

A Day in the Studio

By Paul J. Stankard

5 a.m.

Early each morning before sunrise, when I enter the studio, I begin the day with a prayer or meditation by touching the mezuzah that hangs in the door frame. I thank God for the day and ask Him to bless my workplace. This moment is important because I embrace the idea that labor is a prayer. I'm honoring God by realizing my full potential as a human being. I believe that the spiritual, however you define

it, should be an essential component in one's art-making. The studio is more than a place to work; it's a holy space where the spiritual dimension of art-making nurtures a respect for discipline while working toward one's personal best.

The tranquility that comes from touching the mezuzah follows me into the studio as I begin the day's activities, which start with walking to the control panel to check the status of the annealing ovens. I'm proud of my computerized controller. When I think back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, it's bittersweet because I remember controlling the annealing cycle manually. I trained myself to set the temperature and would organize my late afternoon and evening routine around slowly turning down the oven's energy input knob. The dial controller regulated the percentage of electric needed to hold or gradually reduce the temperature. My three-hour soak time ended after dinner, and I would start to manually ramp down the temperature for five hours to around 11 p.m. and then turn the oven off, to slowly cool on its own. I was programmed to walk into the studio every hour to adjust the cycle. Thinking back, it's amazing how committed and successful I was without a computerized controller to anneal my paperweight's.

It's always a wonderful moment to open the annealer at room temperature, especially now that I think of being in the studio as a reward. When I feel

the "cold" glass in my hand and look at the piece for the first time, I'm excited and thank God for the gift of creativity. Regardless of how the work turns out, this quiet moment in front of the oven is the essence of being an artist/maker, because my labor and dreams are now a reality. While holding the glass, I'm analytical, and it's strange how my eyes automatically go to aspects of the work that are unexpected or off the mark. I'm emotionally connected to the original idea and instantly evaluate how closely the actual work matches my vision of it.

When I take an orb from the annealer to my swivel work stool, I begin to feel tense. I don't understand why, after so many years, I'm still edgy sitting in front of the torch at the beginning of each day. It generally takes 10 to 15 minutes to quiet down and focus on what I need to do. Simultaneously, I can't take my eyes off of the orb. I've often thought about how strange it is that, at the start of the day when I'm examining new work, nothing is ever good enough—I constantly see aspects that need improving.

6:00 a.m.

Early mornings at the torch are the toughest time in the studio. Facing the start of another day, I am filled with apprehension. I ask God for the wisdom and insight to do significant work by focusing on a small, metal crucifix that has been attached to my work bench for more than 40 years. As in focal meditation, I'm seeking clarity and spiritual guidance to help map out the day's work. I'm not sure what causes the anxiety, and have often wondered if it's



Paul Stankard holding a flower.
Photo by Lauren Ashley Garcia

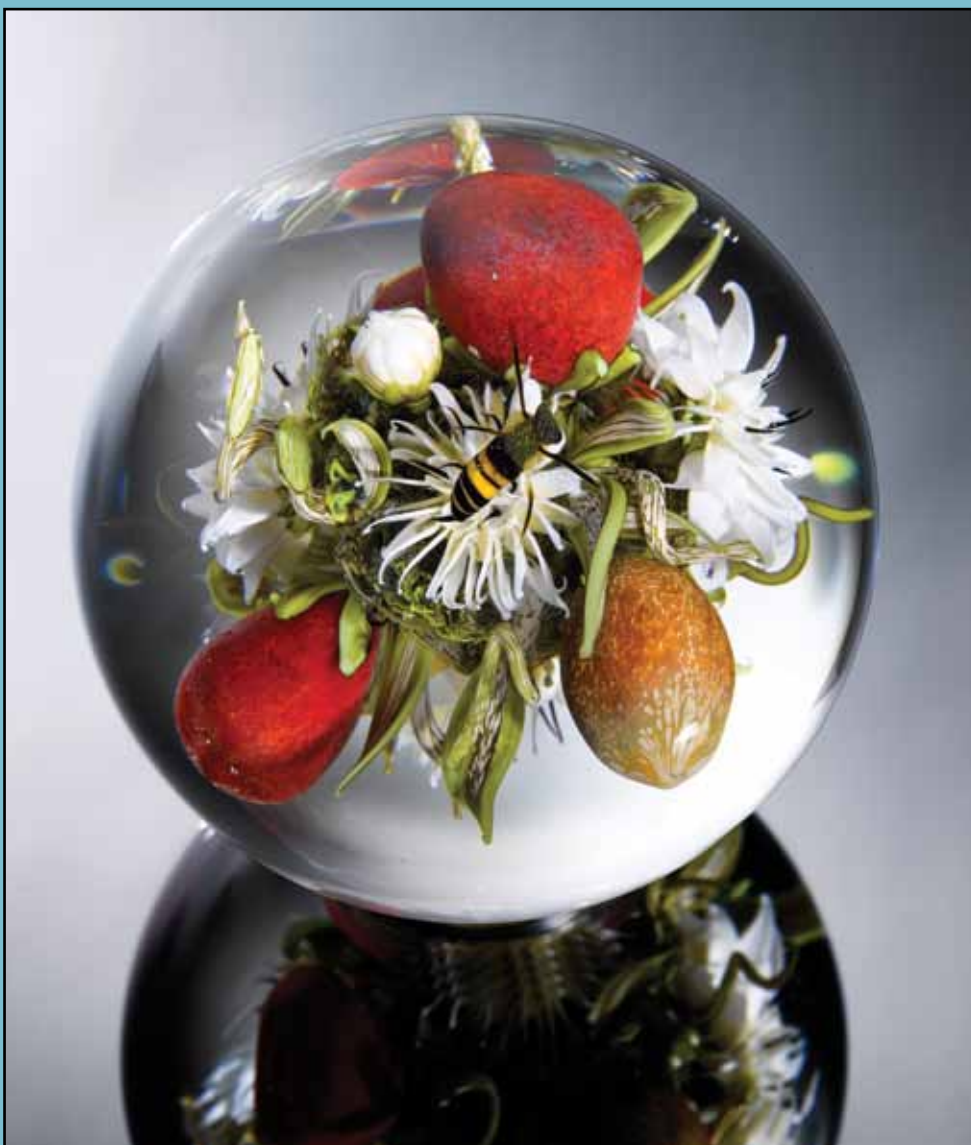
rooted in my childhood, when my failure in school disappointed my father.

An orb just out of the oven is an arrangement of flowers, fruit, and nuts, clustered together with moss, leaves, tendrils, and a honeybee hovering over the composition. It takes time to decide if I'll continue with the design or go in a new direction. This effort has new botanical components: moss that my son Joe's been experimenting with (and finally nailed), and bulbous fruit and nuts that move away from the floral vocabulary that has become my signature. Overall, I feel good about this piece but want to enhance the succulent appearance of the fruit by indenting it on the side and adding brownish-red to suggest an overripe section.

I light the torch, reaching for the striker bunched with the tools to my right. I've handled this same striker for upward of 50 years and always notice its uncomfortable grip. I love witnessing the moment that the sparks bombard the gas and ignite the flame. This flash of beauty reminds me of running around my backyard as a child waving a July 4th sparkler and spending time in the woods striking stones together to see the sparks they make.

As I add oxygen to the gas, I find the colors—ranging from yellow to blue—soothing to focus on. Beyond the esthetics of the flame, the color tells me I've passed 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit, more than needed to melt my glass rods. The flame celebrates the possibility of new discoveries and the start of a repetitive technique that becomes a kind of mantra during my time on the bench. I start with material prep: redrawing glass and overlaying colors on glass so I can build components later. What I once thought of as a monotonous necessity has recently, within the last 10 years, become one of the comforts of my workday.

I sometimes wonder why working with my hands is so natural and so much a part of my creative process. Making things has enhanced my sense of self-worth and guided my approach to independent education. As a child, I built boxes with interesting bits of metal collected from the ruins of a



Flowers, Fruit, and Nuts with honey bee. 4" dia. Orb
Photo by Ron Farina Photography

burnt-down jewelry factory. The hours spend building small machines, as I thought of them, from wires, knobs, and bits of metal gave me a sense of well-being as an adolescent. And now, as an old man remembering that small boy engaged in building magic machines quietly in the basement, I've come to believe the creative process is God's gift to humankind. This gift becomes an act of faith that distinguishes our lives while demanding courage and this creative impulse is the single most important ingredient that helped me overcome emotional challenges. When I hear young people say, "I'm not creative, couldn't draw a straight line to save my life," I think of how sad it is that many misunderstand creativity. I believe this misunderstanding has led to countless

numbers of people being sidelined from more productive and meaningful lives.

I periodically call meetings, and decide that this morning would be a good time to critique the new work. My two assistants, Pauline Iacovino and David Graeber, start at 8 a.m. and will be in soon. I'm keen to talk about the new piece, along with discussing short-term expectations and studio commitments. Dave has been assisting me for more than 20 years and has become a master craftsman in his own right. He now divides his time between assisting me three days a week and working in his own studio.

My daughter Pauline, who's been working in the studio for 14 years, is



Fecundity Bouquet 3 7/8 dia. ORB
Photo by Ron Farina Photography

an administrator and helps my wife, Pat, manage the business side. Son Joe comes in a few hours a day, health permitting. At various times I've had all of my five adult children in the studio, assisting me. Regardless of occasional bumps in the road that come with the family-business territory, I'm blessed and feel privileged to have had my talented children working with me.

8:15 a.m.

During our morning meeting, we focus on form, contrasting colors, and enhancing the fruit and nuts. It was in the early 1980s that the cubes and rectangles appeared, and now these forms have become interesting options for my

botanical presentations. We discuss the merit of various shapes, and I decide to continue with an orb form for this new series, tentatively titled "Flowers, Fruit, and Nuts." With a wider creative parameter and new organic stuff, I'm psyched by the still-unknown possibilities. We talk about adding new floral components and adjusting the colors.

The critique centers on adding a stronger green to the moss and pushing the variety of colors and form by adding a stylized fruit that mimics a red pomegranate. This lush red fruit will enliven the composition and contrast nicely with the pastel colors in the piece. For me, it's all about organic intelligence. We talk about splitting the fruit open

and having seeds spill out. Looking back, the way I've spent countless hours meditating over the glass to decide how the illusions can be enhanced is a little obsessive.

Our 20-minute meeting is over and I walk back to my bench, pumped up emotionally, with a fresh approach to the new design.

The emotional energy and attention I give today's effort is the same attention I gave my early work. In fact, in 1969, working to encapsulate a single glass flower in a 1 3/4-inch floral paperweight was more difficult than the 4-inch orb being created today. What my present and past work has in common is the unknown. Starting out, I didn't have the experience with the material, so everything was a challenge. Today, I'm somewhat more comfortable with the techniques and materials, but I'm searching for new ways to express what I care about. Thinking about containing a single stylized blossom demonstrates how art-making is about solving one problem after another and learning from your mistakes.

Somewhere along the journey, probably in the late 1970s, I had an epiphany about my floral designs: I wanted to engage the viewer in a visual dialogue that goes beyond the question, "Wow, is that really glass?" This artistic goal has become my greatest challenge and has led to using metaphors in glass that celebrate the lifecycle of nature. This artistic need comes from my heart and soul, and has motivated me to educate myself. Visiting museums and reading great books has complemented the work and, more importantly, allowed me to connect the dots in life. In the studio, I strive to bring what I've internalized from independent studies into a kind of focus that matches the same depth of feeling articulated by the written word by masters of confessional writing such as Walt Whitman, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and St. Augustine.

At the bench, I see that the materials have been prepared for making a piece featuring Pineland Pickerel weeds, fruit and nuts; the Pineland Pickerel weed is a yellow stylized flower that is currently one of my favorite subjects. I

begin to melt down a 3/8th-inch yellow rod overlaid with white. Based on the result of the last effort, I decide to add a heavier coating of clear glass over the colored rod. To do this, I hold the colored glass rod in my left hand, parallel to the flame but close enough for the heat to splash the area I need. In my right hand, I melt a clear glass rod in the flame. While the end of the rod is softening and starting to sway, I lay a 2-inch-long strip of clear glass on the colored rod, repeating the process as I go around the yellow glass until it's completely encased. At this point, when the colored glass is cased in clear, I thoroughly reheat the entire 2-inch section in a hotter flame. The goal is uniformity. Before I pull the glass rod to 12 to 15 inches, the section has to be heated evenly to ensure quality results.

I have internalized the technicalities of this process over 40 years, but there is still a level of risk. The challenge of uniformly heating the 2-inch section is to keep the piece constantly turning to offset gravity's pull. As it heats and rotates, the glass rod softens and begins to flop around. To protect the integrity of the material, you have to be totally focused. At this point in my career, redrawing a rod—pulling it longer and thinner—is lyrical because I can offset the sagging with fast and efficient hand skills. When I was first beginning, the glass was stiff, and I was clumsy. Only after years of repetition did I acquire control over the process, to the point of appreciating the poetry of glass in motion.

The redrawn rod, 1/8th of an inch in diameter, is needed for pressing petals for the Pineland Pickerel Weed. (As a side note, it's weird how, over the years, I've worried about not being able to replace my favorite stainless steel tweezers and won't take them with me when I go out of my studio to teach, for fear of losing them, but that now, coming down the home stretch, this is less of a concern. I've always enjoyed the fact that flameworking with modest tools facilitates variety in my blossoms and vegetation, a variety that I now think of as magical realism.)

To incorporate flowers, fruit, and nuts (hence the title of this series), we'll



Paul Stankard discussing experimental efforts with assistances Joseph Stankard and David Graeber.
Photo by Lauren Ashley Garcia

spend upward of seven hours completing components. I'm working on pressing out the petals and building the center florets (the center component of the flowers) with the material I prepped out earlier. I like to make more petals and florets than needed so I can have a selection when assembling the blossoms. Each blossom requires six to eight florets and about 20 petals. When laid out, these components may appear similar, but I see variety and select petals for different sizes, thickness, and shades. Every aspect of the material preparation, from the mundane redrawing to heroic balling-up crystal, affects the beauty of the effort. I think of my flowers as native and untamed, as opposed to cultivars, which are planned and prized for uniformity. To me, representing nature is suggesting the infinite variations within the plant kingdom.

When the blossom is finished, I carry it to the lower level, called the hot shop, and put it in the blue oven to be babysat at 970 degrees Fahrenheit. A little after 10 a.m., with two Pineland blossoms soaking in the oven, I start to ball up glass to make a few nuts and fruit. In previously testing the colors encapsulated in clear glass, I found wonderful varieties of brown and red shading, along with a few opalescent colors, that,

until viewing the test results, I thought of as uninteresting. I don't know how long this new direction will keep me high or where it will lead, other than to say the over-ripe edibles are sucking me in.

While I'm working on fruit and nuts, Dave is working on honeybees, blueberries, and leaves. I've always felt fortunate to have had talented assistants throughout my career who help me push the boundaries and create ambitious efforts.

Over the years, my emotional response to sculpting glass flowers has evolved into an intuitive process of editing and or layering on detail. The artistic goal is visual unity and organic credibility. Over the course of the morning, as my energy level grows, I start to push and take risks to expand my visual vocabulary. In the first 30 years, when making money was essential to my family's wellbeing, I had less latitude and found myself constantly refining the designs as one way to dilute the boredom of repetitive work. This need to keep the work fresh began to distinguish my work in the history of paperweights. When I came across an attitude in Zen philosophy that says the more personal one's work becomes the more univer-



Preheating colored glass components on a gas fired hot plate.
Photo by Lauren Ashley Garcia

sal its appeal, I reveled in it because it gave me confidence in my obsessive approach to art-making.

11:30 a.m.

We break and go out to lunch, and, when I get back, I have my one half-hour "executive meetings" to decide serious issues (this is my nickname for a nap). By 1:30 p.m., I'm back on the torch, sculpting more fruit and nuts for the afternoon's effort. The components are growing in number and soaking in the blue oven to be encapsulated in the next hour-and-a-half.

3 p.m.

When all of the components are finished, we light the glory hole and Dave and Joe get a break, waiting for it to heat up. I transfer the colored glass components resting in the blue oven to a stainless steel plate over a gas/air Bunsen burner so the colored glasses will be stable, with the temperature above the annealing point. I use tweezers and a hand torch to arrange and melt the components together on the plate and make the final transfer to the pickup oven. This is a sweet part of the pro-

cess. I love flameworking as a technique and its ability to maintain certainty of results, so when I set up a scenario that allows for spontaneity when the hot clear glass moves the design around as it drops on the components, it's exciting. I benefit from the uncertainty of the results. This is where it all comes together as organically intelligent and my idea of fecundity comes alive.

While I'm arranging the design on the hot plate, Joe helps Dave take the clear glass out of the preheating oven to be melted in the glory hole. I finish the design to be encapsulated, transfer the work to the vacuum oven, and wait for Dave to hand me the hot glass. It's important that my assistant heat the glass so it will be soft enough to flow easily when dropped. This whole process requires concentration. It takes just a second or two for my assistant to remove the glass from the glory hole and hand it to me hot, and then for me to drop the glass onto the design. This is a high-risk technique that, if it goes wrong, ruins a day of labor. With the deep concentration I've honed as a dyslexic, I've experienced this sequence in slow motion, much like a gifted baseball

slugger focusing on a 95-mile-an-hour fastball as it approaches.

Now, half of the design has been encapsulated. I go back to the plate to retrieve the second half and repeat the process. When we have the two halves, we preheat each of them and seal together. At this point, we use the bench burners and graphite tools to shape the work into a ball. (You can see this in action in a Youtube video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvrzUWoEerk).

4 p.m.

It's now late afternoon, and the ball is glowing with beauty. A celebratory atmosphere is permeating the studio because we've captured the ideal, and I feel a creative surge. Now, at the end of the workday, the anxiety and uncertainty of the morning are transformed into elation and satisfaction, a feeling I call creative bliss. The orb is knocked off of the puntill into the hot oven and I walk to the controller to program the annealing cycle, knowing I gave it my personal best.



Dropping hot clear glass on colored glass in a suction cup.
Photo by Lauren Ashley Garcia



Close up Golden Orb floating over flowers and human forms.
Photo by Ron Farina Photography



Golden Orb suspended over flowers and human forms.
8" wide by 4" deep by 6 1/4" high.
Photo by Ron Farina Photography

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