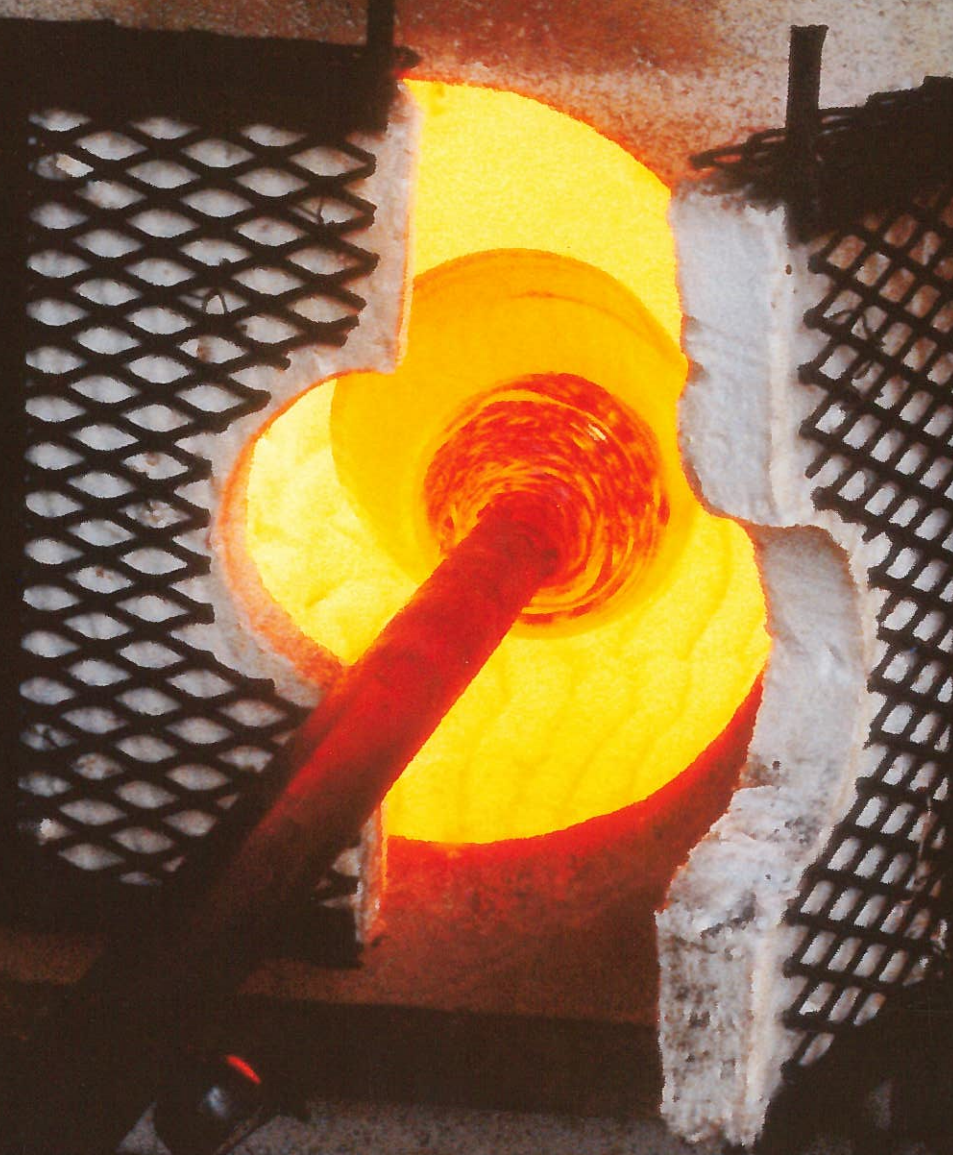


TRIAL BY FIRE

Glass as a Sculptural Medium

September 19–November 23, 1997



THE EXHIBIT



Fire has the power to destroy or renew—transform, purify, enliven, sexualize. Fire has fascinated, terrified, and comforted human beings for centuries as it gathered them together around the hearth or campfire. The age old fire arts of glass, ceramics, and metallurgy are still among our most powerful ways of transforming physical matter into aesthetic and visionary form. Philosopher/phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard describes the qualities of fire eloquently when he notes that

"... the changes wrought by fire are changes in substance: that which has been licked by fire has a different taste in the mouths of men. That which fire has shone upon retains as a result an inefaceable color. That which fire has caressed, loved, adored, has gained a store of memories and lost its innocence. . . . Through fire everything changes. When we want everything to be changed we call on fire."¹

The four artists featured in this exhibition have explored the fire art of glassworking throughout their careers, however, they have not been makers of the decorative arts objects we usually associate with glass. They approach their material as sculptors, combining it with other elements in nontraditional ways. Their ways of seeing and working are conceptual and idea-based as well

as physical. These four sculptors represent several generations of artists who, in the 1960s and the decades that followed, pioneered in transforming this ancient-but-new material into expressive fine art.

In some respects, however, these four artists are still very much a part of glass history and tradition. Working hot glass is by its very nature a group enterprise: all of these artists use teams of workers utilizing ancient techniques of free blowing, blowing and casting in molds, and working the hot glass with tools to make their sculptures. And perhaps most important, the luminous beauty of the material itself—its color, translucence, and shaping possibilities—which fascinated the ancients, is still compelling for each of these artists today.

The Newcomb Art Gallery welcomes you to this opening exhibition of its second season. The gallery serves the academic needs of Newcomb College and Tulane University—in this case the show is connected with the studio art glass and art history programs. But the gallery also exists for the New Orleans community and the national and international art world as well. As the new director of this new gallery I hope you will find our exhibitions and other activities interesting, and will return to visit us many times in the future.

NANCY A. CORWIN
DIRECTOR, NEWCOMB
ART GALLERY
WOLDENBERG ART CENTER,
NEWCOMB COLLEGE AT
TULANE UNIVERSITY

HOWARD BEN TRÉ

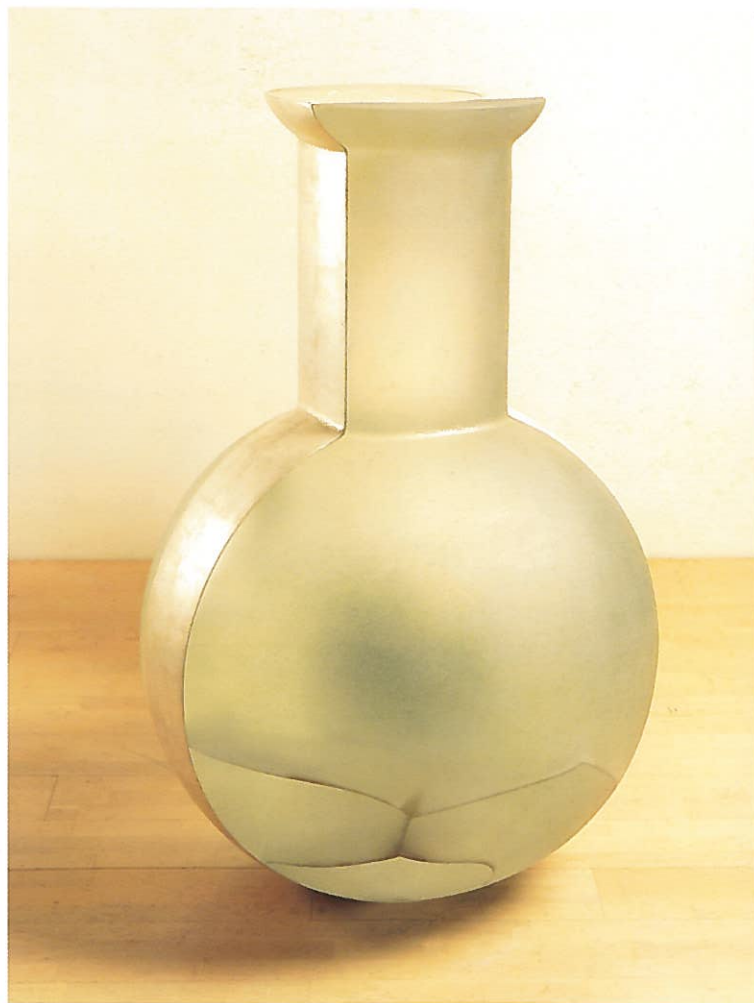
Although he has used glass as his medium for many years, Howard Ben Tré considers himself a sculptor rather than a glass artist. Younger than the founders of the 1960s studio art glass movement who experimented with glass as a material for making fine art, Ben Tré revolutionized glass in the 1980s by making

**"I NEEDED TO MAKE
CERTAIN KINDS OF
OBJECTS IN ORDER TO
ANSWER CERTAIN QUES-
TIONS FOR MYSELF."**

monumental cast sculptures and moving glass away from the hand-held decorative arts object. His work continues to reflect an architectural sensibility in its large scale and powerful simplicity—a simplicity as modern as Brancusi and as ancient as Stonehenge or the glass medium itself. An MFA graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, today Ben Tré maintains a studio in Providence, R.I., where he works full time as a studio artist.

Alchemy is a word often used in connection with Ben Tré's art. His glass conveys the dramatic visual record of its transmutations in the fire process. Fissures and bubbles, rough surfaces with patinas and dark cores containing burnt metallic powders evoke earth processes much grander than anything wrought by a single human hand. The luminous surfaces recall the patinas of ancient Roman vessels that have been buried in the earth. His art is tactile and sensuous but mysterious and transcendent at the same time.

There is an archaeological feeling about his forms as well: his monumental bottles, basins, and dolmen



Pomegranate, 1996

forms, and his smaller amber glass *Stones for Casting* seem formed by the earth itself. Are these stones for sculpture casting or skipping stones for giants? His simple shapes, the neutrality of his pale celadon greenish industrial glass and his habit of working in series all link him with minimalism, but the luminosity and ancientness of his material give his works a spiritual quality. Fire and ice combine in the art of Ben Tré to create a sense of timelessness as vast and deep as the universe.²

JON CLARK

Jon Clark has been using glass to make sculpture since the late 1960s when he studied in Harvey Littleton's seminal glass program at the University of Wisconsin. Littleton, originally a ceramist, was one of the first artists in the United States to experiment with glass as

**"WHY DO I USE
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I REMEMBER MY FIRST
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a fine art medium. Clark's interest in glass took him to the Royal College of Art in London in 1969–72 for his graduate work, and to California to work with Marvin Lipofsky. He has been teaching at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia since 1973.

Clark's art has always been about life forms. He speaks of glass as his form maker, of glass acting as an inflated envelope—a skin that expresses living qualities. Clark's complex process of creation incorporates techniques from many other art media. After an initial set of drawings, he builds a clay model from which the mold is made. The final hollow sculpture is the result of hot glass blown into the mold, thus giving the piece itself an "elastic breath" quality. He then finishes the surface by cutting, etching, grinding, and/or painting the surface with various materials ranging from lacquer to car paint. In this way he achieves unusual textured lustres and remarkably luminescent color effects.

Clark's hybrid combination of working techniques is echoed in his visual vocabulary. Like many

postmodern artists of the post 1960 era, his inclusive eye draws inspiration from history and from many art forms outside the traditional boundaries of his medium. His earliest work was based on the tiny sand core glass vases of ancient Egypt and the rich variety of ancient Roman glass that he studied in museums and on travels to Egypt, Greece and much of the Roman Empire. Later he became interested in the Pre-Columbian art of South and Central America. His most recent explorations into what he calls "archaic shape and natural form," shown in this exhibition, are inspired by stone carvings from the ancient mound builder cultures of the Wisconsin, Illinois and Ohio region that he saw in the Cleveland Museum of Art. Clark's art exemplifies the tremendous range of visual ideas and technical knowledge that has recently opened up glass and other areas of the visual arts in exciting new ways.³

Solo Torso, 1997



RUTH KING

Ruth King has been working with glass and many other materials since studying with Jon Clark at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia in the late 1970s. Today she teaches at Ohio State University and maintains a studio in Columbus. It was the difficulty of seeing and handling molten glass—its transparency and its heat—that inspired her to incorporate other materials including photography and computers. Blowing and pouring hot glass and working with its light-capturing qualities continue to fascinate her and to generate new directions in her art.

As part of a younger generation of studio glass artists following the first American and European pioneers who revolutionized the material in the 1960s, she feels free to reach beyond “the frozen fluid” itself. In her work she utilizes other flowing, glass-like, translucent materials, such as the vinyl balloons in *Generations*, and combines them with contrasting materials. “I use steel,” she says, “because glass doesn’t like steel and I try to get them to like each other.” For King, the historical tradition of glass making is “a point of departure for contemporary ways of perceiving things.”

Generations, the room sized installation piece she has created for the Newcomb Art Gallery, is based on a larger installation piece she did at Alfred University in New York state in 1994. In that piece and the Newcomb work, she replaced the glass and air she would normally use with vinyl and helium “in order to make what interests me about glass larger than life.



***Generations*, first version as seen in 1994**

The vinyl balloons, inflated with helium, are meant to evoke the sense of inflation I experience as a glassblower, on a more surreal scale.”

Generations brings viewers into the actual space of the art work itself, surrounded and enveloped by the piece. In this large scale, human sized work, the line between architecture and sculpture is blurred and the border between ourselves and art is obscured. We sense the piece in relation to our whole bodies, not just our eyes. Walking among the helium tanks and the gently drifting, translucent balloons, enveloped by colored light, we are transported into another world where our senses are activated and intensified.⁴

“MOLTEN GLASS WORKING HAS MADE ME AWARE OF THE POTENTIAL FOR JOINING THE RATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL RESPONSES I HAVE TO THE PHYSICAL WORLD. GLASS IS THE BEST TEACHER I EVER HAD.”

ROBERT WILLSON

Robert Willson's colorful sculpture draws its inspiration from Mexican and American Indian art and from Venetian glass. After graduating from the University of Texas in 1935, a fellowship took Willson to Mexico, where he studied painting with Orozco and other muralists. Many years as a university professor intervened before another grant in 1956 took him to

"IT WAS FUN— the Corning Museum to study glass. By
STILL IS!" 1964 Willson was in Murano, Italy, on the first of many trips learning to make glass in the city's historic art-glass factories. He has been returning to work there ever since.

At that time—in the late 1950s and early 1960s—a few people were beginning to experiment with glass as an expressive art medium in a studio setting. Willson was in the forefront of those developments, attending conferences with Harvey Littleton, Erwin Eisch and other early glass pioneers. In contrast to them, however, he worked mainly in Italy, and his approach remained centered in the factory rather than the individual studio popular with American crafts artists. Italian glass factories were not mechanized systems of mass production, but collections of craftsmen working in teams producing decorative art pieces. "I wanted to make things that one person couldn't make, I needed a team," Willson says of his move to Italy. In that respect his work reflected the approach of sculptors working in other media during the 1960s and 70s who abandoned the individual hand aesthetic to have their work fabricated.



Millefiori Crystal, 1994

Willson's approach to glass also combines the aesthetics of painting and sculpture, blurring the boundaries between these two areas. Gestural and pictorial effects abound in his work. He loves light, and strives to capture its beauty through bubbles, brilliant colors, engraving, and other means. The viewer can detect his sense of humor and enjoyment of life, especially in his Pre-Columbian-looking, gargoyle-type animals. His jewel colors and use of techniques such as millefiori are clearly influenced by the Italian glass and painted pottery traditions. The first of his many shows were in Venice in 1964 and 1968, and, in 1996 he was included in the first Venetian Biennale of Glass. His work can also be seen in the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art. As this exhibition opens, he is once again at work in Murano.⁵

CHECKLIST

Howard Ben Tré

Providence, Rhode Island

1. *Pomegranate*, 1997
60" x 70"

Pencil, graphite, gesso, copper and gold leaf, patina and pigmented waxes on paper

2. *Pomegranate*, 1996
(illustrated)
50" x 31"

Cast low expansion glass, steel, silver and gold leaf

3. *Solitary Form I*, 1993
54.5" x 12" diameter
Cast glass

4. *Working Drawing*, 1993
40" x 98"
Pencil and graphite on paper

5. *Stone for Casting No. 1*, 1992
6" x 19" x 11"
Cast blue glass and metal powders

6. *Stone for Casting No. 2*, 1992
7" x 17" diameter
Cast amber glass and metal powders

7. *Basin 9*, 1991
10" x 36.5" x 11"
Cast glass, iron filings

8. *Primary Vessel 10*, 1989
77" x 34" diameter

Cast glass, bronze powder

Works courtesy of the artist and Charles Cowles Gallery, New York.

Jon Clark

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

1. *Solo Torso*, 1997
35.5" x 17.5" x 9"
Mold blown colored glass with etched surface, wood and marble base

2. *Cell Torso*, 1997
14" x 18" x 12"
Mold blown colored glass with etched surface, painted wood and slate base

3. *Solo*, 1997
15" x 11" x 4.5"
Mold blown colored glass with applied lustre on etched surface, marble base

4. *Large Bud*, 1997
27.5" x 25" diameter
Mold blown colored glass with applied lustre on etched surface, painted base

5. *Sprout*, 1997
26.75" x 20" x 9"
Mold blown colored glass with applied lustre on etched surface, marble base

6. *Bud*, 1997
17" x 11.5"
Mold blown glass with etched surface, stone base

7. *Group of working drawings*, 1997

Works courtesy of the Snyderman Gallery, Philadelphia, Penn.

Ruth King

Columbus, Ohio

1. *Generations*, 1997
Installation in 20' x 30' gallery
Helium tanks, clear vinyl balloon forms, neon and amber lights
(First version, illustrated here, was seen at Alfred University, New York, in 1994.)

Robert Willson

San Antonio, Texas

1. *Wild Beaste Totem*, 1997
120" x 36" x 18"
Five modeled glass pieces in metal frame (Framework by Phil A. Simpson)
Barbini Factory, Murano

2. *A Box of Glass*, 1995
8.5" x 8.5" x 8.5"
Modeled glass
ARS Factory, Murano

3. *Millefiori Crystal*, 1994
22" x 12" x 10"
Modeled glass
ARS Factory, Murano

4. *Sky and Planet*, 1992
12" diameter
Modeled glass
ARS Factory, Murano

5. *Mountain Trail*, 1992
29" x 5" diameter

Modeled glass
ARS Factory, Murano

6. *Lady of Character*, 1992
17" x 12" x 5"
Modeled glass
ARS Factory, Murano

7. *Red Nile*, 1991
26" x 18" x 4"
Modeled glass
ARS Factory, Murano

8. *Roads Around the World*, 1986
9" diameter
Modeled glass
Barbini Factory, Murano

All works were produced in Murano, Italy, and loaned courtesy of the artist.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We owe special thanks to Associate Professor Jeremy Jernegan, acting gallery director, and Professor Gene Koss for selecting the artists before the director's arrival, and for helping organize the glass workshop. Thanks also go to Tana Coman, Judith Zwolak and the Tulane Office of University Publications for their work on this catalogue. The hard work of Curator/Exhibitions Coordinator Sally Main and Acting Curator/Registrar Thomasine Bartlett on this exhibition is greatly appreciated.

Designer: Tana Coman; Editor: Judith Zwolak, Tulane Office of University Publications.

Newcomb Art Gallery Director: Nancy A. Corwin
Curator/Exhibitions Coordinator: Sally Main
Acting Curator/Registrar: Thomasine Bartlett

This exhibition was organized by the Newcomb Art Gallery.

Endnotes

¹ Gaston Bachelard. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, N.Y./London, Quartet Books, (1st pub. 1938), 1987, p.57.

² All information and quotations from catalogues, articles and Nancy Corwin's phone conversations with Ben Tré, spring 1997.

³ Information and quotations from Clark's May 20, 1997, tape answering questions from Corwin.

⁴ All quotations from King's June 6, 1997, written statement answering questions from Corwin.

⁵ All quotations and information from Corwin's interview with Willson in San Antonio, Texas, July 18, 1997.

Exhibition Lectures & Activities

Fri., Sept. 12 — SPECIAL HOMECOMING DAY PREVIEW. Alumnae, university faculty and staff and the public are invited to the gallery to view artist Ruth King finishing her room-sized installation, *Generations*, and to converse with the artist and the gallery director and staff. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Fri., Sept. 19 — OPENING RECEPTION, 6-9 p.m.

October — Related activities to be announced

Fri. and Sat, Nov. 7 and 8 — WORKSHOP: *The Exhibition Artists at Work*. The public may observe the artists working in the Newcomb Art Department glass studio. 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

Sun., Nov. 9 — SYMPOSIUM: *Glass as a Sculptural Medium*. New York critic John Perreault and the exhibition artists will discuss new developments, accompanied by slides, and debate ideas and issues. Montine McDaniel Freeman Auditorium in the Woldenberg Art Center at Newcomb College. Coffee at 12:30 p.m., speakers from 1:00-3:30 p.m.

PARKING is available on the Tulane/Newcomb campus in a limited number of metered spaces. Visitor parking is located in the Collins C. Diboll Complex parking garage on Ben Weiner Drive. Parking is free on campus after 7 p.m. and on weekends.

HOURS: Mon. through Fri., 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sat. 12 p.m.-5 p.m.

For **GALLERY INFORMATION** call (504) 865-5328. *NEWCOMB*



NEWCOMB ART GALLERY

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1997

YOU ARE INVITED TO A WEEKEND OF GLASS

The Newcomb Art Gallery, Woldenberg Art Center at Newcomb College, Tulane University, presents the artists featured in the exhibition *Trial by Fire: Glass as a Sculptural Medium*.

WORKSHOP DEMONSTRATIONS

Fri. & Sat., Nov. 7 & 8. Howard Ben Tré and Jon Clark will work in the Pace-Willson Glass Facility, Woldenberg Art Center. You can observe Ben Tré casting and finishing his large-scale sculpture and Clark demonstrating the process of blowing sculptural forms into plaster molds of his design.

SYMPOSIUM

Sun., Nov. 9. The artists and New York critic John Perreault will discuss and debate the role of glass in the fine arts and current developments in the national and international arena. Montine McDaniel Freeman Auditorium, Woldenberg Art Center. Coffee: 12:30 p.m. Program: 1-3:30 p.m.

EXHIBITIONS

Newcomb Art Gallery. *Trial by Fire: Glass as a Sculptural Medium.* The works of Howard Ben Tré, Jon Clark, Ruth King and Bob Willson explore the possibilities of blowing, casting and conceptualizing glass.

Carroll Gallery. *The Mary and Gene Koss Collection: 20 Years of Inspiration.* Drawn from the private collection of glass art professor Gene H. Koss and his wife, Mary, this exhibition represents 20 years of teaching and friendship with graduate students and colleagues in the field of glass.

Both galleries are located in the Woldenberg Art Center at Newcomb College, Tulane University, and will be open for viewing, Fri. & Sat., Nov. 7 & 8, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., and Sun., Nov. 9, 12:30-3:30 p.m. Parking on campus is free on the weekends.



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