

From shards to timely show

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Glass artists have many enemies -- heat, cracks, gravity -- but perhaps chief among them are the risks of transcontinental shipping.

That's something glass artist Mark Zirpel ran afoul of when he shipped a batch of his work from Scotland to the States for a show here in November. When Zirpel opened three full crates of work he had completed earlier this year at the prestigious Scotland residency program at The Northlands Creative Glass Center for his solo show, he discovered that two-thirds of his finished pieces had shattered in transit.

The gracefully rippled surfaces of vanilla-tinted glass? Broken. The concave orbs hanging in a field of black? Ditto.

Daunted but not deterred, Zirpel re-created the entire "Celestial/Terrestrial" show for The Bullseye Connection Gallery in about five months. The result on display at the gallery is light, deft and -- not surprisingly, given the race against the clock -- heavy on thoughts of time.

Consider the undulating surfaces of Zirpel's five "Beach" pieces, which were created by taking casts of the rippling patterns of sand at low tide and slumping, or melting, white glass over the form. Translucently thin and exquisitely graceful -- made as they were by Mother Earth -- the forms are an elegant combination of representation and concept. This is time, but not the ravages of time: Zirpel treats his subjects of time and nature with reverence and respect.

Zirpel consulted more than just tide charts to make his show. In "Salt Pool" he slumped black glass into a concave form, then filled the form with salt solution. Over time, the water evaporated and left concentric rings of white salt. If you can resist the impulse to lick the piece -- salt licks, after all, are another aspect of nature -- it becomes part of Zirpel's bigger concept.

Zirpel is not concerned with time, but with marking time. According to Rebecca Rockom, Bullseye sales associate, Zirpel became concerned about a claim he heard that people spend an average of seven seconds looking at art. Which may be why in this new show Zirpel set traps for viewers, tricks to get them to stay. In "Heart/Lung (bagpipe)," he created a mechanized leveling pump that passes water through a tube into a large, clear glass bladder. The top of the bladder is outfitted with a whistle. As the water rises, air in the bladder is pushed out. As it falls, it is sucked through the whistle back into the bladder, neatly equalizing air-pressure in the process. The fill-and-empty cycle lasts much longer than seven seconds and, though the sound of the whistle can grate, the piece keeps viewers in place.

"Heart/Lung (bagpipe)" is more cute than deep and, if forced to choose out of the pieces that trap the viewer with motion, this would be at the bottom of the list. Stronger by far is "Celestial Clock II," a piece of white glass slumped into a semi-oval, decorated with a lead fishing weight suspended by fishing line from the ceiling. The weight is superfluous, distracting more than advancing the art. Still, the weight casts a shadow. As the glass turns, the light catches the skin of the glass, texturizes it and moves on. Watching the running of the shadows along its surface, and the pale diffusion of light along its back, is like watching a nature video in fast forward.

"Celestial/Terrestrial" works because of Zirpel's gentle and subtle handling of his subject matter. Flavored by the intersections of nature and time, Zirpel transforms such ephemeral matter as tides and diurnal arcs, creating works worth more than seven seconds of viewing.

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