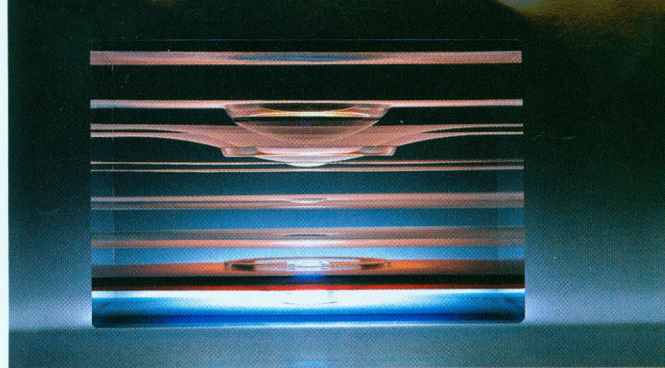


TOM PATTI: Illuminating the Invisible



BY PATRICIA FAILING

The recent 35-year retrospective of Tom Patti at the Museum of Glass: International Center for Contemporary Art, Tacoma, Washington, was packaged with a luxurious catalog and videotaped artist interview.* Comparing the work with text and tape was a curious experience: the data did not quite line up. The incongruities, however, made the show especially engaging.

Patti is probably best known for his merger of flat and blown glass traditions. His signature compositions are created by forcing bubbles of air into stacks of molten plate-glass sheets, forming hollow interior spaces. In his most recent sculptures, single spheres of air are embedded deep within solid cubes of laminated colored glass. As it passes through layers of hot glass, the air forms rings or echoes like those of a stone cast into a body of liquid.

He creates his sculptures from ready-made panes of manufactured glass used in home construction and automobile windows. The forms Patti prefers are mechanically crisp and devoid of expressionistic traces of the hand. His goal is to "take the fingerprints off the work," to distance himself from romantic studio glass of the 1970s and 80s. This romanticism, in his view, functioned as "a curtain in front of an empty space."

The catalog essays, by the critic Donald Kuspit and the curator and glass historian William Warmus, situate Patti's aversion to displays of handcraft and expressionistic surfaces within the context of Minimalism. Comparing Patti to artists such as Carl Andre, whose compositions are also generated from stacks or layers of industrial materials, the authors detect parallel strategies for downplaying personality in favor of materiality and process. As Warmus points out, Patti's work foregrounds the specific properties of flat glass—thickness, color and edges—much as Donald Judd foregrounded the specific qualities of plywood. Kuspit links Patti to Minimalist preoccupations with phenomenology: he sees Patti's work as an attempt to "thematize the fundamentals of experience. For Patti, as for the Minimalists, these [fundamentals] are flow and stability, states that occur simultaneously."

Unlike many pioneers of American studio glass, Patti did not come to the medium with a background in ceramics. In the 1960s he studied architecture and earned degrees in industrial design at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. While in New York he attended meetings sponsored by Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), the influential organization founded by the artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman and the engineers Billy Kliver and Fred Waldman to foster collaboration between their professions. One genre of production stimulated

by E.A.T. collaboration was inflatable plastic sculpture, including Andy Warhol's floating silver pillows. Patti began working with inflatable materials too. Unlike most E.A.T. artists, however, Patti was trained as an artist and an engineer. He may have been the only patron of Max's Kansas City, New York's legendary 60s avant-garde art bar, who was being funded by Owens-Corning to conduct research in plastics. Patti's work may owe a certain debt to the Minimalists who frequented Max's, but his affinity for industrial processes and materials was undoubtedly influenced by the E.A.T. milieu as well. The earliest work (1976) in his retrospective, furthermore, is antithetical to a Minimalist aesthetic.

Patti began experimenting with glass in the late 1960s and by 1976 was creating his first successful glass sculptures. An example is *Gray Fold*, formed by fusing cylindrical air bubbles between two sheets of opaque gray glass. The glass is nearly indistinguishable from sheets of polished plastic. The battleship-gray surface and title, which describes process, might suggest Robert Morris's Minimalist work of the mid 1960s, but certainly not his approach to form. Minimalist work is identified with the a priori logic of the grid: Patti's *Gray Fold*, in contrast, is an undulating biomorph that resembles a small whale breaking a watery surface. *Bilateral Clear Gray Glass with Orange*, also from 1976, is a teardrop-shaped vessel flattened at the base. Both compositions might be more at home in the company of the so-called "L.A. Look" of the late 1960s than with East Coast Minimalism. L.A. Look artists like Craig Kaufmann and Larry Bell, who were especially attracted to resins and plastics as sculptural materials, developed an aesthetic of lush simplicity not unlike Patti's. They favored plastic surfaces that sustain the effect of visual depth while reflecting light into the ambient environment, an effect Patti creates as well. Kuspit describes Patti's work as conveying a form of visibility that can't actually be seen: the L.A. work makes a similar impression.

Kuspit places Patti's sculptures within his own canon of high modernism: seen in and for themselves, they offer, he says, quoting Alfred North Whitehead, "presentational immediacy"—in this case, "a rare contemplative experience of the sheer givens of color and shape."

Warmus, in contrast, discusses the sculptures as metaphors for landscapes or architecture. Indeed, the recent compositions are put together as if they were buildings seen in cross section, floor by floor. (Patti also creates architectural commissions, some made from a new type of bulletproof, bombproof glass he helped develop.) Warmus finds metaphorical life forms in