

PHOTO: CHARLIE BROOKS

'Double Figure', 2002, paper, paint, varnish and silver leaf, 106.6 x 240 cm

HUMANITY & PARAPHERNALIA

The human figure is always at the heart of Richard Jolley's impressive creations, either on its own or accompanied by flora and fauna, in terms of reference that are as all encompassing as this adventurous artist's zest for life. Profile by Dan Klein.

'I was a student and I bumped into glass as a second semester freshman in 1971.'

THAT was the beginning of a long career path for Richard Jolley as for many others of his generation, a career in his case that has by no means been restricted to glass. It began with the undergraduate program at Tusculum College in Greenville in 1971 followed by further studies at Vanderbilt University (both of them in Tennessee) and Penland School in neighbouring North Carolina. Despite the fact that he has spent nearly all his life in Tennessee and has been warmly celebrated as a local artist, with a solo touring retrospective exhibition organized by the Knoxville Museum of Art in 2002, his reputation and his work

has reached a wide public, mainly on the American continent. He is neither a trendsetter nor a trend follower. From the outset he has been very much his own person relying on instinct and intuition to guide him. The result has been inventive, personal, idiosyncratic and a lot of fun. As so often happens with figurative artists there is an element of doodle-like automatic drawing about the faces and bodies he creates, the patrician nose, the long jaw and the cleft chin of the male, the well-rounded female forms. However varied their facial expressions or their body language they remain the same two people. Their physiognomy bears a striking resemblance to Richard himself and his wife Tommie Rush, also a glass artist. They are the spokespeople for everything that Richard Jolley wants to express.

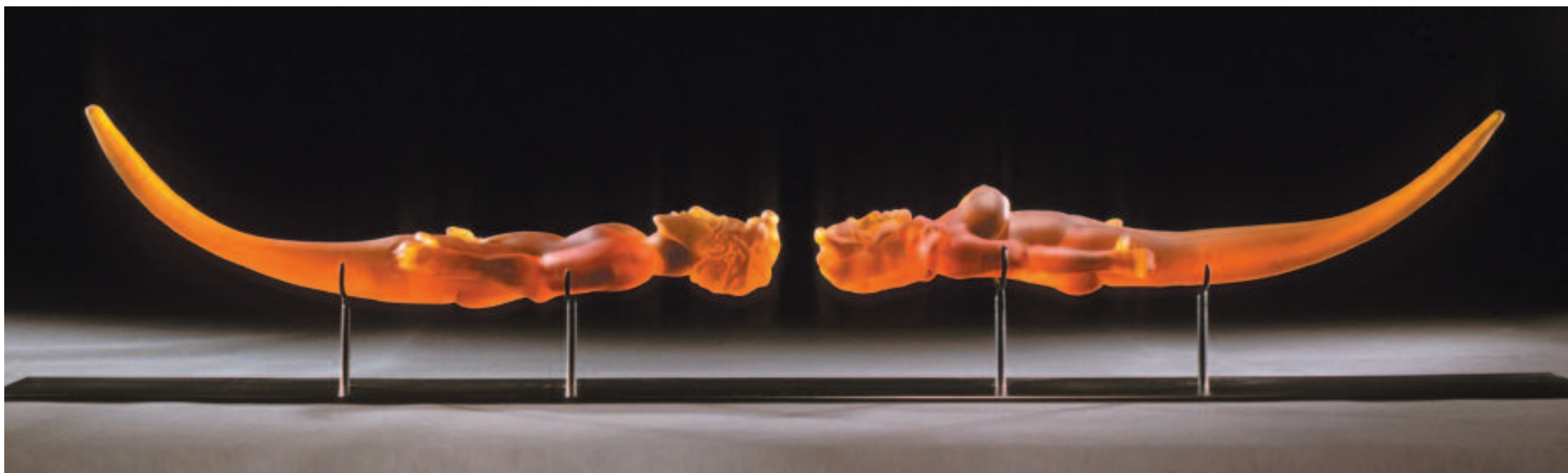


PHOTO: CHARLIE BROOKS

'Suspended Figures', 2004, glass and steel, 33 x 172.7 x 17.8 cm



PHOTO: RICHARD JOLLEY

'Garden #8', 2007, glass and steel, 117 x 122 x 26.7 cm

'So much of what we did then was trial and error ... it was just pure process, just the sheer excitement of doing it'

In the early 1970s there were no guidelines or rules about how an artist should set about working with glass. All aspiring young artists knew was that they wanted to express themselves in a new medium and that the material had tempting hidden secrets. Jolley has spent his whole working life experimenting with the material in terms of colour and form. Mixing his own colour batches has been part of the discovery process. Everything he has learnt has been knowledge gained through trial and error to the point where he is now totally in command of the glass techniques he has devised, a master of hot-formed glass. A lot of it has involved repeating processes time and again until they are fixed in body and brain. In hot glass, as in athletics, in dance or with learning to play a musical instrument, the only way to get there is through long hours of repetitive practice. It requires patience and lifelong dedication before the choreography of hot glass becomes second nature to the point where one can express oneself with the kind of nuance of which Richard Jolley is capable.



PHOTO: LIANA VELAZQUEZ-HALE

Richard Jolley serving additive elements for face, Spring 2007



PHOTO: RICHARD JOLLEY

'Translating Substance #31', 2007, glass, 147 x 78.7 x 38 cm



PHOTO: DON DUDENBOSTEL

'Male and Female Relaxing', 1987, glass, 37 x 48.3 x 14 cm. Collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California



PHOTO: RICHARD JOLLEY

'Evening (Tabula Rasa)', 2003, glass, 43 x 35.5 x 11.3 cm



PHOTO: RICHARD JOLLEY

'Female Bust with Garland', 2007, bronze, granite base, ht 41 cm

'For myself, the basic interest has always been the touch of the hand, which actualises the concept of the mind; it was a rejection of abstraction, period.'

A lot has been written about Richard Jolley over the years and different authors have cited a whole host of influences from Cranach and Dürer to Matisse, Dubuffet and Abstract Expressionism. He is an avid reader, has a wide appreciation of the arts and is a perceptive observer of life. He reacts to his surroundings wherever he finds himself and to the American way of life in particular with its rich vein of popular culture. The terms of reference in his work are as all encompassing as his zest for life. In many ways he is a Renaissance man, whose knowledge of art feeds his creative instinct. In his life, art and the making of art are inseparable. Influences will creep in here and there, sometimes pronounced as in work from the 1980s in which his blue line drawings on glass are almost a homage to Matisse. Over the years Jolley has used a wide range of different media to express his personal vision as artist and maker, never shying away from technical challenge. In the process he has gone from vessel to sculpture, from glass to bronze, from wood-cut and monoprint to combinations of pigment, silver leaf and varnish on heavy paper and has been justly described as a 'virtuoso of the various techniques'.

'I also like working with acrylics, silver leaf and varnish on the "paintings" I make on paper. I like working with all these materials, and I liked combining them in the mixed-material series. You try to push the envelope, to transcend the materials.'

When it comes to materials and processes other than glass Richard Jolley is adventurous and fearless. He loves the challenge of bronze casting and of printing processes: he uses paper, different metals, silver and gold leaf, stone, paint and wood, working with them either indi-



PHOTO: RICHARD JOLLEY

'Translating Substance #25', 2006, glass, 1136 x 71 x 40.6 cm

vidually or in combinations of his own choosing. In 2004 his many talents combined to create the scenery for Mozart's *The Magic Flute* for an opera production in his hometown of Knoxville, Tennessee. The human figure is always at the heart of his creations, either on its own or accompanied by birds, dogs, flowers or leaves. Faces, bodies, and accompanying paraphernalia always address some human issue and titles such as *Four Seasons*, *Affinity* and *Remembering the Night* are invariably clear indications as to what these are. The titles are the key to the artist's thought processes from the outset of creation to completion. In Jolley's case titles are not just random additions. They are carefully considered and his thought processes embodied within his colours and forms. Sometimes he thinks in monochrome, sometimes in polychrome and his form language ranges from monolithic simplicity to harmonious assemblage, from the lyricism of solitude to the turbulence of relationship.

'Glass is the perfect modern material for sculpture. It can have such transparency, translucency or opacity, such an ability to dematerialise, and it's a very sensual material.'

Jolley has worked most frequently in glass starting with a series of vessels in the mid-1970s which, as they became more three dimensional, turned into sculpture. The one consistent feature has always been the human figure, a whole body, a head, a torso, or a conglomeration of body parts as in the *Totems* that he worked on between 1994 and 2001. Most recently Jolley's work has become more expansive with large-scale wall pieces or free-standing sculptures made up of assembled parts,



PHOTO: RICHARD JOLLEY

'New World', 2007, glass and steel, 213 x 127 x 127 cm

sometimes monochrome, sometimes bursting with colour. The blue line figures (1985–90) are of a lyrical nature. Some are single, others conceived as double figures or pairs. The later busts are quite different, with the romantic feel of earlier work giving way to caricature or character observation. There is a different more constructed character to the totems of the 1990s, as if the decorative vernacular of baroque fantasy had been updated and gathered into single monolithic clusters, expressions of sheer physical enjoyment. Heads and bodies are piled high in a riot of colour. Birds, which often appear in Jolley's work, are perched in unlikely places. The



PHOTO: RICHARD JOLLEY

Richard Jolley's stage design for Mozart's opera 'The Magic Flute'



PHOTO: CHARLIE BROOKS

*'Boy and Globe',
2004, acrylic on paper,
ht 244 x 106.7 cm*

*Richard Jolley defining
features with hand tool,
Spring 2007*



PHOTO: CHARLIE BROOKS

'Rogue', 1991, glass, 38 x 15.2 x 19 cm

later work seems less aleatory and more meditative. The "Tabula Rasa" series which began in 2001 with titles such as *Into the Light*, *Essence* and *Serenity*, is contemplative, with double-sided imagery and colours that melt into one another. The newest work has made a leap in scale, a leap from sonnet to epic poem as it were. Perhaps his involvement with the world of theatre and opera have made him think in more scenic terms.

'By using more hands, you have the ability to make more complex or larger work. You become more of a choreographer of timing. I work as the Master Gaffer, so in one way I still touch all my pieces.'

In August, 2007 I had the opportunity to watch Jolley, accompanied by a team of four, making a large blue head in his hot shop in Tennessee. It is part of a studio complex that was once garage buildings and a small house, where he has worked for over 30 years. The hot



PHOTO: LIANA VELAZQUEZ-HALE

shop is generously equipped and spacious. Most of the modelling is done whilst the glass is in a molten state, though there is additional cold work after a lengthy cooling period. On this occasion Jolley was much more than the 'Master Gaffer'. Clearly he knew more or less exactly how he wanted this head to look from the outset. His body language showed that all the rhythm and movement of glassmaking choreography had become second nature with long years of practice. With time his assistants had also become acquainted with their necessary "dance steps". It was like watching a performance of a well-rehearsed dance ensemble.

Wearing a protective sleeve on his right arm and with his long hair tied in a red spotted kerchief, he set to work. The instruments are those of a thousand years of glass making, shaped to his own requirements: a blowpipe, wooden shaping tools, wet paper and steel pincers. At the outset a blob of glass is gathered from the furnace and the molten ball added to until it is the size of a foot-ball. As the gather gets larger two assistants rotate the blowpipe whilst a third blows into it. Jolley instructs him when to blow. At the same time he also shapes the blob, pulling it with pincers into an embryonic head shape. Assistants add blobs of glass which he shapes into nose, nostrils, eyes, eyebrows, ears and lips, cutting away any excesses of molten glass with a pair of shears, smoothing with a wooden paddle. To maintain heat, the head is carried back and forth to the glory hole by an assistant, whilst intermittently a flame from a gas torch helps specific areas to stay hot enough for more detailed modelling. This is done with a variety of custom-made instruments that prod, poke and pull to create the desired facial features and facial expression. The head is heavy by now and requires three assistants to carry it to and from the glory hole.

Now another blob of glass is added to the top of the head and shaped with a steel cylinder slipped over it whilst also being smoothed with a wooden paddle. Jolley gives simple orders to the team – "Head Up" "Head Down" "Over" "Side" "Reverse". More blobs are added to the new cylinder on top of the head, the beginnings of a curly "hair-do". The hairstyle is built up starting at the nape of the neck and building upwards with additional rows of wavy "curls". It is beginning to look like an Elvis Presley quiff. As the head becomes heavier a cross bar is used to support it as it is being carried on its many trips to and from the glory hole. The cylinder protrudes above the curls: a new blob of glass is added to it to which a blowpipe will be attached, whilst the one at the other end is removed with a tap of the hammer at just the appropriate spot.

It is now time for Jolley to open up the base of the head by making a hole in order to shape a neck and chin. A strip of glass is cut away with shears to achieve the correct proportion to the lower part of the head and the hole then widened with steel pincers as assistants rotate it whilst Jolley shapes the chin and neck by pulling and cutting. As the piece nears completion a groove is cut into the cylinder at the top of the head to which the blowpipe is now attached. There is more shaping and detailing as the head is carried back and forth to and from the glory hole, with a cross bar supporting the weakest point where a groove has been cut and gradually deepened. Jolley says, 'The next one is the last' and the head is brought back to the bench for a final deepening of the groove, then a tap of the hammer so that the head drops gently into an assistant's gloved hand to be carried by him to the annealer. The process has taken a good two hours. Richard Jolley turns round to his audience 'And that's all there is to it,' he says.

Dan Klein



*'Four Seasons',
2007, glass,
ht 244 x 27 cm*