



**GetPosted**  
Create your profile, upload photos, and share your photos with the world • Create your free account now

post-gazette **NOW**  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

## Arts & Entertainment

# Art Review: Exhibition transforms views of glass art

Wednesday, November 14, 2007

By Mary Thomas, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



One of three glass sculptures by Honorable Mention artist Michael Rogers at the Society for Contemporary Craft, from the exhibition "Transformation 6: Contemporary Works in Glass"

An eclectic, thought-provoking and at times playful exhibition at the Society for Contemporary Craft is in many ways the show that the rest of Pittsburgh's year of glass has been preparing visitors for.

The year's focus has been on the studio glass movement, displaying historic and contemporary works ranging from functional to blatantly beautiful to conceptual, or a combination of those qualities.

"Transformation 6: Contemporary Works in Glass" brings the medium up to the moment through expression that pushes expectations of materials and concepts.

The biennial exhibition series was established in 1997 in memory of the Society's founder, Elizabeth R. Raphael. In addition to inclusion in the show and catalog with other finalists, the Raphael Prize winner receives \$5,000, the winning artwork is purchased for the Society's collection, and a video is made about the artist to play during the exhibition.

Twenty-eight artists were selected from an international pool of applicants, including Japanese artists Kazumi Ikemoto and Atsuko Tajima (the latter living in eastern

Pennsylvania), and Israeli Boris Shpeizman. Providing local representation is Kansas native Stephen Protheroe, now part of Pittsburgh's growing glass artist community.

Exhibition guest jurors were artist Hank Adams, the glass studio creative director at WheatonArts and Cultural Center, Millville, N.J., and German artist Sibylle Peretti, winner of the inaugural Raphael Prize. They were joined by Elizabeth Raphael's daughters Catherine and Margaret, and Kate Lydon, Society director of exhibitions.

The featured medium rotates by exhibition, and it's a happy coincidence that glass, the subject of the first show, was due this year. Inviting Peretti to jury, besides establishing a cyclic connection, provided opportunity to film her video. She was the only prize-winner who had not been filmed because the videos weren't begun until the second show.

Seattle artist Mark Zirpel rightly captured the Raphael Prize for "Pair," a kinetic sculpture with deceptively simple presentation. However, typical of the artist's work, it's inspired by and reflective of basic human biological and psychological behavioral patterns, as well as the movements of natural elements such as wind and tides.

Two clear glass flasks, capped by white latex gloves and connected by rubber tubing, rise and lower in slow motorized opposition. Water, draining from one to another by gravity, forces air into one glove, expanding it into a hand, while the other collapses into its chamber. Then, in the measured rhythm of breath, the opposite occurs, and repeats, one hand reaching as the other withdraws.

In his video, Zirpel talks about the ways "Pair" addresses the exhibition theme: transformation. There is the dynamic between the two flasks, which represent people. "The relationship with another being is transformative," he says, and that's what's "at the heart of the piece."

There is the transformation of objects into ideas. And there is the transformation visitors undergo as they reconsider their assumptions about what art is, he says.

Most transformative is the synthesis of observation, thought and material that occurs under Zirpel's watch and takes shape under his palms. There are four other sculptures by the artist in this exhibition, just enough to whet the appetite for more. The Zirpel video is a finely made artwork in itself that manages to capture, richly and succinctly, the essence of this complex thinker. That's no easy accomplishment and a reflection of the skill and devotion brought to its production by Alan Harris of AIH Group. Harris has filmed each artist in the series, and his similarly refined piece on Peretti also plays in the gallery.

Experimentation means taking chances, and some show pieces work better as ideas than as completed objects. A stack of rough forms is reminiscent of ceramists' early efforts to build clay sculpture large by combining parts. Conceptual pieces can be so obscure that the meaning remains with the artist.

Jennifer Blazina's "Recollection," a memory piece based upon a one-room schoolhouse, would be more effective were it more intimate, perhaps by presenting fewer units.

The tomb-like size of "Evoking Nabokov," in comparison, works for Michael Rogers'

conjuring of the famed author through symbolic objects and endless lines of miniscule script engraved on the surfaces of the case .

In contrast, Sydney Cash's eye-catching "Atomic" is achieved with minimal material and knowledgeable application of glass's characteristic interaction with light.

Among other notable works are Tim Wagner's "Government Cheese," a metaphoric gathering of fat dead rats; John Miller's Pop Art-inspired, oversized fast food "66 Fix"; Kait Rhoads' "Nudibranchs," painstakingly composed of murrine segments; and Penelope Comfort Starr's cast memorial to her father's World War I experiences, "Detritus of War #6."

Zirpel says, "I believe in the power of objects, the power of materials, to communicate ideas to oneself and to others."

The works in "Transformation" give support to that faith.

*"Transformation 6" continues through Nov. 24 at 2100 Smallman St., Strip District. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Admission is free; an illustrated catalog is \$18; 412-261-7003 or [contemporarycraft.org](http://contemporarycraft.org).*

Art critic Mary Thomas may be reached at [mthomas@post-gazette.com](mailto:mthomas@post-gazette.com) or 412-263-1925.

First published on November 14, 2007 at 12:00 am