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THE ARTFUL MIND

TOM PATTI *Artist* PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEE EVERETT

TOM PATTI

INTERVIEW BY HARRYET CANDEE PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEE EVERETT

Harryet Candee: **Growing up in Pittsfield had a direct influence on you in terms of becoming an artist. Were you at one point thinking you would want to be an architect, or an engineer for General Electric?**

Tom: The landscape behind my house was the GE factory and landfill. That's where I spent my entire childhood discovering discarded oddities - disposed of in less environmentally careful times. Although that has been my project these past seven decades: to humanize the industrial junk that mesmerized me as a child, I never really thought much about what I wanted to do. In high school, I tested high on some of the college-prep exams but I enrolled in the Commercial (secretarial) Course – typing and shorthand, etc. – my teenage friends and I knew that's where all the girls were. During high school I worked part time washing dishes at the hospital in Pittsfield and had applied for a job in the secretarial pool at GE. I just assumed that I would not get the job, but I could type 60 words a minute and had passed the exam. Architecture and Engineering weren't even on my radar.

How did you decide on glass to be your prime medium? Did you ever paint?

I was a social delinquent in my early high school years in the 50s with my friends, Because the judge in town knew most of the kids in the community – you pretty much had a choice: You went in the service or you went to jail. Most of them opted for the service and so by eleventh grade, most of my friends had left school. So I was pretty much alone there, and I had gotten into trouble again and I was on probation for two years. It was actually my probation officer who was trying to find something that I could do that was socially acceptable. Every Thursday I would meet with him (Mr. Primmer). He saw the tattoos that I had on my hands and he asked me about them. Because I was the only one who could draw, among my friends, I told him that I was the one responsible for all the tattoos in high school. We'd skip school and go up to the park at the Blue Anchor lawn on Pontoosac Lake and I would do all the tattooing. So he said, "Tom, all these tattoos – maybe you could show me some drawings or do some drawings." So I figured, I'll do some drawings for this guy and in six months, I'll be out of here. You know, I won't do two years. I'll do everything he says. Well, two years of drawing – I never did get out in six months. He loved my drawings. He loved my work. I started doing paintings for him, all kinds of stuff - very dreamlike. They were part tattoo art and very surreal. It was the late '50s and early '60s, and the age of bomb shelters and hiding under your desk at school. The space program was developing. My paintings were sort of visionary, science-fiction-like landscapes, and they all had a foreboding, ominous visual component to them. There was a dark and light that continues to appear in my work. Mr. Primmer recommended that I go over to the Berkshire Museum where were offering art classes. So I went up there one evening and I met a teacher named Mr. Joseph, who was a draftsman at GE. He taught the painting class. For two dollars a class, I could join the class and he gave instructions. I was 15, 16 years old, and most people in there were in their 40s and 50s.

I went to one or two classes and painted, and he said, "Tom, you know, you have a unique interest in art and your painting is very accomplished. You don't have to come to class. Why don't you come over Saturday mornings and I'll give you private lessons on my porch". He didn't live too far, so every Saturday, I would go over and he would give me drawing lessons and painting lessons, and we'd talk about art and his wife would make me a sandwich for lunch. I'd work there most of the day. Then I was exhibiting my paintings on the lawn at the Berkshire Museum with the BAA (Berkshire Art Association). People would come by and I would talk about the paintings and sell work to the local tourists. I made some money, and would give half of it to my parents, and have spending money for myself. One summer I was outside on the lawn at the Berkshire Museum, when I met Norman Rockwell. He came by and he saw my paintings. He came over and was talking to me about my work. He was curious about what I was going to do, and I told him I didn't know, that I didn't have any plans. He called my home a few days later and invited my parents and me to his studio. I didn't know, really, who he was. My mother knew who he was. My parents and I drove to Stockbridge. He told us that I had talent and that he thought I should go to art school. I didn't realize that you could go to art school, that it was a valid profession – that a trained artist could make a living. That was the thinking at the time. Rockwell recommended that I go to the best school for studying art, and it was called Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY. So I applied and received a full scholarship for the six years and went on to receive Bachelors and Masters degree in Industrial Design.

My life had been this constant wonder – never anticipating what the next thing was going to be. There were surprises that I kept turning the corner on and discovering, and they led to a path. There was no preconceived notion of what I was going to do or how I was going to do it or where I was going. Working with glass as my primary medium would come much later.

You must love how light and color diffuse and refract when paths are crossed. Also, you must adore the sense of movement in objects. In what ways do science and art fuse and diffuse for you when working with these concepts as a whole?

Tom: In my larger Works, it's what I call "sight-line specific." Depending on the viewer's location to the artwork or the entry line (sight line) into the building, the glass becomes clear, transparent, or appears opaque at times and changes color. It happens as you move, as the observer actually physically walks past a Work. It isn't unlike what I was trying to do with my smaller work, where you would move vertically and look at a piece – because it was in layers. Those layers open up, close, or compress, depending on your viewing angle to them. They function at arm's length, because I made them for myself, for my eye at my arm's length. But my Work on this larger scale animates the viewer. It becomes an element of the work- like Earth/Sky at Chesterwood. I am aware of the science (glass composite, lighting, sightline) that effects my art, but some is just happenstance.

This past spring you were selected for a specialized residency at Corning Research and design facility, Sullivan Park. What were your goals while you were there? Did you make some discoveries that you will incorporate into your own work?

Tom: When I was selected, Dr. David Morse, the chief technology officer of Corning Incorporated, said, "Tom's own experimentations with glass compositions make him a particularly interesting artist to work with and we are eager to work with him and see what new discoveries he makes with our material." My goal was not to focus on a specific specialty material, but instead

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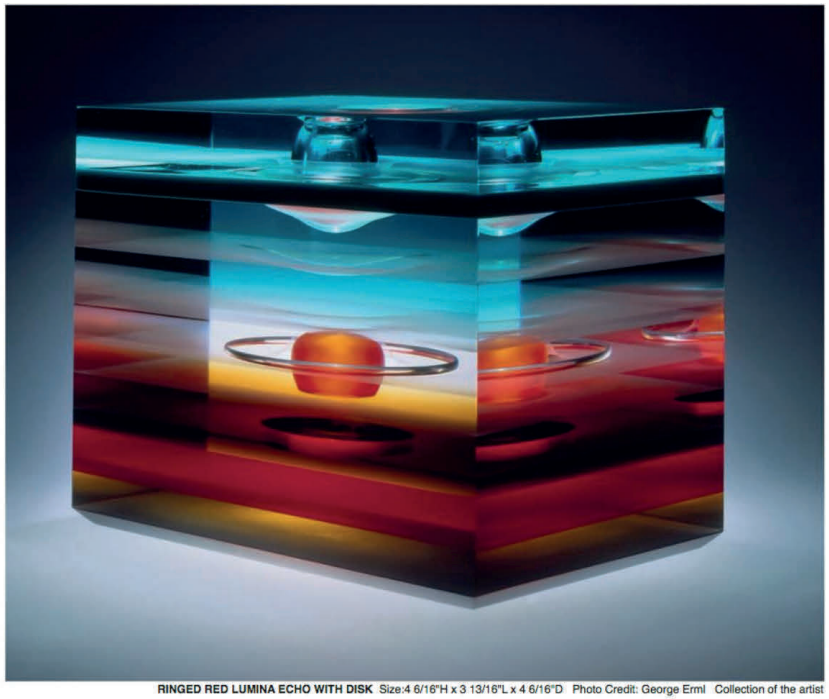
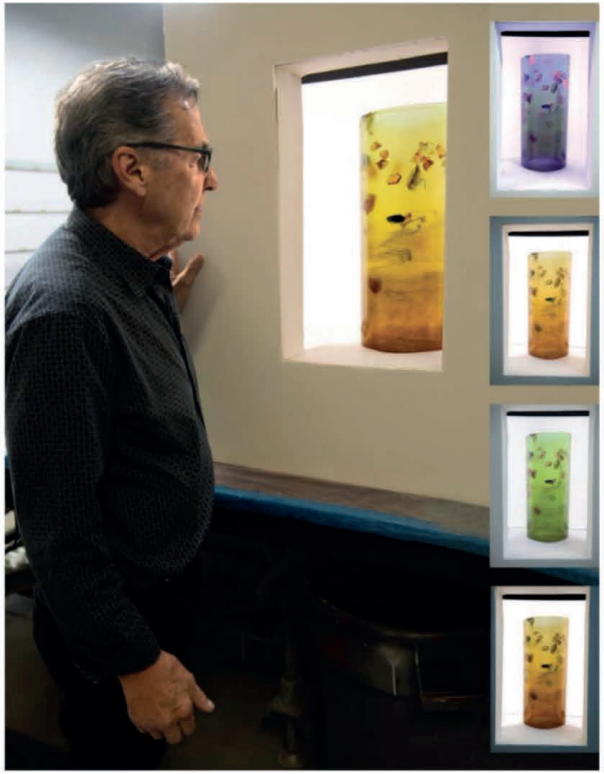
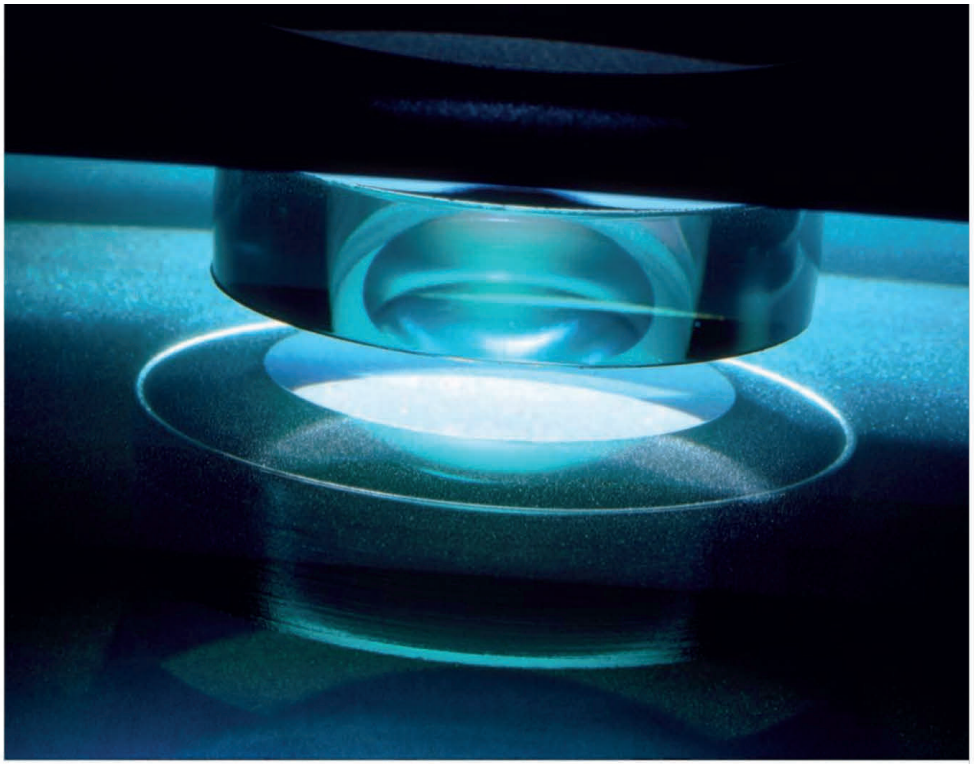


RINGED RED LUMINA ECHO WITH DISK Size:4 6/16"H x 3 13/16"L x 4 6/16"D Photo Credit: George Erml Collection of the artist



Artwork created during the artist's six month Specialty Glass Residency at Sullivan Park, Corning Incorporated's global research and development center.
Tom focused on an exclusive process using proprietary rare earth glasses developed by their scientists.

"To study and work at Corning was an opportunity to engage with the world's elite scientists and engineers. Exploring material processes and ideas in a manner that disconnected me from my studio environment and afforded innovation and insight... pushed my work forward and offered a creative thinking that sparked innovations in art and science." *-Tom Patti*



BLACK LUMINA SPECTRAL WITH DISK (detail) Size:4 13/16"H x 6 3/16"L x 4 1/2"D Photo Credit: George Erml Collection of the artist

to explore the vast resources of personnel Corning had to offer. I wanted to learn from the collaborative dialogue that would take place with the scientists and process engineers at Corning. For me, the process was as important as the outcome; because my art is a result of the way I conceptualize and the vision I set for myself as I work, having a direction, but never knowing exactly what the results would be.

You have been a technical consultant on glass design for different corporations. Why do these companies come to you for research? What do they ask you to explore?
Tom: The technology I have used since the 70s and my interests in art have been established over the last 40 years and I was visionary in laminating and composite technology. When I began to exhibit my work, people started to know about it. Many Companies began to research and develop in these areas and they were looking for innovative and creative ways of form development using glass and plastics. So they approached me. I believe Glen Hiner saw that – in Pittsfield at GE and then again at Owens Corning. Having an artist of my type in there – could benefit the employees on a conceptual level. I don't think he separated the idea of searching and researching. He saw the common relationships of discovery that take place in the science lab or the artist's studio. I have NDAs with the companies I work with, so am not able to discuss in detail.

How do you feel artists can be useful in innovation with technology? Where do the lines of art, science and engineering blur?
Tom: Working with scientists and large corporations is a unique experience. It can be very difficult. The searching that an artist does, the self-reflection and the need for discovery within the process can be a long one. When you're an independent artist you give yourself the commission. But when you work with others you give some of the decision-making in that creative process to people outside of yourself.
But when you enter an advanced scientific-research institution setting like Corning there are also similarities. Scientists, like any other curious beings, perform best when they are driven by inspiration.

Have you ever worked with other artists or scientists as a collaborative venture? {If so, please explain. If not, would that be of interest to you?
Tom: While at Pratt I would engage in programs throughout the school in engineering, fashion and interior design. I would go to lectures in the City, contact the speaker and write and share my notes and information that I was doing that would relate to their talk. I got to know Buckminster Fuller and Dr. [Michael] DeBakey who was developing the artificial heart, at the time. Because I was interested in art, technology and industry there was a program – called Experiments in Art and Technology, (E.A.T. - a non-profit organization formed to promote collaborations between artists and engineers and expand the artist's role in social developments related to new technologies) where I met Bob Rauschenberg, Billy Klüver and other, and important contemporary artists. We would gather and meet there once a month and put out a small publication that I would bring around and drop off at specific areas around the City. I was the youngest person there, although they weren't much older than me. There wasn't a lot of interest outside of that program, at the time, but within a few years, my work was published in DESIGN 1969. E.A.T. did the Pepsi Pavilion at Expo '70 in Japan. Although I did not go to Japan, I was participated in the early stages of it. I had become involved, through Pratt and E.A.T., with the Expo '67 in Montreal, where my work was exhibited in the area on global housing. I had begun to develop materials and inflatable structures that could be mass-produced, had infinite form possibility and could be spaces for habitation.

Since then I have frequently worked with scientists, engineers, architects, artists and writers to produce my Work. And have been involved with the design and fabrication of the Work of other artists.

Do you see yourself as a scientist and engineer as well as an artist? How can collaboration and cross over between these fields enhance possibilities?
Tom: I do not see myself as a scientist. Although my Industrial Design education trained me to think critically and design for form and function of objects, products and systems - engineers and scientists are uniquely trained to think more analytically and mathematically in determining means of testing specific ideas to prove them true or false. Both disciplines require creative processes, yet their purpose is different.

When experimenting with glass, what are the areas that intrigue you the most? Temperature, color, light, shape?
Tom: These are the manifestations for me, the infinite possibilities of the unknown.

What are some of the discoveries you have made in terms of materials science as it pertains to glass? Do you play with the material and how?
Tom: During the 60s and 70s I developed glass-fusing technologies using commercial sheet glass and non-compatible glasses. And in the 90s I developed large-scale architectural laminated glass for impact resistant artwork. I look at and select materials that I think are going to move my work and my ideas forward and I continue to experiment with new glass products that companies send me in order to explore their potential.

You are known for your visionary architectural installations, you have been selected to design large-scale public commissions for art museums and places of mass transportation. What is the dialogue do you hope people feel in conjunction with your architectural glass art? What kind of reactions do you enjoy hearing?
Tom: My work is not about a specific reaction or insight, yet hopefully it enhances the space and creates viewer curiosity. My work should make the viewer search. People familiar with my work recognize it for its innovation, beauty and originality. I want my work to engage the public in an aesthetic dialogue and respond to a world of change (encouraging natural light to enter, creating secure places, engaging response). My hope is that each individual observer will ask questions based upon their own experience and begin to discover more about art, life, nature, and themselves.

Do you feel working on a larger scale makes more of an impact on the public? Does it give you more experiential freedom within the design? What is your largest installation so far?
Tom: Experiential freedom is a prerequisite for all art

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PERIODIC MOTION Size: 8'H X 200'L Photo Credit: Michael Short BART at Oakland Airport - South Wall

making not determined by location. The scale of my work is determines my ideas. Collectors and museums acquire my small-scale artworks and public spaces are accessible to anyone. So context is the only factor that distinguishes the two. Artists commission their own work. I do not take on public projects that would affect the content of the works. The BART station at the Oakland Airport in California is approximately 300 feet long and 8.5 feet high. It is a recent work and one of the largest.

Have you felt inspired by Calder's mobiles at some point while studying and exploring glass and movement? Who in the art world do you most admire, and why?
Tom: Inspirational work leads to serious questions about ones own work. Major figures in art are gateways to new understanding. They have advanced our awareness within our time. I admire and respect anyone who is searching and scratching to enhance life's meaning.

Many artists these days are interested in replacing the hands-on process of making with 3D printers. How do you think that will change innovations learned by the artist? If you remove the human hand from creation do you feel the same discoveries during process are possible?
Tom: The evolution toward industrialization that began in the late 1700s in Britain has seen back and forth dialogues. The arts will use and embrace whatever tools are available at any given time. Innovation will continue, and the pioneering artist will always be drawn to new ways to express their most lingering questions. Machines (printers) don't make art, artists do.

Would you ever be interested to design a building because of your glass architectural systems?
Tom: Yes. I would like to collaborate with an architect to design a contemporary house someday. I have been contacted by architects over the years, and told how my work inspired them. Most architects do not want to embrace an artist as a project partner. On several occasions I have worked with visionary architects like Cesar Pelli, Bruce Fowle and locally David Rothstein.

What in nature has the greatest effect on you; inspire you to make sculpture in three dimensions?
Tom: Nature's ability to constantly change. Standing motionless in front of a painting or sculpture is not my interest. Since the 1980s I have created five outdoor works at Chesterwood that all engage the natural environment. I think EARTH/SKY at Chesterwood is a good example. You need to back away from it, step to the side, and observe the cloud motion, images, and the sun as it traverses the sky. And when you finally walk away - and glance back quickly over your shoulder, it will surprise you again. Because your sightline has changed, the sculpture appears changed. It has altered our perception of nature's reality. The same is true of MIAMI RAIN on the Marquee building in downtown Miami. However often you see the works; you are supposed to see something different over time.

What was the learning curve and path you followed in order to discover that you were not going to just blow glass and make vases? Did you struggle much to find out what you wanted to know?
Tom: Early in my career I seemed to have a very unique path, it was somewhat different than a lot of my peers. I essentially taught myself. Although I think you learn skills more quickly being taught by someone, to find your own voice within that formal training takes a longer period of time – because you're so inundated with the experiences of other artists, other people and influences. When you're self-taught, you're often unaware – naïve - not in a negative sense, but naïve in that you just haven't had experience. It doesn't become baggage. To become sophisticated with your work – to find a specific truth within what you're trying to do, requires intense work.

What do you learn from the properties of glass that you encounter in your life on a daily basis when not in the studio?
Tom: I am amazed how modern cultures are impacted by new material discoveries, and at the percentage and varieties of glasses used in cars, homes, skyscrapers, etc.

Manhattan has become a City of Glass. New environmental friendly glasses allow our need for energy conservation to become a reality. I am very aware of this because of my work with the glass companies testing their new products for the medical, military and aerospace industries.

Tom's work table.
Drawings for EARTH/SKY and *Coming® Fibrance®* Light Diffusing Fiber

In 2012, you had an exhibit of your work at the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield and you created a permanent installation there… Describe the installation you built for the museum? What inspired it?
Tom: ECHOES IN SPACE and VELOCITY ECHO were completed June 2012. The Work is site-specific art in three interior locations: the vestibule entrance area, the admission reception area and the natural science room. These works transform the way patrons entering the museum interact with the space. Defined and influenced by our existence in the universe and the relationships between cell structure, particle physics and the forces of gravity and light, the pieces are abstract, non-objective art. No one portion of the work is more important than the whole essence. They create an experience of shapes and patterns open to the viewer's personal interpretation. The visible surface depth within the reflective and light transmitting glass emulates infinite space, contained within a realm to stimulate curiosity and imagination. They were created to communicate to the visitor the excitement of fusing art, science, and natural history in the museum environment, in the context of the natural and industrial environment of the Berkshires region. Juxtaposing the geometric and the organic, the industrial and the natural, the pieces reflect both my personal history and the history of the Berkshires itself. The Berkshire Museum has long held an important place in my career. As a young person growing up in the community I had no formal art training. Wandering the Berkshire Museum's galleries afforded an oasis of inspiration, and a world of discovery in natural history, science and fine art. It created an environment that I wanted to be a part of and served my imagination as a child without it ever occurring to me that I would become an artist. I wanted the commission to stir the imagination of others – just as the museum inspired me as a boy growing up in Pittsfield.

I understand your daughter is a jewelry maker. Who's genes did she get handed down that caused her hunger for jewelry designing and why not glass?
Tom: Sienna Patti is an art dealer and has a gallery in Lenox where she represents international, contemporary studio jewelers and artists. She is not a jewelry maker.

What do you think you most important discovery in glass has been? What is your favorite glass sculpture? What about it made you so proud?
Tom: There have been many innovative discoveries I have made over my career. These discoveries were not the intent, but were an inherent part of the creative process. For me, each work has its place in the oeuvre of my work. All represent a distinct effort and each has its own meaning and history.

Do you feel the same passion for plastic? They look the same, but they feel different.
Tom: I will use whatever is most effective for my purpose. Materials don't require loyalty. Each has its unique place in our world. Both are ubiquitous. Just look at the plastics floating on the surface of the ocean and the glass covering the bottom of the sea.

Is working with glass considered to be dangerous to your health? How is glass recycled in your studio?
Tom: I suppose it depends. In 1993 I purchased an 18-ton oven that was actually used by NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, to develop the graphite exterior for the stealth bomber. I was looking for a device where I could control the atmosphere inside the oven, could remove the oxygen because it was combustible and could raise the atmospheric pressure and temperature inside the oven. I wanted to create the experience that it was like working on another planet, and that materials in this environment would behave in a unique way than what I was accustomed to on earth. I had it inspected and began to take the oven apart and modify it. I brought in an engineer and we discussed the potential. It's a very dangerous machine to use. If something goes wrong, it would remove the building from the site that I'm on and probably the adjoining buildings. It's under full pressure, with tremendous energy load. I save and use all the glass for making prototypes of my work.

What project are you working on now? How is it different than any other project you have finished and had out in the public?
Tom: For the past six years I have been working on small-scale investigations of real and imagined space. The works are flat vertical planes that are viewed from two sides in a walk around space.

Do any of your sculptures have a sense of humor? Can you tell us of one that makes you smile and chuckle?
Tom: I find my work curious while creating them. Stripping them bare of anything non-essential creates an essence of finality. My work is not about entertainment, yet the viewer is free to react in any way.

What would a young artist need to be really good at in order to work in the way you do? And what would you expect of them in terms of challenging themselves and gaining self-knowledge and expressiveness?
Tom: The further you go out on a limb, and the more risk, the deeper the investigation. – If you're really out on the edge, you don't bring many people with you. Working alone is where the discoveries are made and insight is gained. If everybody's out there with you, you probably haven't gone far enough. Realize that what I value the most is the serendipitous quality of hands on creativity and surprise - the anticipation,

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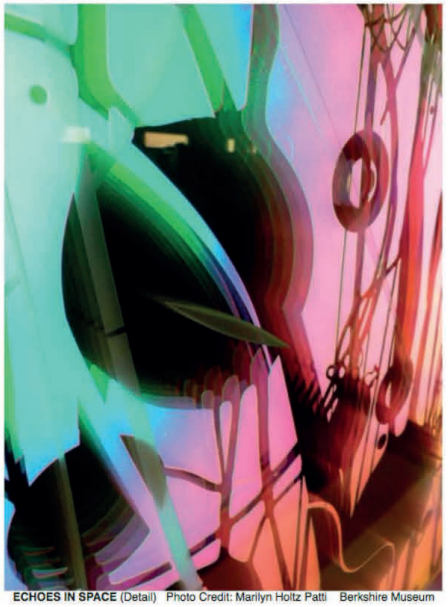
VELOCITY ECHO
Size: 12'H X 10'W X 2"D
Photo Credit: Paul Rocheleau
Berkshire Museum Commission - Exterior view of entrance wall



ECHOES IN SPACE (Detail) Photo Credit: Marilyn Holtz Patti Berkshire Museum

and the expectation that happens in the art world. For me, that's how I think and work. I don't want to think about what I'll be doing tomorrow. I want to take care of it today. I work to be inspired, reflective and not imitated. Being an artist is hard work, yet is a process to be enjoyed. There is no substitute for your own voice.

Do you ever think about the great cathedrals in history, their glass windows? Or perhaps, can you at all relate to Chagall's windows he made for Lincoln Center? They are obviously not three dimension but they do use other mediums in the construction.
Tom: I have respect for artisans of the past and the visual impact of stained glass in the cathedrals. Chagall's windows illustrate the potential of glass in the mind of a modern artist. His creative freedom explored an old concept with new materials. What interests me more is the Crystal Palace in London for the Great Exhibition of 1851. The structures combined clear glass and an innovative cast-iron metal system.

IF you had to do a commissioned piece to honor the icebergs in Alaska, what ideas would come first to mind to explore?
Tom: I would probably imagine them inverted. I always wondered what the size and shape under the ocean looked like. I would invert all the icebergs that exist on one day, and then connect them at touching edges to build a new landscape of frozen fresh water.

What was it that got you in the forefront of being an international glass sculpture artist? Was there a pivotal point in your career?
Tom: In 1976 Corning Museum acquired my work. That was the first museum. But I went back home after Corning acquired that piece and was still struggling in Savoy with part-time jobs and doing my work. Sienna was now born - we were raising a child and another one was on its way. Marilyn and I were trying to figure it all out. Someone said, "Maybe you should take your work to New York and see if you can sell it". I walked up and down Madison Avenue with work. Then I met Doug Heller. He didn't know who I was at the time, but took several pieces. I wouldn't let him take the work on consignment. I didn't know who he was or what was going on in the art world. I said, "Well, if you're going to take the work, you're going to have to pay me for it." And Doug said, okay, and he gave me some money. Doug presented the work in his gallery. He hadn't sold anything, but he said there was a lot of curiosity about my work, and that he thought that if I could clean up everything that I had been working on the last few years and could make it presentable in the gallery he would give me a one-person exhibition. So in 1977 the Museum of Modern Art purchased a piece, Untitled 1976 and in 1978 the Metropolitan Museum acquired Banded Flair 1977. Then by 1979, the Corning Museum had chosen Banded Bronze 1976 for the cover of the "New Glass" exhibition, which opened at the Corning Museum and traveled to the Metropolitan, the Victoria and Albert and other museums. At the same time, the Museum of Modern Art bought another work Solar Bronze Riser 1978. My work moved onto the public stage and was accepted. The New York Times wrote about it. The whole acceptance of glass was becoming established in the craft world and was moving into the art world in general. Artists were starting to work with glass and it was a valid artistic expression.

Working with a glass you find different textures as a piece evolves. What portion of the transitions are your most favorites? At what state do you love glass the most?
Tom: The human eye can distinguish subtle changes in the color and surface texture of glass. They are formal elements in the creative process. I select and develop those elements, which advance the purpose of each

Artist Tom Patti in the design and concept study area of his studio Photograph by Lee Everett

work. I never loved glass. I continue to work with glass because of the qualities of form potential. In its transient state one can view the front, sides and back simultaneously. All of its states – from liquid to solid – interest me.

Do you have any interest in making smaller objects of art, like those pieces made by Lalique? That would fit into decorative crafts; do you stay away from the "craft" world as much as possible?
Tom: My innovations in glass have progressed from intimate, small-scale sculptures that have been described as "monumentality in miniature" to large-scale works developed in water and in trees as architectural and environmental installations.

I choose to ignore the distinction between Fine Art and Craft. Having made small and large works, it has never really mattered to me how others categorize my art. In museums it is exhibited next to contemporary paintings and sculpture, or in the architecture and design areas, or in decorative arts. It only matters that they exist. History will continually judge their worth to society.

On your free time, not that you have any, where do you like to travel? And Why?
My wife Marilyn and I travel for business – that is our pleasure. We enjoy the South of France. Serge Lechaczynski, the dealer who represents my work in Europe is there – in Biot, a small town outside of Nice. We love the Berkshires. It is the most sustaining place for us that combines nature, culture, family and friends

A technical question: How is colored glass made?
Typically, powdered metal oxides, sulfides, or other compounds are added to the sand (silica) during the melting stage. Color can also be added or removed during the cooling and rigid cold stage.

What was the most exciting discovery you have made while experimenting with glass, and not thinking of it as going to be finished product?
Tom: I had always been on the outside of my work looking in. Then in 1992 – when I started doing more architectural commissions - for the first time I had the feeling that I was on the inside of the work looking out. I was making large, clerestory windows in buildings that I could walk through, and doors that I could open and enter into the space. It was like going into the work - and I could imagine myself inside of one of my objects. The three recent works at the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield are good examples of where these investigations have taken me. A sense of finite space, having no top or bottom, with edges that disappear – the work expand s your perception.

IF you were going to make something for yourself. A beautiful piece of artwork. What medium would you want to work in? What would you want to create that you can reflect upon and contemplate over?
Tom: It I would not change anything I am doing. The work I make is to challenge myself.

What have you found to be most challenging part of working with glass?
Tom: Realizing that I have not done enough to discover more possibilities with the medium. Glass has two unique possibilities. One is aesthetic, and the other is about the potential for functional applications – as in space station windows, cell phones, medical, etc. I find it challenging to search all the possibilities.

Thank you Tom!