

Birmingham native and glass artist Stephen Rolfe Powell gives his creations names like "Undulating Groan Jones," "Hesitation Cleavage Smith," and "Teasing Buns Johnson." No wonder people seem to like them so much. His riotously colorful, large-scale vessels maintain a consistency and simplicity of form that is at once soothing and provoking—the bodies of his vessels often subtly, and not so subtly, suggest a variety of human erogenous zones and are juxtaposed with impossibly stately, elongated necks. The vessel form itself, he says, "is a pretty common object that everyone seems to be able to relate to and is an easy way to bring people into what you're doing with color." Color is clearly Powell's major concern, influenced as he was in his early career by abstract expressionism. "When I was going through graduate school, I was completely intrigued by the color-field painters like Mark Rothko and Kenneth Noland who could present a canvas that was just color—no subject matter whatsoever, just use color to carry a work of art," he says.

Born in Birmingham and educated at Birmingham-Southern College, Louisiana State University, and Kentucky's Centre College (where he currently heads one of the few university art glass programs in the country), Powell initially worked mainly in ceramics until the early '80s, when he decided to devote himself entirely to glass because its natural fluidity allows for the highly emotional use of color he craves. "What you can do with color in glass you can't do with ceramics; in other words with glass you have three different options with color [translucent, opaque, and transparent]. It gave me a lot more of a range to play with color," he says. The sheer physicality of the process also attracts him, mirroring as it does the gestural nature of the action painting of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, whose styles guided his early efforts in the glass medium: "I was immediately drawn to the process the first time I saw it done. Everything is very spontaneous; the way you move with the glass when you're blow-

ing it is very physical and direct."

The process Powell uses to achieve highly textured and intricately color designs in his vessels involves rolling a hot cylinder of molten glass over a plate of carefully arranged pieces of colored glass (there are approximately 3,000 pieces of color in each work). The beginning of the vessel's neck is formed by turning the cylinder against a metal rod. At the most crucial moment, when Powell begins to blow and shape the body of the vessel, he dashes to the top of a five-foot platform with about 25 pounds of hot glass on the end of the blowing pipe. He then lowers the glass-laden pipe between two metal poles which divide the vessel into two lobes. With assistants on the floor guiding his progress, Powell stretches the neck and blows the body into the desired shape (throughout this part of the process, an assistant must repeatedly wipe Powell's brow so that sweat doesn't drip onto the glass and crack it). The piece is then moved to a cooling chamber where it will slowly assume room temperature over the next 44 hours.

Unlike some glass artists, Powell insists on being involved in the blowing aspect of his work, rather than simply generating the design and allowing technicians to execute its creation. He and his assistants are usually able to produce

about four pieces a week; only about 20 percent of what he manages to produce actually survive the creation and cooling process and make it into galleries and museums. "We're on the edge of disaster for most of the process," he explained.

New work by Powell will be on display at Gallerie Alegria November 17 through January 7 (there will be a reception to meet the artist on Friday, November 17, from 6 to 9 p.m.). Call 868-9320 for more

details. Powell will also lecture at the Birmingham Museum of Art on Sunday, November 19, in the American Gallery beginning at 2:30 p.m. Admission is free. For more information, call 254-2565.

—Jane Longshore

