

Art: Design: Culture

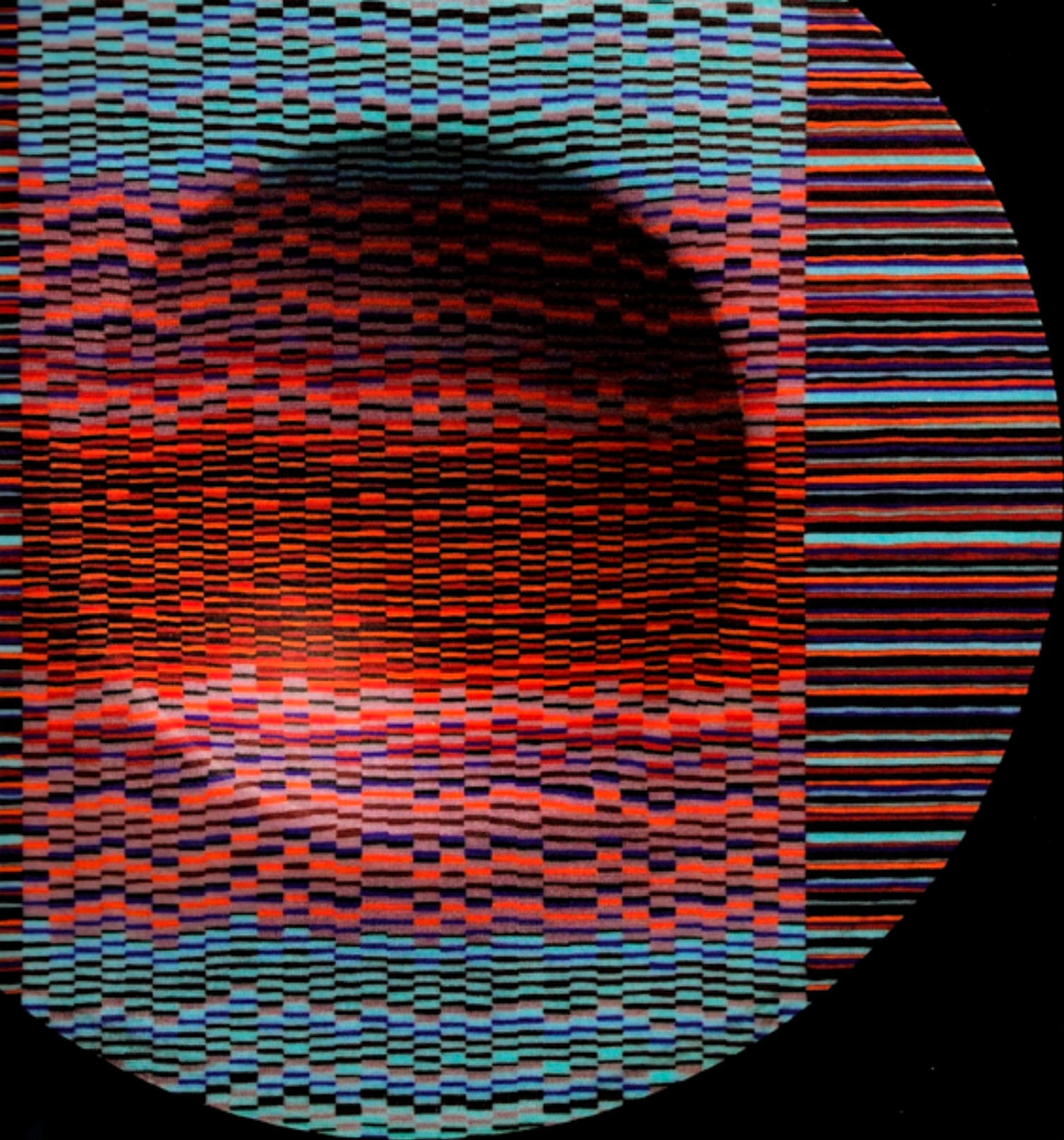
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OPPOSITE
*Untitled 6, 2006. Glass, kiln-
formed and wheel-carved.
H 3, W 21, D 21 in.*
PHOTO: KIM BELL/ART
COURTESY: PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

ChromaZone

Bruce Guenther, chief curator at the Portland Art Museum, has organized the first U.S. museum retrospective exhibition of the work of Klaus Moje. Guenther, who is also the Portland Art Museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, has extensive experience with contemporary painting and sculpture, including tenure as chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (1987-1991) and as curator of contemporary art at the Seattle Art Museum (1979-1987). The exhibition, titled simply "Klaus Moje" will be on view through September 7, 2008, at the Portland Art Museum, Oregon. Andrew Page, editor-in-chief of *GLASS*, spoke to Bruce Guenther about Moje's influential body of work.



*Untitled vessel, mid-1970s.
Blown and cut crystal.
H 4 3/4, W 4 3/4, D 2 3/4 in.*
PHOTO: JAMES DILL
PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK

What do you see as Klaus Moje's primary contribution to the larger awareness of glass as a medium for art?

Klaus Moje is intellectually one of the central leaders in glass internationally. In a quiet way, his work has established a new baseline for glass as idea, as a chromatic and painterly experience. He has encouraged the development of several generations of artists who participate in a post-minimalist dialogue that has moved kilnforming into the arena of sculpture.

Klaus Moje has produced a continuing body of work that integrates aesthetic ideas from the Bauhaus, geometric art, and builds on his personal response to place and native cultures, all of which are integrated into a coherent aesthetic that is current—and has stayed current—for 35 years.

What inspired you to curate this retrospective exhibition of Moje's work?

The immediate response I had to his work. I was amazed at how intensely seen and thoroughly resolved his work is across the years. There's a chromatic sophistication about his color choices, about the way he deals with color and the contrast of values, translucency and transparency, that I think is sobering in its brilliance. He has valued glass for its chromatic saturation, versus that "cheap-and-cheerful" glossy glitter seen in a lot of art glass works. At the end of the day, I wanted to bring Moje to a wider audience outside the cognoscenti of the glass community.

To what extent does Moje's training come into play in the evolution of his work?

Klaus's career begins as a young man working in his family's glass working shop in Hamburg, and his training in German vocational schools. He was exposed to a set of ideas and concerns shaped by the Bauhaus which focused on material and function, analysis of structure, and a consideration of form and function. Klaus, growing up during the post-World War II industrial rebuilding of Germany, is clearly aware of the lessons that come from an aesthetic that welcomes the workmanlike in its simplest and most pure form.

One can trace the joint influences of traditional glass working and Bauhaus functionalism from his early carved crystal pieces—where elaboration comes from the process on a traditional form of a vessel or a column of glass—to his

Untitled, 1978. Mosaic glass, kilnformed and wheel-carved. D 18 1/2 in.

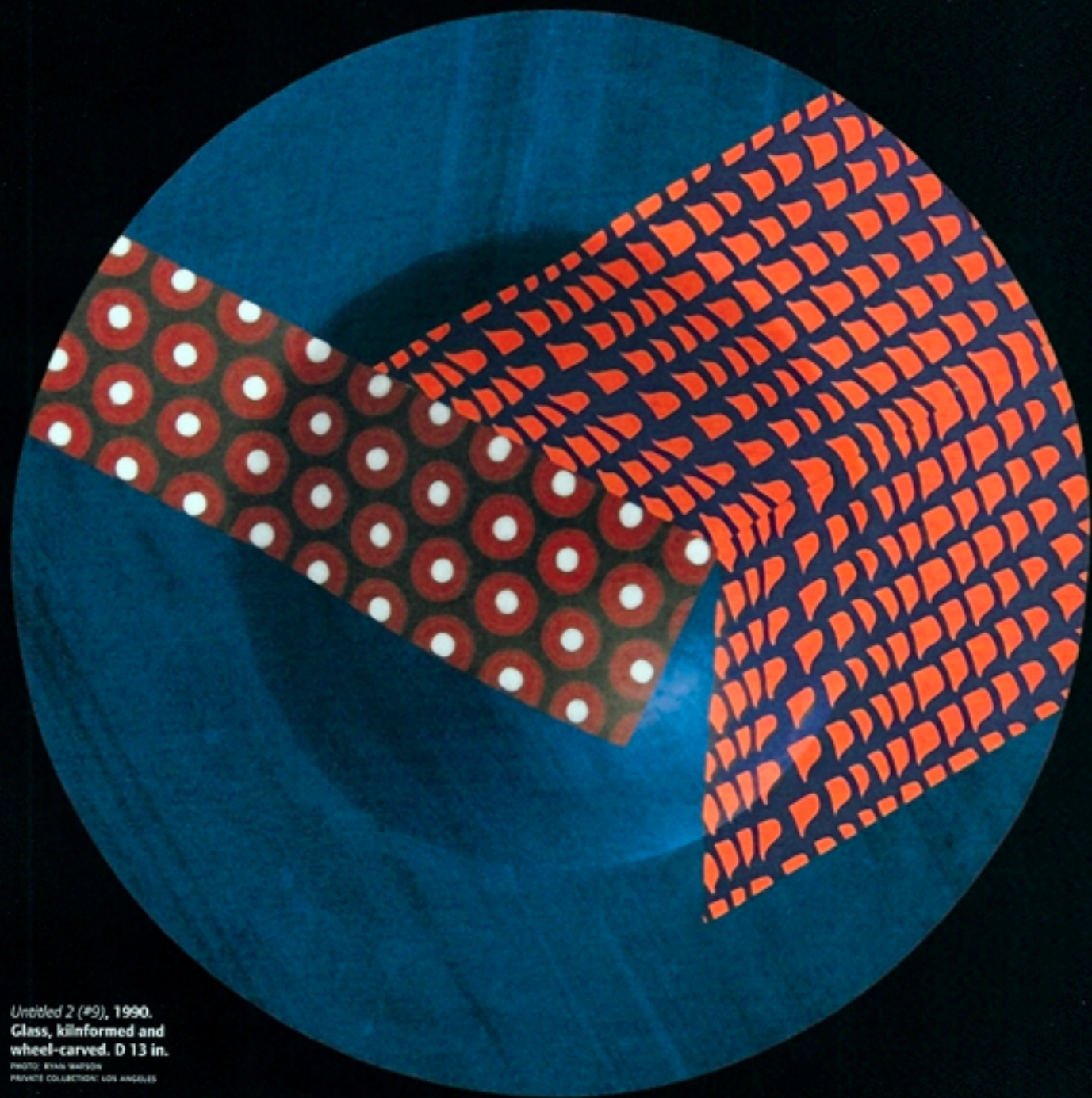
PHOTO: MIKA BARTON
PRIVATE COLLECTION, ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

Untitled (#24), 1987. H 18 1/2, W 13 3/4, D 2 3/4 in.
Glass, kilnformed and wheel-carved.

PHOTO: JAMES DEE
PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK







Untitled 2 (#9), 1990.
Glass, kilnformed and
wheel-carved. D 13 in.

PHOTO: RYAN SAPIEN
PRIVATE COLLECTION, LOS ANGELES

move into assembled glass forms. As he moves to flat glass, we can see how intrigued Moje was by pattern making and surface. He works with optical properties of glass and changing the surface of the glass in a way that allowed light to seem to come from within the work to reveal his chromatic interplay and the pattern, much in the same way that translucence of paint works in an Impressionist painting. Having been raised inside the envelope—that is, the great German tradition of engraved and carved glass that was carried on by his father's workshop—Klaus updated a 500-year-old tradition with new forms and abstraction in his early work.

With the grinding tool and abrading of the surface, he pulls the sheen off his objects. Sometimes the surface he's after is like suede leather, sometimes it's the subtle granulation of an orange peel. It's extraordinary the way the glass feels under your finger, the way it moves; but it's most important how the surface affects the eye. Your eye reads certain of his textures as breaks in the color plane that emit light and begin to almost sparkle.

You've talked a lot about the texture of his work, but what do you see as the content?

I would answer rhetorically, What is the "content" of Josef Albers' work? What is the "content" of Bridget Riley's work? Their work is engaged with the optics of color, chromatic density, and complexity of pattern, all of which lead the mind into an altered mode of processing, stimulating the eye and the mind with this pattern. Its subject is the release of narrative. Moje's work eloquently speaks to similar concerns.

What influence has Australia and indigenous art had on Moje?

Aboriginal art is something Klaus has access to in Canberra, but it is only part of a much more complex reference base that he has to draw on for his inspiration. We talk about aboriginal art as a series of graphic prompts, where line, dot, zigzag, and other forms of linear patterning have a semantic or social meaning. And while I think it might be an apt comparison of means, it is clearly not a direct source for Moje. He reinvents pattern through a pre-existing screen that originates in European functionalism and international abstract painting.

Sources are interesting to consider, because in conversation, Klaus will acknowledge seeing a wide range of work, and he clearly thinks about all of it. However, there are things that have touched him as a visual person, that he has absorbed and that are expressed through his work.

It reminds me of a wonderful story about Clement Greenberg taking the young Jackson Pollock to look at Mark Tobey's work, and that their dialogue about Tobey somehow activated a response in Pollock's work, which became something bolder and more physical than the wrist-based movement that defined Tobey's painting. Pollock abandoned the fussiness and scale of Tobey's work to embrace the wild openness of the American



TOP *Untitled*, 1985. Glass, kilnformed and wheel-carved. H 21 1/4, W 22 1/2, D 2 1/2 in.

PHOTO: JAMES BEE
PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK

BOTTOM *Untitled T (#2)*, 1990. Glass, kilnformed and wheel-carved. D 20 in.

PHOTO: RYAN WATSON
PRIVATE COLLECTION, PORTLAND, OREGON

West, where he was from. In many ways it is a parallel to the way that Klaus absorbs inspiration from the world and makes it his own voice—in the way he sees and responds through a material he knows intimately.

It's interesting to see the craft tradition expressed in the actual form. Klaus is still making plates, or at least maintaining their shape in many of his works.

It's as if Moje had to honor that tradition using plate and bowl forms, but subvert them intellectually. I am reminded of the modernist artist Anni Albers and her work in textiles. She was intimately involved in the history of her material and based the structure of her weavings on the loom process. The constancy of her formal means provided a way of framing the radical modernist dialogue in which she was engaged just as Moje's use of the memory of functional forms allows for the invention and the exploration of a new vocabulary for him.

With all of this focus on optical effect in Klaus's work, do you see any connection to the work of Chuck Close?

Isn't it interesting to think about Chuck Close? Close's work has been based on a gridded image, and through various circumstances, he has freed the paint to be a mark and not an illusion, an image. Klaus Moje and Chuck Close both achieve the power of their work through the structure of a grid and color. Now, would Klaus say he has been directly inspired by Chuck Close? I don't think so. Interestingly, they both share the influence

of Josef Albers and his theories of color—Moje through the Bauhaus legacy and Close through Albers' affiliation with Yale, where Close did graduate studies. And Albers' color theory has shaped my own understanding of Klaus's use of color dynamics.

Can you speak a bit about Klaus's role as a teacher?

The beauty of Klaus Moje's influence as a teacher is that none of his students have aped his work. Each one has discovered his or her independent aesthetic vocabulary through his encouragement and exacting standards. But each also owes a debt to Klaus as a role model for his absolute integrity as an artist, his technical innovation, and his spirit of experimentation. One of the things I see in all the Canberra graduates is a rigorous intellectual framework for working that comes out of Moje's truly Germanic rigor and analysis.

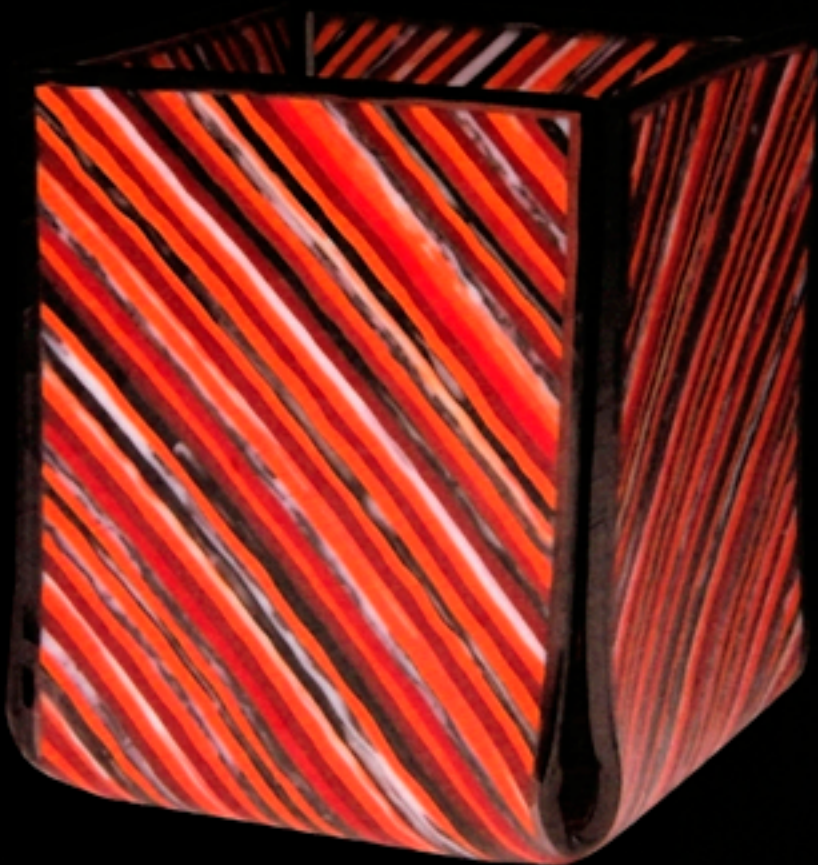
Take, for example, Jessica Loughlin, who reduces color in her sculpture to values of gray, white, and black, and builds her work with layers of sheet glass and ground surfaces not unlike those you discover on Klaus's objects. But you wouldn't say they are like an artistic father and daughter, or even the first and third generations of the same school, as their works are so different in nature.

Do you see graduates of the Canberra glass program as contemporary sculptors?

I see them as sculptors, object makers, and innovators who use the

Untitled 8, 1993. Glass, kiln-formed and wheel-carved. H 7, W 6, D 6 in.

PHOTO: EVAN BATHON
PRIVATE COLLECTION: PORTLAND, OREGON





Untitled 5, 1996. Glass, kiln-formed and wheel-carved.
H 1 3/4, D 11 1/2, D 11 1/2 in.

PHOTO: BOB LITTLE
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND BULLSEYE GALLERY



ABOVE
Untitled, from the "Rolling Lines Series," 2007. Glass, kilnformed roll-up, wheel-carved. Tallest: H 28, D 5 in.

PHOTO: NOB LITTLE
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND BULLSEYE GALLERY

OPPOSITE
The Portland Panels: Choreographed Geometry (Suite of 4), 2007. Glass, kilnformed and diamond polished. H 72, W 48 in. (Each panel)

PHOTO: MIAN DAFSON
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND BULLSEYE GALLERY



Untitled 3, 2006. Glass, kilnformed and wheel-carved. H 3, W 21, D 21 in.

PHOTO: NOB LITTLE
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND BULLSEYE GALLERY

transparency and opacity of glass in all of its possibilities to create new experiences that are parallels to the experimental works of other contemporary artists such as Rudolf Stingel in painting. Color is liberated to become actually physical, totally liquid, and tradition challenged.

Was there any new work created for the exhibition?

As we walked through the exhibition space a year ago, I challenged Klaus to create a new work that would not be just a 20 x 20 inch square object, but something that could command the entire wall. Klaus went out and created *The Portland Panels* at the Bullseye Glass studio. They are a tour de force technically and magnificent visually. I would venture to say that they may well be one of his masterpieces, though I am self-conscious in saying so. The way that the four panels in their complexity and use of pattern reinvent space is amazing. You read them as one reads a painting of overlapping patterns; becoming immersed in this completely illusionary space of a lapping, teeming collision of form. A unified field was created from 22,000 strips of glass, which became four panels, but the pattern opens up and dances from one to the next to the third onto the fourth. It's breathtaking. Moje had to break new ground to create these mammoth fused glass panels that could survive the fusing, the grinding, the abrading of the surface, until they emerge as a totality, something unitary while independently rich and engaging.

What were your goals as curator of this exhibition?

My goal was to create an exhibition that would leave people thinking about color as an emotional and intellectual framework through which experience is shaped. I also wanted to show Klaus's journey from the initial carved three-dimensional crystal forms to the fused, patterned kilnformed vessel forms onto the wall itself, and ultimately *The Portland Panels*.

Klaus Moje's accomplishments are vast. I want the exhibition to reveal his complexity in the way he introduces and bridges the native patterning of aboriginal objects, the color theories of Josef Albers and the optical explorations of Bridget Riley. To celebrate work that deals with the responsive eye and how we understand two colors placed together in close value, how color can optically activate the eye to generate brain waves, leading not to meaning, but sensation/experience and mathematical order. ■

