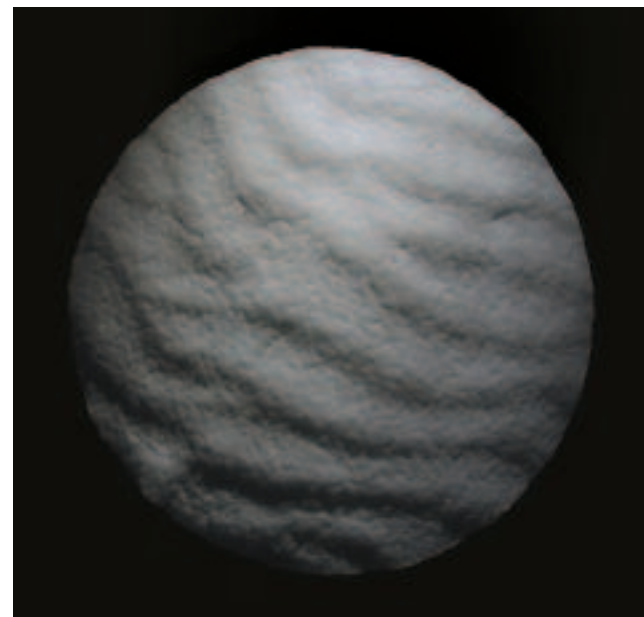




'Lunar Surface', 2004, glass powder on fused glass, 51 x 51 x 5 cm



'Polar Cap', 2005, kilnformed enamelled glass, 71 x 71 x 9 cm

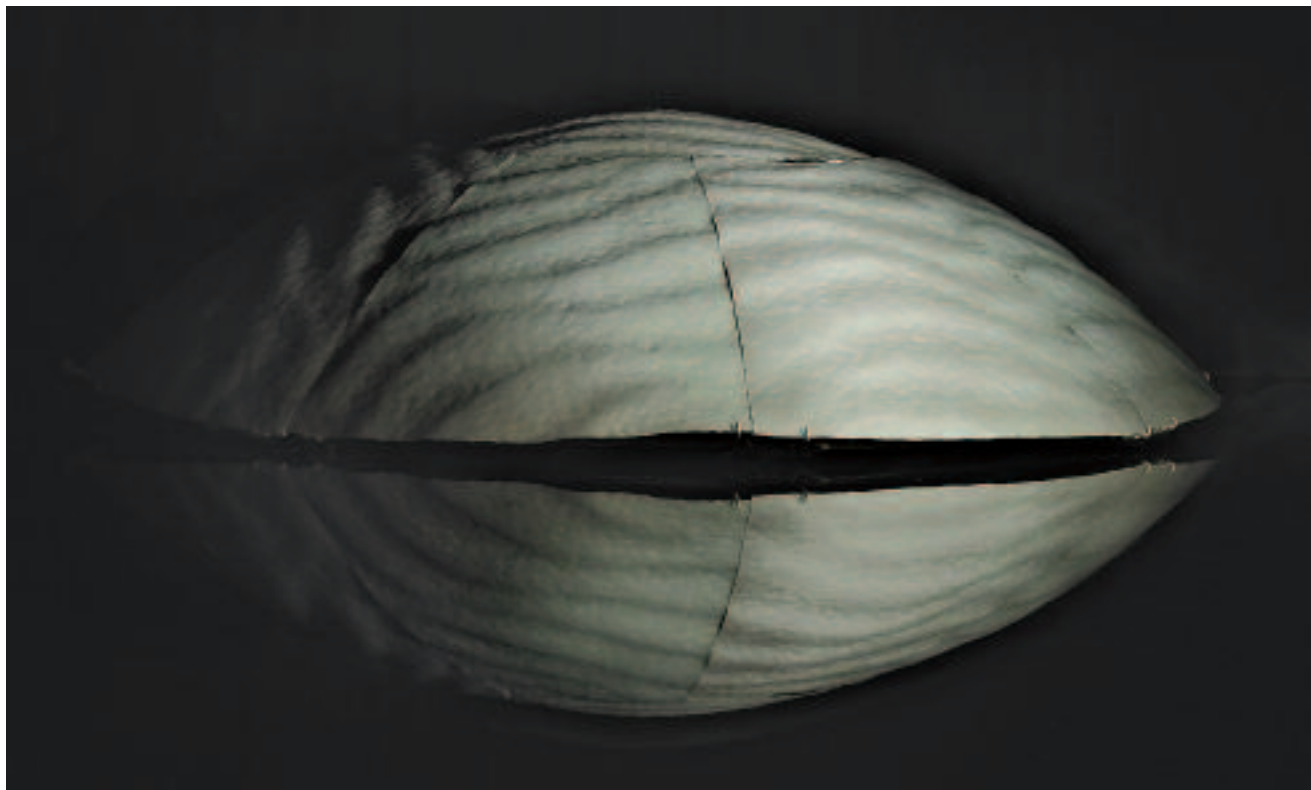
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK ZIRPEL

MARK ZIRPEL & THE NATURE OF TIME

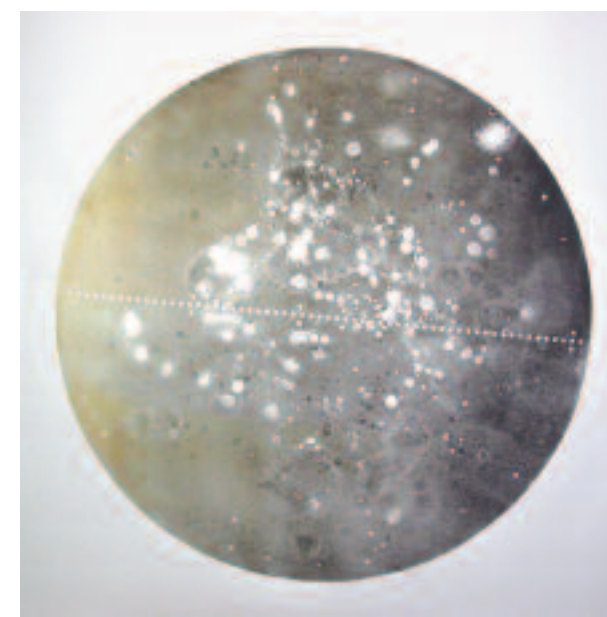
Much of Mark Zirpel's engaging installation work combines clockwork and theatre that is audience activated, for he regards the act of viewing as a kind of validation for his existence as an artist. Text by Dan Klein.

RECENTLY Mark Zirpel, now in his mid-forties, has come into his own. His exhibition "Celestial/Terrestrial" at the Bullseye Connection Gallery in Portland, Oregon, that ended in January, 2005, received critical acclaim with one reviewer commenting: 'Even if you hate glass you'll love this show.' Zirpel has never sought the limelight; he does what he has to do as an artist because that's his entire life. 'For me art has been a lifelong process of always encouraging myself to go on. This encouragement has been self-generated because I knew damn well it was not going to come from any-

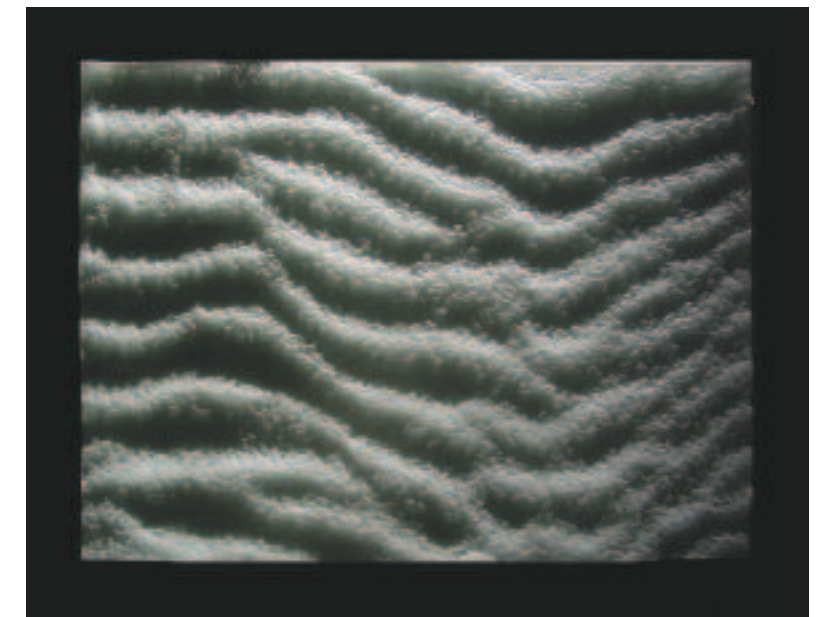
where else! His artistic journey to where he is now has been via a circuitous route that began with drawing and printmaking. He graduated with a fine arts degree from the University of Alaska in 1985 but the shift to glass came with his appointment in 1994 as Cold Shop/Print Shop co-ordinator at the Pilchuck Glass School. 'I got into glass by the back door.' At Pilchuck he says he felt like 'an alien on a different planet'. Apart from anything, the glass community offered a less solitary way of life. 'By the end of my first session at Pilchuck I knew 100 people. It is not the same in the world of sculpture or



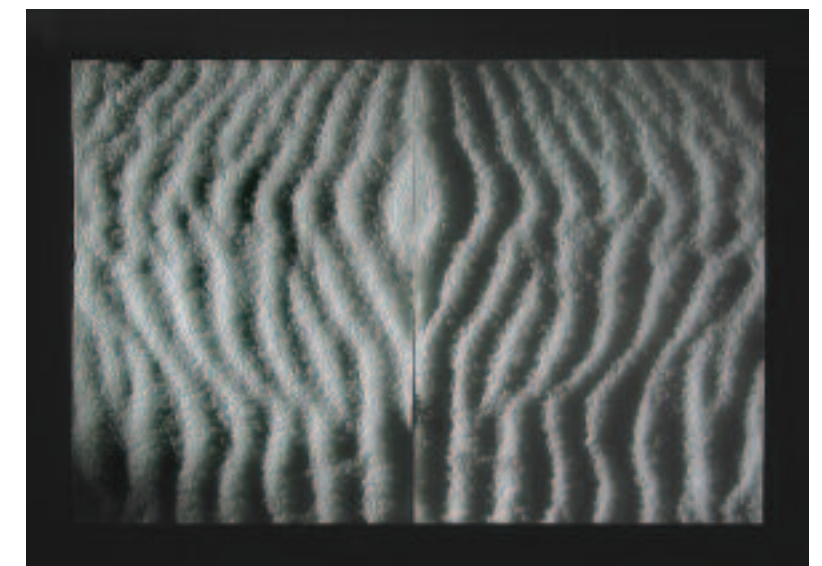
'Orb on Water', 2005, kilnformed enamelled glass, steel, water, 172 x 172 x 61 cm (glass only)



'Orb', 2001, relief print on rives BFK, 72.2 x 72.2 cm



'Atlantic Shore, Whale Beach, New Jersey', 2005, kilnformed glass, 20 x 102 x 5 cm



'Jersey Shore', 2005, kilnformed enamelled glass, 112 x 142 x 7.6 cm



'Mabano Beach, Camano Island, Low tide 10:37 pm, 27 May, 2002', kiln-formed enamelled glass, 61 x 61 x 5 cm

printmaking. Perhaps it is the primordial force of fire that brings people together.' There he met his partner, Tina Aufiero, who was the first person to instruct him about slumping glass. Since discovering the medium his life has changed. 'Pushing paper around to get it to do what I wanted was hard work; glass allowed me much more freedom.' Whether working with paper or with glass, or with any material for that matter, his life-long quest has been to understand the nature of time and man's relationship to time. It's the idea that drives him rather than any of his chosen materials. 'Offer me a residency in a cheese factory and I'll work with cheese.' Materials are merely the means to an end and glass may well not be the last of the different ones Zirpel has chosen to work with, even though at present it appears central to his way of making.

He became hooked on kiln-working processes after meeting Lani McGregor and Dan Schwoerer of Bullseye at a Pilchuck benefit auction to which he had contributed a work. It caught their eye and they invited him to do a two-week Bullseye residency, which for him, as for so many others, was a life-changing experience. 'It was like going back to school,' recalls Zirpel. It was not the extensive Bullseye colour palette that attracted him as he works almost exclusively in black-and-white or transparent glass. Very occasionally the blue of the sea or the sky make an appearance, but colour is not Mark Zirpel's thing. It was the flexibility and the three-dimensional possibilities of slumped glass that appealed to him. For the past 10 years glass has been his main artist's material. 'Are you a glass artist?' I asked him. 'Yes, with reservation,' he replied.

Zirpel sees art making as a three-part equation which goes from head to heart to hand, beginning with idea. He gets attached to an idea and becomes obsessive about it until he has worked it out of his system. Ideas germinate in a continuous process over a long period of time. They take an emotional hold, which can only progress from concept to reality through the process of making. But for Zirpel, the work isn't complete until the viewer becomes a part of the act of his creation through reaction and sensory participation. Walk into a Zirpel installation and a rubber-gloved hand might wave at you in a gesture of welcome that is both amusing and engaging. Much of Zirpel's installation work is audience activated. He sees the act of viewing as a kind



The 'Body Work' exhibition at William Travers Gallery, Seattle, Washington, 2005. Pieces shown: 'Beggar', activated prosthetic arm, voice chip with speaker and motion sensor, 157 x 58 x 48 cm; 'Broken Eye Chart', kiln-formed glass, enamel, 81 x 51 x 1.3 cm; 'Viewer Activated Greeting Device', blown glass, latex, air pump, motion sensor, inflated size 40.6 x 12.7 x 7.6 cm

'(Beggar) A socio-economic inquiry into the practice of begging', 2005, pneumatically activated prosthetic arm with tin can, voice chip with speaker and motion sensor, 157 x 58 x 48 cm

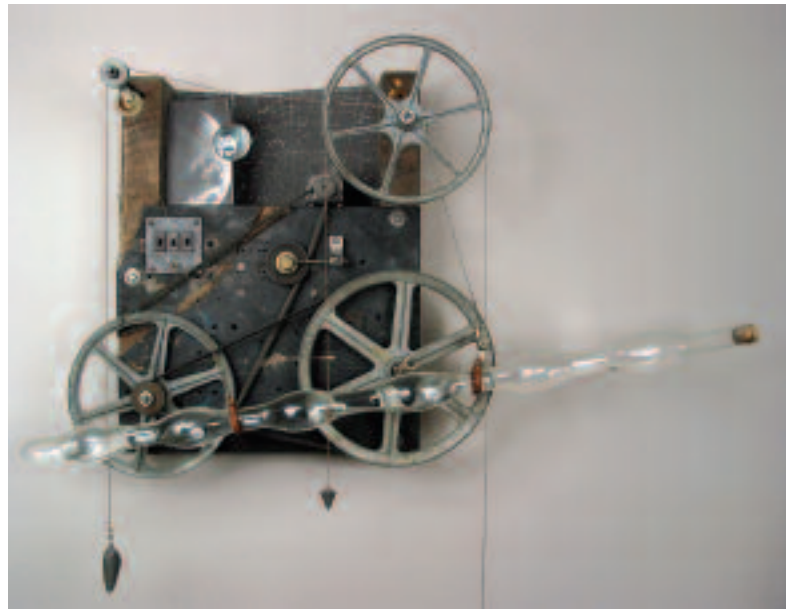
of validation for his existence as an artist.

Zirpel enjoys exploring the technology and machinery which enable ideas to assume a concrete presence in the world. The technical paraphernalia of both print-making and glassmaking are an endless source of fascination for him. 'I don't have any facilities other than a glass cutter,' he says, although his studio still contains machinery used as a printer and includes an etching press, a litho press, a darkroom and welders. Gradually, as and when he can afford it, glassmaking equipment is also finding its way there and he is planning to build his own kiln. He is like a kid with toys when exposed to new equipment. For him the joy of making is closely linked to inventive technology. He embraces the challenge of unfamiliar machinery and likes to experiment with new ways of using technology to translate ideas into reality. He could never be accused of being set in his ways. 'Discovery is part of what I do.' In another life Zirpel thinks he might have chosen to be a material scientist.

Until now his life as a glass artist has been spent going from one artist's residency to the next, always working to further his ideas both during the residencies and during the periods in between. Over the past five years he has done 10 residencies and has enjoyed all of them. For Zirpel they have provided the ideal lifestyle, though this may not continue to be so. 'During a residency I experiment 24 hours a day and see what happens.' They have taken him all over the US and to the far north of Scotland. It was a 2004 residency at North Lands Creative Glass in Caithness where an endless sky and magical light inspired his Portland show "Celestial/Terrestrial". For Zirpel the appeal of residencies lies partly in the fact that they offer the opportunity to work with equipment he doesn't have access to in his studio.

Residencies are also seen as a way of breaking with routine. Zirpel quotes Marcel Duchamp's dictum "style is habit" and adds: 'I don't think habit is necessarily such a good thing. Our modern way of living impinges on my incentive to make art. Social pressures, my own proclivities, get in the way - if you move yourself it will

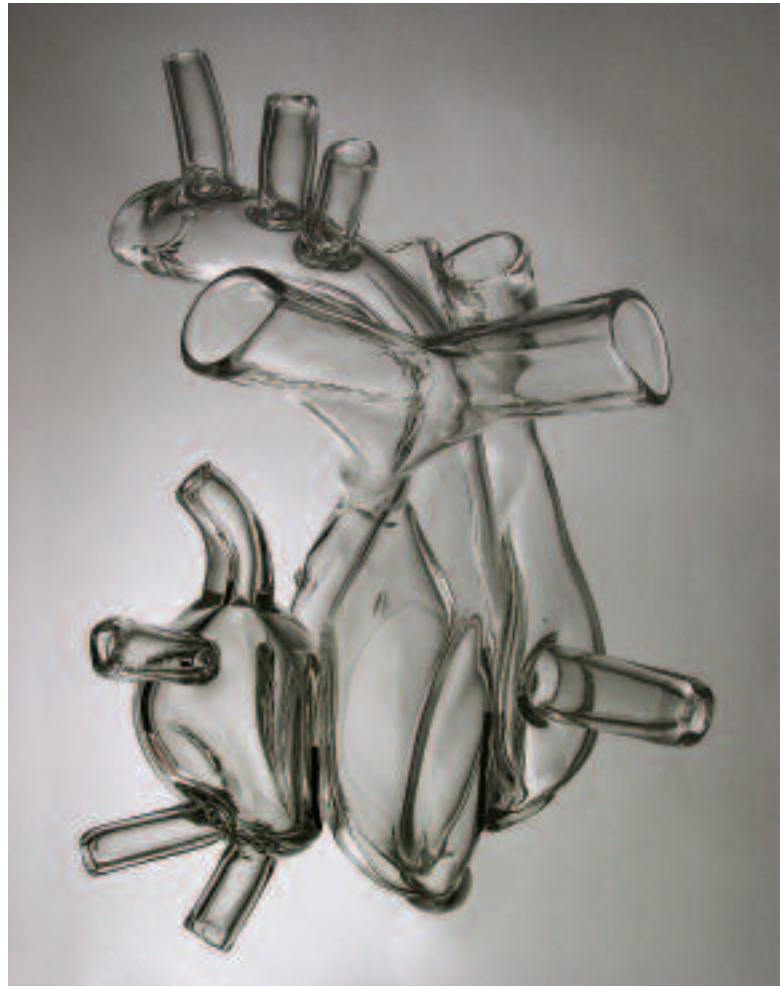
'Life Support', 2005, cast silicone rubber, gurney, surgical light, air, reed, accordion bellows air pump, motion sensor and motor, 305 x 366 x 279 cm



'Tide Machine', 1998, Borosilicate glass, water, motor, string, lead, lens, lithograph, xerox, pulleys and wood, 213 x 122 x 35.5 cm



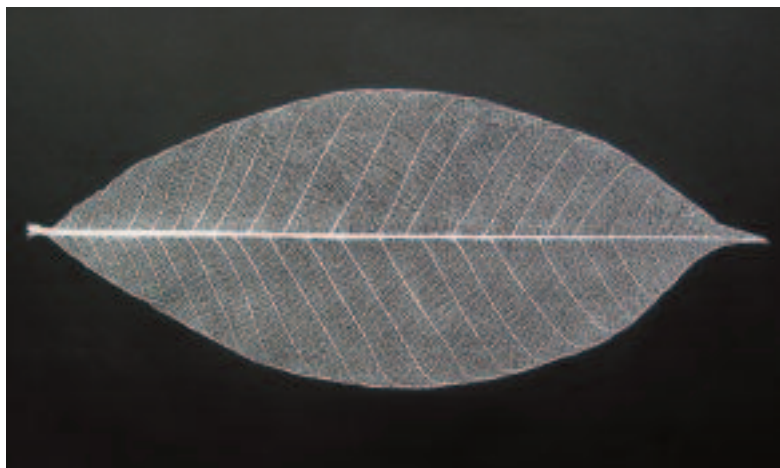
'Smoking Lung', 2005, blown glass, latex, accordion bellow, motor, cigar, smoke, steel motor, voice chip with speaker, 96.5 x 84 x 66 cm



'Heart', 2005, blown glass, 35.6 x 25.4 x 23 cm

be a completely different experience.' At residencies he has the feeling that he is 'leaving the world behind'. 'If you go to a residency merely to continue what you do in your own studio, there's no point to it.' He is always willing to try something new and although there are recurring symbols in his work, in particular the ellipse and the circle, he moves quickly from one concept to the next.

Zirpel's way of life is largely determined by this quest for discovery and creation and not by their accompanying financial rewards. He does not really make work with the express intention of selling, even though he is delighted when and if it does sell and is obviously enjoying his newfound success. He makes because he has to make and doesn't mind confessing that '80 per cent of what I make is garbage'. There's great artistic integrity in this degree of risk taking. If he has to make money in order to live, Zirpel thinks nothing of taking on con-



'White Luna/Black Luna', 2003, kiln-formed glass, enamel and salt, each glass piece 20 x 91 x 7.6 cm

struction work to supplement his income. His landlord in Seattle is a property developer and Zirpel worked for him as and when he has had to. Until recently he did not have a gallery, but that has changed with two major shows: one at Bill Travers Gallery in Seattle, the other at Bullseye in Portland. As Zirpel gets noticed and discovered there will be more solo shows.

Zirpel is part Dr Caligari and part poet: occasionally both sides of his personality find expression in the same work. Of late, however, poetry has taken precedence over funk. In both modes he addresses the same concerns, looking at various aspects of nature and relating them to time. Viewing a Zirpel installation is a new way of experiencing time. The passing of time for him is not so much regulated by the tick of a wristwatch as by the ways in which it affects everything in the universe. The phases of the moon and their effect on nature; the searing heat of the sun and its effect on the parched earth; the marks left by the tide on sand; and the beating of the human heart, are the subject matter of his work. With every ebb of the tide different impressions are left on the sand. And Zirpel has recorded nature's sand impressions by taking moulds of them. In a process of his own invention he translates nature's patterning into glass. His plaster moulds taken from sand patterns left by the tide can weigh up to 363 kg (800 lbs). Part of the process of discovery was finding a method of cutting them up (the largest became a six-part mould) and transporting them to his studio. The rim of light around the darkness of an eclipse is another favourite visual phenomenon that he likes to re-create in black glass with a halo of white enamel light.

The installations that Zirpel creates combine clockwork 'Leaf', 2003, sandblasted enamelled glass, 71 x 14 x 0.6 cm

and theatre. Blown and kiln-formed glass combine playfully with found objects, ranging from bagpipe reeds to rubber tubes. Different elements are joined together and simple mechanical devices make them move or vibrate. Together they create a contemplative environment that makes one think and smile. One of his installations incorporates a device which measures how long you have spent viewing it. Zirpel was intrigued by a statistic that claimed that the average time spent viewing a work of art was seven seconds. Another work has 'a viewer-activated greeting device'. Yet another, entitled *Swimulator*, was conceived for an audience of dogs. The overall effect is of a half-joking, half-serious chemistry lab with stage lighting. In some installations glass components that take their inspiration from human body parts (the digestive tract, the heart, and genitalia) are linked to mechanical devices, cog wheels, levers and motorised parts that appear to monitor their functions, making us aware through metaphorical reference of the way in which time affects everything in and around us.

The death of his father caused him to think long and hard about the ageing process in human beings. The installations are dimly lit overall with bright pools of light here and there. Light is as important as shadow in Zirpel's work. Sometimes installations are accompanied by sound devices, not conventional music but sound patterns created by devices such as the random plucking of piano strings, reminiscent of the music of John Cage and the fluxus movement of the 1960s.

Within these installations are a series of poetic wall pieces, usually composed of kiln-formed, enamelled and sandblasted black or white glass, which have a fragile and lyrical quality. Some possess elliptical or circular impressions, occasionally with the ellipse and the circle juxtaposed; sometimes the ripple of sand is re-created. Textures are smooth and matt or rough and gritty, resembling a moonscape. Zirpel has also devised an ingenious way of transferring photography onto special film which, when laid on the glass surface, can be sandblasted to produce a unique kind of imagery. With this technique he has created skeletal images on glass of leaves found on forest walks.



Mark Zirpel, 2005

Deprived of light they have lost everything except the detailed veining which once nourished their greenery. When transferred onto glass the metamorphosis is magical. In translation the dead leaf has taken on new life, been resurrected as it were; through sandblasting the veining shines with a sparkling light.

Mark Zirpel sees what he does as a way of life and not as a career path. He doesn't want the market to determine the kind of work he makes, though he sees market approval as validation of 'this undefined thing that one does'. This gives him the courage to make art for its own sake in an increasingly competitive world. He is uncompromising and certainly never driven by gallery expectations. If a gallery likes his work he will exhibit there, often aware that his type of installation may have little commercial appeal. A few enterprising galleries have thought the risk worth taking. It makes a welcome change in a marketplace governed by collectors and gallery owners with a growing tendency to judge success rates by sales figures.

Dan Klein

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'Projector/microscope', 2003, kiln-formed oil lens, bullseye glass, kerosene, fire, lead, copper and stainless steel, 81 x 51 x 122 cm



'Terrestrial/Celestial', 2005, fused, fumed, sandblasted glass, 102 x 76 x 0.6 cm