this room, and every other room in the studio, is so thoroughly, shockingly cluttered, Marquis decided to title his recent show "The Mythological Horizontal Surface," at Bullseye Connection Gallery in Portland, Oregon. This refers to the idea of an uncluttered rectangular work table, which he claims never to have seen and speculates might be as mythic as the unicorn.

Cluttered or not, this studio has produced intricate and visually delightful works over the years, not the least of which are the work in his most recent exhibition. The show covered so much territory and pulled together so many disparate trains of thought that Marquis refers to it as "a one-man group show." Above and beyond the elements that will be familiar to those who follow his work (fanciful pyramids, dustpans, and hollowed-out bottle silhouettes, various objects lined up in rows inside collectible cases), the artist has included fresh departures, most notably a series of oversized, exuberantly patterned eggs inside brass bird cages. Marquis reflects on what inspired them: "So many of the things I made over the years were complicated; I've always been interested in layers of complication. Now I'm getting back to basic shapes." To make the pieces, Marquis first purchased existing bird cages (bought at auction on eBay) and removed the perches and water cups inside them. Then he decided how big to make the egg, custom-fitting it to the cage's interior. Reflexive, mind-twisting, the finished pieces—proto-birds trapped inside their cage before they are even hatched—suggest no dearth of existential interpretations, all of which the artist resists:

Dick's Works, **2007. Blown and hotworked glass, granulare technique, found objects. H 10 ½, W 16, D 6 ½ in.**
PHOTO: RICHARD MARQUIS

Stars and Stripes Pyramid with Reddy Kilowatt, **2006. Glass, hot slab technique, found object. H 6 ¼, W 12 ¾, D 8 in.**
PHOTO: RICHARD MARQUIS

Dust Pan, **2004. Hot slab construction. H 4, W 14, D 10 ½ in.**
PHOTO: RICHARD MARQUIS

Egg Cabinet 07-1, 2007. **Blown glass, granulare technique, wood. H 28 ½, W 23, D 6 ¼ in (installed).**
PHOTO: RICHARD MARQUIS

"Don't read too much into it. It's not that conceptual. I've tried to remove content from my work. My work is pretty much all form now, all aesthetics. I'm pretty much just trying to make cool shapes."

While he admits his work in the late 1960s and early seventies had a political bent, he says he has steered clear in his more recent work. Of the teapots he made ten years ago, with their warped American flag motifs, he recalls: "Everyone said the stuff I did with the flag was political. The reality of it was, I was just looking at it as a nice pattern."

It is difficult to gauge how seriously to take such remarks. With his quirky, unassuming demeanor, Marquis initially comes across as a naïf but later, as his words begin to sink in, he leaves you wondering whether he's merely playing his cards close to the vest.

Another new series in the show, "Land Speed Assault Vehicles," stakes out more fresh material. While Marquis has made representations of vehicles before (a 2002 series called "Cars" drew inspiration from Model T's), his "Assault Vehicles," based on 1930s racers, sport the most unabashedly reflective surfaces of any piece he has produced in decades. "At first I was going to knock the surface back some," he says, "but I decided to keep it shiny because it went along with the illusion of speed." The racers may have raced out of Marquis's own adolescence, much of which was spent immersed in Southern California car culture. From 1957 to 1962, his family lived in Upland, California, on Foothill Boulevard, which was part of Route 66. "My brother and I would sit outside and identify every car that came through." Automobiles still fascinate him; in the middle of his studio sits a rusted, 1958 Citroen 2DC, which has never run during the 20 years he has owned it, although "it's getting closer to the top of the list to fix." As for the glossy surfaces of the "Assault Vehicles" series, he says the finish is a departure for him because "I never cared much for shiny, sparkly things—to me, it all sort of looked like bad science. You work in glass long enough, you get bored with that kind of stuff." Perhaps because we have grown to expect his surfaces to have a matte quality, sometimes verging on waxy-looking, the racers come across as all the more striking for the contrast: elongated ovals with long strips of unlikely but effective juxtapositions of gunmetal blue and pumpkin, aquamarine and mustard, red-orange and orange-red, all smooth and streaking glinty-white across long, liquid curves. Whatever meaning or content the pieces do or do not have, clearly Marquis is driving fast and having a hell of a time.

And yet, speeding into high gear, he has decided to turn off the engine that powers his wheels. In June Marquis turned his furnaces off, swearing not to fire them back up until December. During the six-month interim he is finishing unfinished projects scattered throughout his studio that he has not touched in as long as ten years. Having the furnaces down for so long is "frustrating and refreshing." When asked why he imposed the half-year hiatus, he begins by talking about his carbon footprint. "Glassblowing is one of the worst things in the world you can do in terms of your carbon footprint. You use up all these natural resources, basically to make things for rich people. So reducing your carbon footprint is actually a great excuse for doing less work." He laughs, then turns serious. "In the future I'm going to make fewer things, better."

When he fires the furnace up again this winter, will his work be in any way changed as a result of the break? Is it possible that his growing penchant for eliminating content and reducing objects to elemental forms will lead away from his signature, self-aware tchotchkes into more abstract or minimalist realms? Richard Marquis is back at the picnic table, petting the tabby cat and sipping iced tea. The air is fragrant with lilies and columbine. The canaries are singing in their cages. "Who knows?" he says. ■

A contributing critic to ARTnews *and contributing editor at* Art Ltd.*,* ***RICHARD SPEER*** *is visual arts critic at* Willamette Week *in Portland, Oregon. He has written about cultural matters for* Newsweek*,* Salon*,* The Los Angeles Times*, and* Opera News*.*

OPPOSITE PAGE
Land Speed Assault Vehicles, **2007. Blown glass, brass, wood. L 25 in. (longest vehicle)**
PHOTO: RICHARD MARQUIS

THIS PAGE
Sphere Pyramid, **2007. Blown glass, granulare technique, wood. H 17, W 18, D 18 in.**
PHOTO: RICHARD MARQUIS