

GLASS ART

For the Creative Professional
Working in Hot, Warm,
and Cold Glass

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Murrine Maker David Patchen

Diving into Detail

by Colleen Bryan

How much detail can an artist successfully resolve in an object of glass art? That question animates David Patchen's persistent exploration of vibrant colors in rare combinations and pattern upon pattern of intricate murrine and texture. These simple, elegant, organic forms provide a canvas for evolving studies. The San Francisco, California, glassblower moves gracefully and seamlessly between the roles of thoughtful creator and efficient, capable craftsman—disparaging neither, relishing both. And the result of this dance is breathtaking.

Vision Fueled by Curiosity

Patchen credits a tendency toward perfectionism for driving the quality and precision of his work. Curiosity fuels his creativity and results in the diversity of patterns and colors. "I appreciate the same properties that everyone likes in glass—its brilliant color, transparency, and three-dimensional optics. These are magical attributes unique to glass. But I also see glass as a means to communicate and express emotion, concept, and vision.

"I am a very curious person. I am always attempting to combine colors I haven't worked with before. People frequently compliment my use of color in ways that are unfamiliar in glass. I have a strong desire to challenge myself by using the entire palette. Any time I've concentrated too long on one side of the color wheel, I push myself somewhere else."

The artist's vision is expressed in his portfolio through seven series of blown glass vessels and sculptures. His works are placed in museums, select hospitality spaces, and in private collections throughout North America, Europe, and Asia. His book, *David Patchen: Glass* is in the permanent collection in glass museum libraries in Murano, Italy, and Corning, New York.

Most of Patchen's forms have been vessels until *Bloom*, his most recent series. "*Bloom* plays with the idea of revealing beauty inside something that looks drab, odd, or monochromatic from the outside. I've kept orchids and been a scuba diver for a long time. I've been fascinated with geodes, which look like basic rocks until you break them open to reveal blossoms of crystals. I wanted to create something that looked organic but was not representational of animal, flower, or mineral. *Bloom* evolved into a hybrid of all those influences."

Mystical interiors with the center opening into a crazy flowering of murrine, this series of sculptures emerged from that concept rather than from simply playing with color and pattern. "The pieces in the *Bloom* series are all one-of-a-kind works that vary in color, texture, interior pattern, and overall form, but they are recognizably all of one species."

A Simpler Context for a Complex Process

Patchen blows glass at Public Glass, the San Francisco Bay Area's public access studio and school for glass. Skilled artists can rent private studio space in which to design, inventory, photograph, and pack their work. They can rent the hot shop down the hall and use it as much or as little time as they want. "This arrangement means I can have my own private space without having to buy and maintain all the equipment. That frees up more of my time for glassblowing. We have a nice glass community here that I would miss if I opened my own private studio. I am a pretty social person, and on days when there aren't a lot of people around, I miss the social aspects of the environment. I try to give back to it with people who are here wanting to learn. Public Glass also offers a wide range of glass classes, and I took my introductory class here."

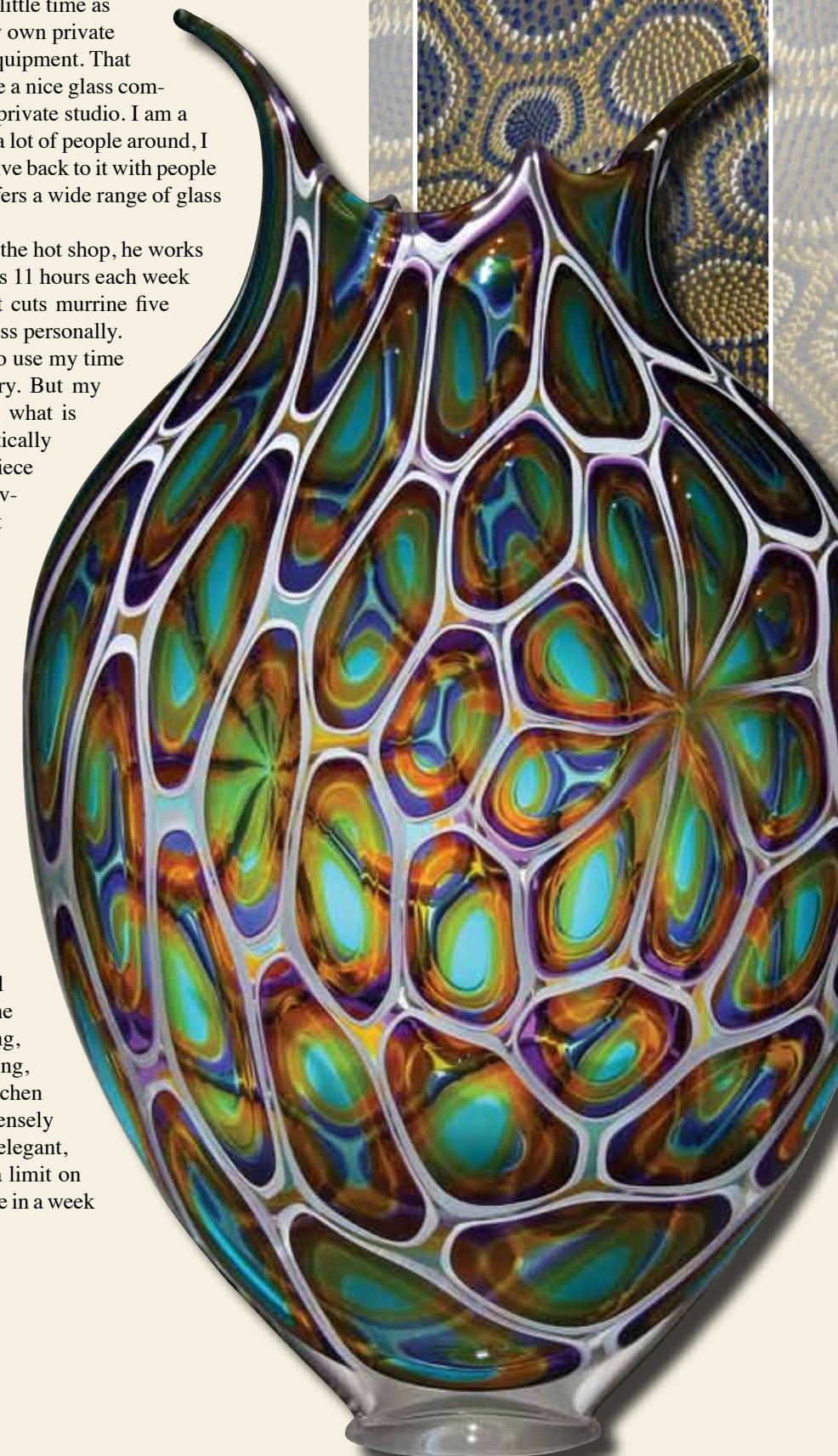
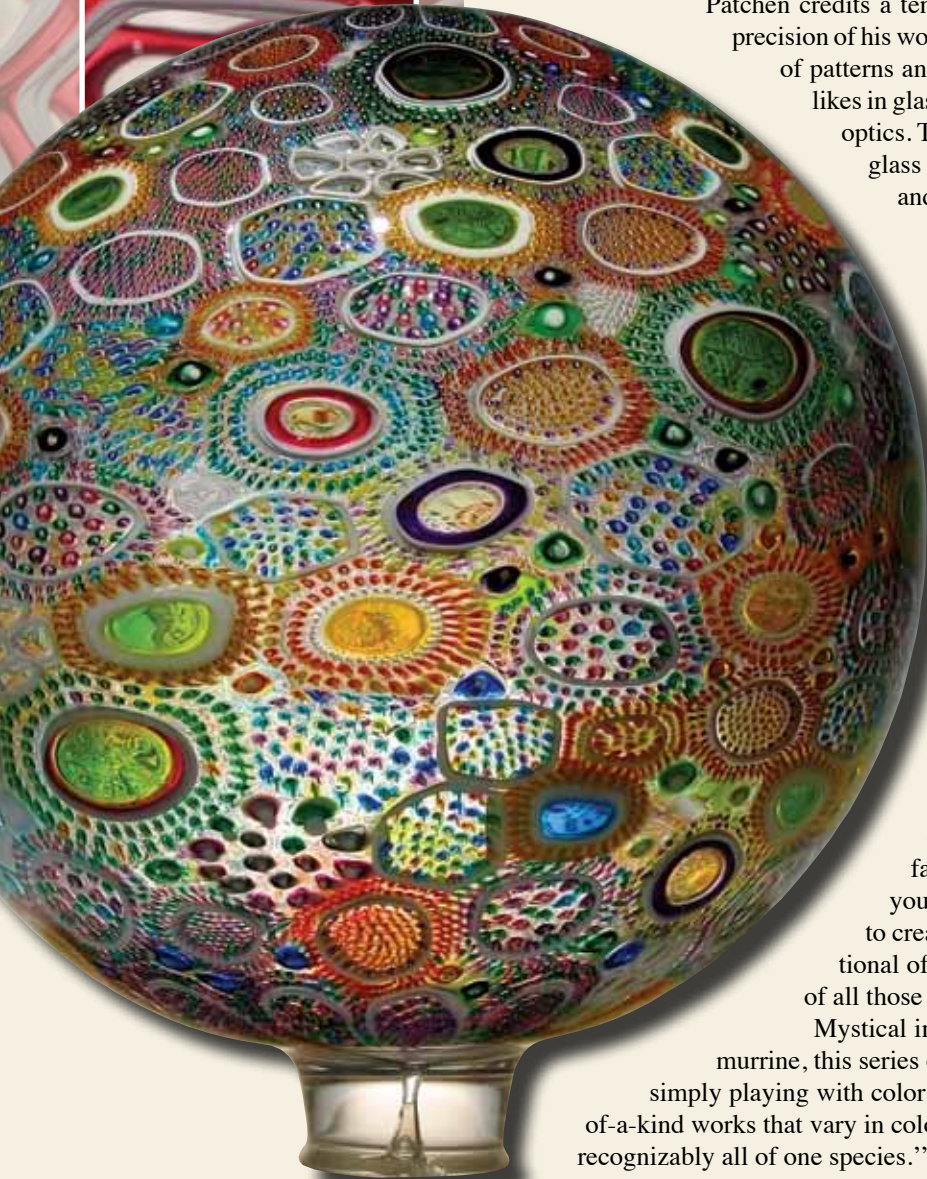
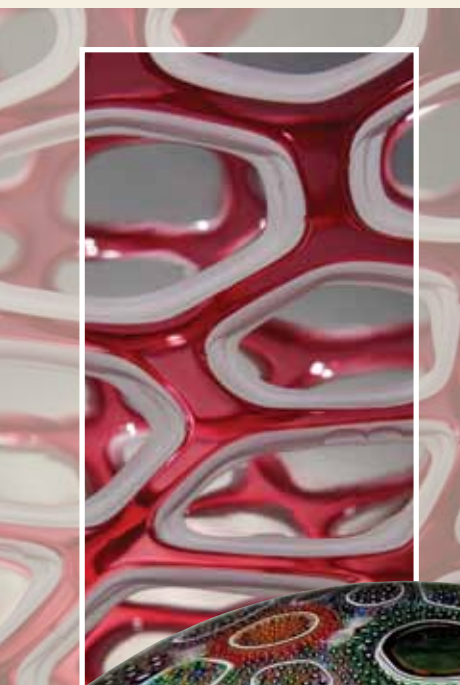
Patchen designs his work alone in his studio. In the hot shop, he works with one assistant, a skilled glassblower who spends 11 hours each week helping Patchen make his work. Another assistant cuts murrine five hours a week. Patchen handles the rest of the process personally.

"I have sometimes thought about better ways to use my time and wished I could focus more strictly on artistry. But my perfectionism intervenes, and I find myself doing what is practically necessary rather than just what is artistically necessary. I can't stand the thought of losing a piece because someone packed it incorrectly, so I pack everything to know it will be done right, and I haven't had anything break in a dozen years. I also do all my own cold working for the same reason. It isn't worth the risk of losing even one piece if I were to farm out these tasks."

This heightened sensitivity is particularly understandable in light of the labor-intensive process of murrine making. Patchen begins by choosing colors and designing both the murrine and the three-dimensional objects they will go into. Colored glass rods are stretched into cane, then arranged according to the design and incorporated hot into long rods of murrine. The multicolored murrine are cooled, then sliced, before being composed into mosaic patterns and fused into a sheet. He and his assistant then roll the murrine onto a blowpipe creating a patterned bubble and encase it a few times in clear glass, all while making multiple trips to the glory hole on the way to becoming an object of art. After the blowing, annealing, and cooling, finish work includes grinding, polishing, and occasionally sandblasting. While Patchen finds that the intricate and involved process is immensely satisfying and the finished product is wonderfully elegant, he acknowledges that the labor required imposes a limit on what he is able to produce. "Some glassblowers make in a week the number of pieces I make in a year."

Left: David Patchen, Mixed Murrine Sphere, 14" x 14" x 15", 2015.

Right: David Patchen, Colorfield Foglio, 19" x 12" x 3", 2015.



The Artist as Craftsman

Glass, more than most other artistic mediums, requires skill and expertise to execute on a vision. It takes years to understand and become proficient with the material, even before attempting artistic expression. When Patchen approached glassmaking, he brought a logical, methodical frame for his passionate, driven investigation. “It is natural for me to dive deep into inquiry. When I was starting out, I wasted no time asking people with more experience what they did in the hot shop and why. I’m not burdened with false pride. If you ask a lot of questions and then go rip off their work, you lack creative integrity. On the other hand, if you take their advice and apply it to your own artistic endeavor, that is just smart.”

As a glassmaker, Patchen feels compelled to be a fine craftsman. “Unless you have other craftsmen making your designs, there is no escaping that with this medium. The artistry is in what you do with color, pattern, concept, and narrative, as well as what degree of originality you bring to your work. Those answers determine the degree to which you fall on the artistic rather than the craft side of the continuum.”

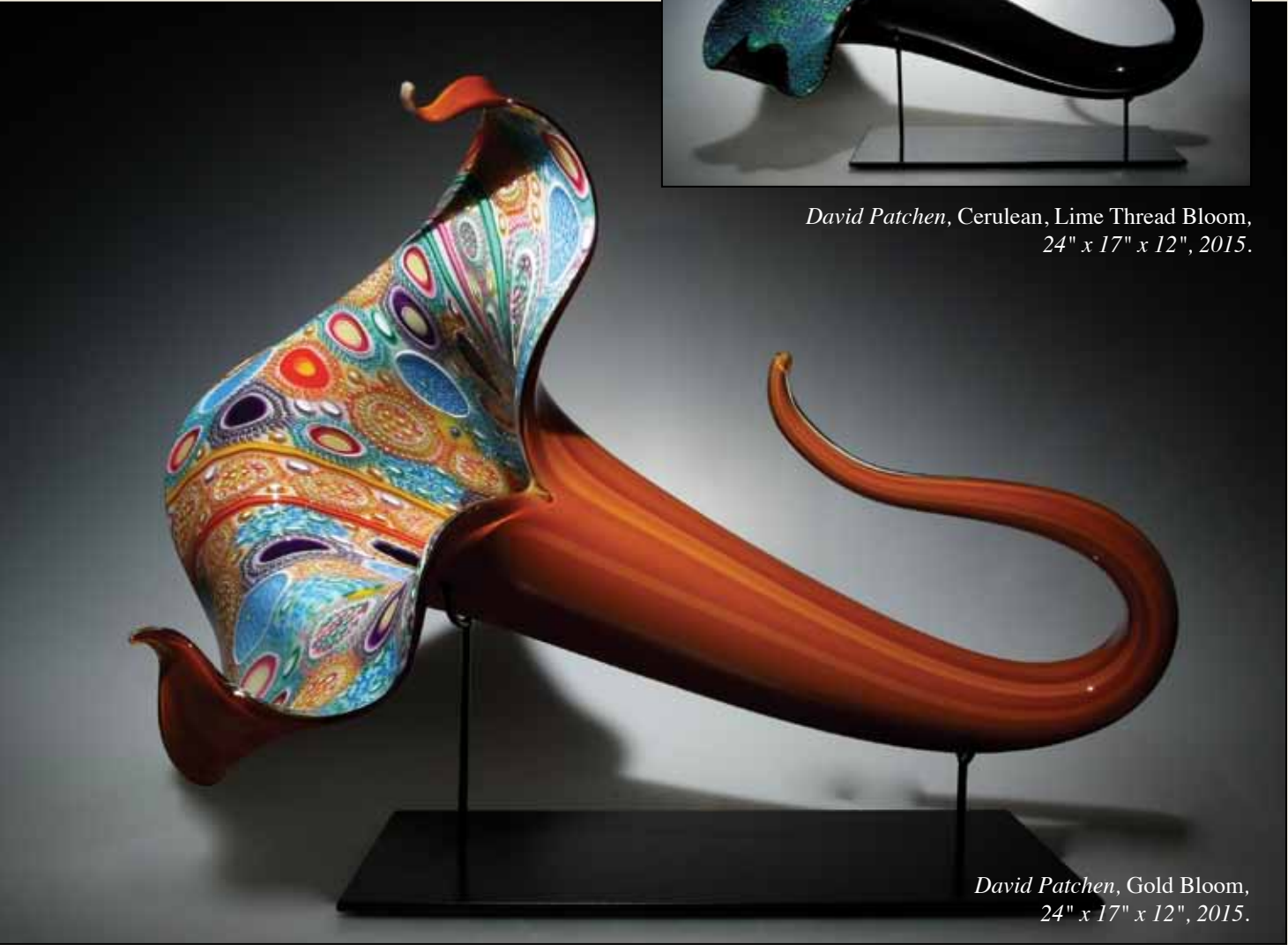
Patchen blows glass on Tuesdays and Fridays. During the rest of the week he deals with design, composition, and business. “My work is very intentional. There are no happy accidents. I design everything ahead of time outside the hot shop so that when I’m blowing glass it is not about artistic decisions. Rather, I’m executing on a vision I previously designed.



David Patchen, White Spiral Bloom, 22" x 18" x 12", 2014.



David Patchen, Cerulean, Lime Thread Bloom, 24" x 17" x 12", 2015.



David Patchen, Gold Bloom, 24" x 17" x 12", 2015.



David Patchen, Dew Drops Bloom, 22" x 17" x 12", 2015.

“I enjoy this process of thoughtful creativity and, by contrast, the intensity of executing work in the hot shop, where the limited window to shape molten glass requires precision and urgency. The dual challenge of designing and executing complex work satisfies both the artist and the craftsman in me, and I continually find it exciting to create a piece I’ve poured over for days, watching it come to life in the fire.”

Choosing What to Make

For a person with a solid background in marketing, Patchen spends little thought on meeting demand or playing to market trends. “Most of the time I make what I want, and galleries or collectors order it. The vast majority of what I make is one-of-a kind murrine work. Occasionally I take commissions of my series at a specific size or with specific colors based on a client’s requests. I decide what I want to make on a given day, so I feel like I get to play a lot.”

Still, Patchen enjoys projects that push him outside his usual sandbox sufficiently to expand his comfort zone. Sometimes the challenge comes from scale, as with the two large *Foglio* sculptures he made to stand in alcoves on either side of the reception desk at the Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong. “Those were really difficult, since I wasn’t experienced making work on that scale at the time. Weighing 45 pounds each, they were a bear to make, even with four people on the team. But we worked through the difficulties, and I learned a lot.”

Other times, the challenge stems from auditing the larger debates within glass art and considering them in his own designs. Patchen tracks Tim Tate’s Facebook discussion of Glass Secessionism, which is joined by thinkers such as curator and art historian William Warmus. Tate proposes Glass Secessionism as the 21st cen-

tury follow-up to the Studio Glass movement of the 20th century. Increasingly conceptual and theoretical, proponents suggest that the new directions for glass in the art world move beyond vessels toward sculpture and incorporate multiple media and technology. The 20th century focus on materials and technique recedes in the face of a 21st century emphasis on concept and narrative. While Patchen does not necessarily agree with everything posited in that dialogue, which poses a particular challenge for the materials and technique-drenched process of murrine, he does find it compelling and interesting to consider where glass is going in the future. In his own work, he is eager to explore more conceptual sculpture. The *Bloom* series steps forward in that direction.

As an artist, Patchen is always excited by possibilities and isn’t concerned about being able to find something intriguing to make. He finds inspiration and renewal from international travel, the marine environment, photography, architecture, science, and nature. His experience has also taught him to take artistic impediments in stride.

“My skills have developed enough that I can now make what I want. That was an interesting threshold, when suddenly your skills advance to the point where the question is not ‘What can I make?’ but rather ‘What do I want to make?’ That happened to me about five years into working with glass. Beyond that threshold I was able to find my voice aesthetically.”

As a dad to two young children, Patchen’s biggest challenge is balancing family and art, both of which are labor intensive and time sensitive. “I struggle between the desire to be a fantastic dad and the desire to bring as much energy and passion as I can to my work. I think more about family versus glass than about any other challenges I face as a glass person.”

Releasing His Art to the World

Patchen distributes nearly all of his glass art through 20 different galleries, mostly in the United States with a few in Europe. His work is consistently shown at the SOFA Expo in Chicago, Illinois; Art Palm Beach in Florida; and at international shows such as Art Shanghai (China), Kunstmesse Dusseldorf (Germany), and Vienna International Art (Austria). He has produced hospitality commissions for major luxury hotels, most notably the Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong and the Peninsula Hotel in Paris, France.

The predominance of gallery sales means that Patchen misses the opportunity to meet the buyers and collectors of his work. “Most commissions come to me from designers for high-end hospitality projects or designers and decorators for individual homes. Designers have a good eye for art within the context of a given project, but even when they are positive about the work, they are not buying for their own pleasure. Occasionally collectors reach out to me directly, and their enthusiasm is great. Recently I sold some work to Elton John, who is a huge collector and supporter of the art world. It was such fun communicating with him about the work he selected. As a social person, I find it a lot of fun when I have a chance to interact directly with collectors.”

Occasionally Patchen catches a glimpse of where his art is ending up and is surprised. “A few years ago I was asked to make several pieces and permanently attach all of them to large clear glass bases—not a common request. I discovered that the customer was a billionaire who wanted the glass on bases, because they were headed to his 170-foot oceangoing yacht.”



David Patchen, Aquamarine Parabol, 33" x 7" x 7", 2015.

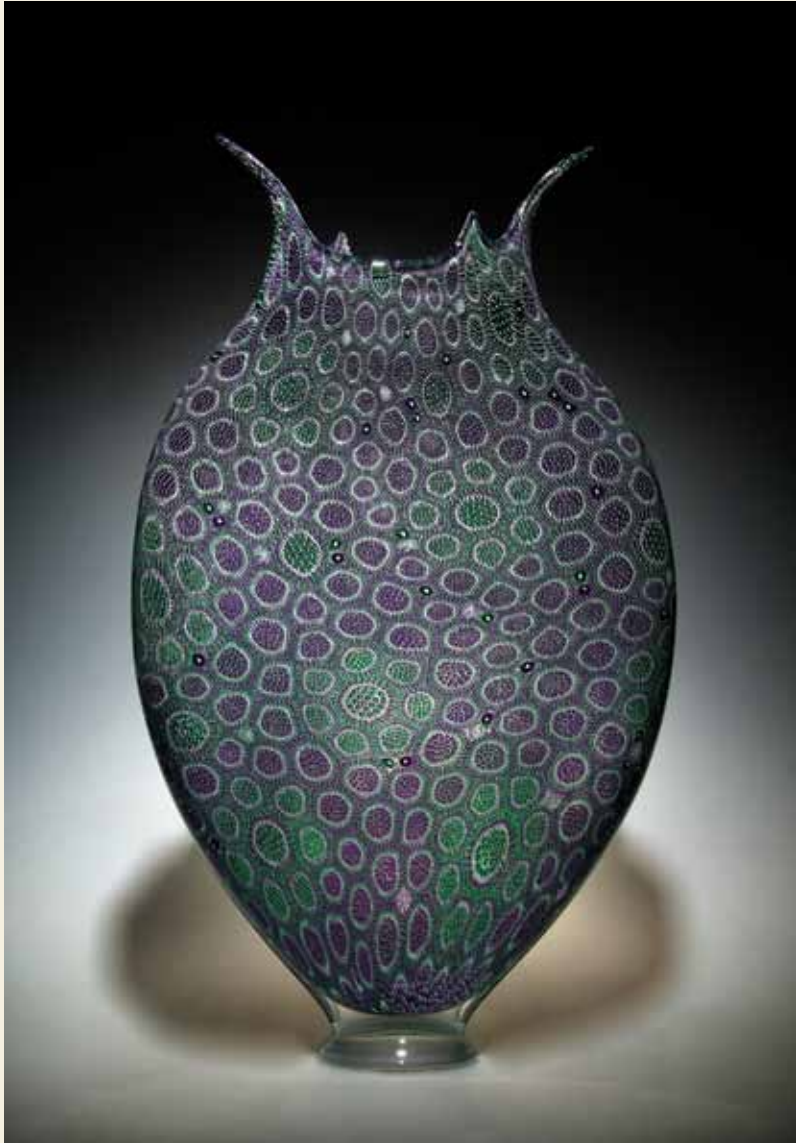
David Patchen, Gold, Cerulean Thread Foglio, 26" x 16" x 4", 2015.

The artist is thoughtful about the galleries in which he seeks to place his work. “I prefer mixed-media or glass galleries. The latter draw glass collectors but can be limiting, since people who haven’t yet discovered glass won’t see your work. Galleries that have never dealt with glass before are sometimes daunted by it, whether because they are afraid of its potential fragility or don’t know how to engage with their clients about glass. I like multimedia galleries because they expose all art enthusiasts to glass.”

Early on, Patchen sought to leave the job of marketing his work to the galleries. He soon found that in a world laboring through a challenging economy, their ability to support any single artist was limited. “I’ve taken on the role of marketing myself. In addition to managing my website, I am prolific on social media through Facebook and Instagram. I send out a newsletter a few times a year and do a little advertising.”

Beyond gallery type, Patchen has found some regional markets with lots of art galleries underwhelming. The prevailing aesthetic and artistic vocabulary seems to vary by region, so some markets may be more familiar with or appreciative of intricate work such as murrine. Finding appropriate galleries for his work has been important to the artist’s success, and he works diligently to expand those boundaries. “Creating an attractive, robust, professional website and keeping it updated has been my best business decision. It allows me to reach prospective galleries and collectors wherever they live. People won’t know about your work unless they see it.”

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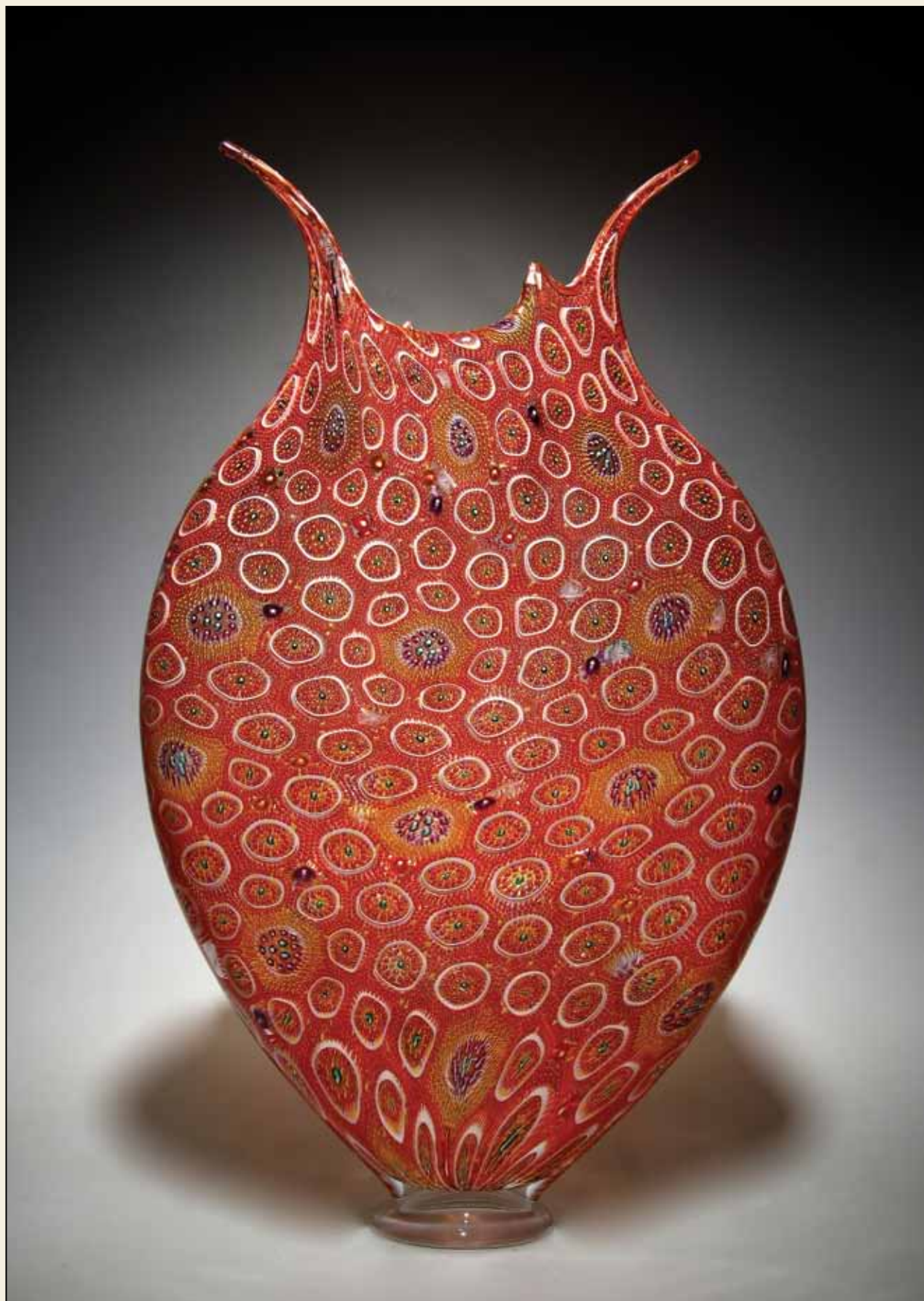


David Patchen, Uranium, Lime Parabol, 32" x 6.5" x 6.5", 2015.

David Patchen, Hyacinth, Jade Foglio, 25" x 15" x 4", 2015.

Visit davidpatchen.com/studio to find videos and images of David Patchen’s process for creating his murrine art.





*David Patchen, Scarlet Thread Foglio,
25" x 15" x 4.5", 2015.*