

Richard Jolley

From Gallery Work to Masterwork

by Shawn Waggoner

On May 4, 2014, the Knoxville Museum of Art (KMA) in Knoxville, Tennessee, debuted Richard Jolley's new, monumentally scaled sculpture commissioned and created especially for the newly refurbished Ann and Steve Bailey Hall. Measuring 105 feet long by 12 feet tall, *Cycle of Life* is one of the largest figurative glass-and-steel assemblages in the world. A visual narrative with seven parts that address the progression of life, the work is Jolley's most ambitious and complex undertaking to date.

Prior to the creation of *Cycle of Life*, which began in 2009, Jolley's focus was his body of sculpture that explores the human condition. He has participated in multitudes of museum and gallery exhibitions including the 1997 Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, North Carolina's first extensive exhibition of his mature glass sculptures. In 2002, the KMA presented the first major retrospective of Jolley's work, which later traveled nationally to 14 museums over five years.

More recently in 2011, the Mobile Museum of Art in Mobile, Alabama, presented *Richard Jolley and Tommie Rush: A Life in Glass*, featuring an extensive body of work by Jolley as well as his wife, Rush, a respected glass artist in her own right. The youngest visual artist to receive the Tennessee Governor's Distinguished Artist Award, Jolley has received several prestigious private and public commissions, including *Everything and the Cosmos* (2007), installed at 7 World Trade Center, New York City.

His sculptural work takes the form of drawings, busts, totems, suspended figures, birds, the garden—all exploring issues of the human condition, nature, and the universe through the use of glass, color, and contemporary symbolism. Jolley's work is alluring, in part because it allows the viewer to escape from the everyday into a dreamworld. His message: Art is not limited by its medium but is open to a continuous exploration of new possibilities for what can be meaningful to the human eye.



Exploring the Human Condition

When Jolley founded his Knoxville studio, there was not a tremendous amount of information about glass readily available to the small-scale studio artist. “In retrospect, I see this as a positive, because I was not weighted down with the past, and the future seemed as if anything was possible.”

Jolley started making his own batch glass (a modified Penland formula) and melting his own colors, a practice he continues today. His studio is in the same location only larger, and he now employs four full-time assistants: James Breed, Nate Nardi, Raul Garcia, and Daniel Pacific. “To become an artist is difficult. You must make the transition from student to secondary artist, which is someone who imitates someone, to a primary artist dealing with primary experiences, and this is what I set out to do.”

Blue Line Drawings (1985–1990) was Jolley's first mature body of work. “This technique was expanded upon and developed by Mark Peiser. While I never saw him work in this fashion, what attracted me to this technique was that these cane marks could express the touch of the hand, which became extremely important in my work.” With the creation of *Blue Line Drawings*, Jolley realized he wanted to explore the human experience/condition. “I tend to explore a body of work until I feel that I have said all I can say and then move on to the next pursuit. It is not linear, but it does have a constant, which is my interest in the figure, sculptural volume, how we fit into our time, and how little things really change.”

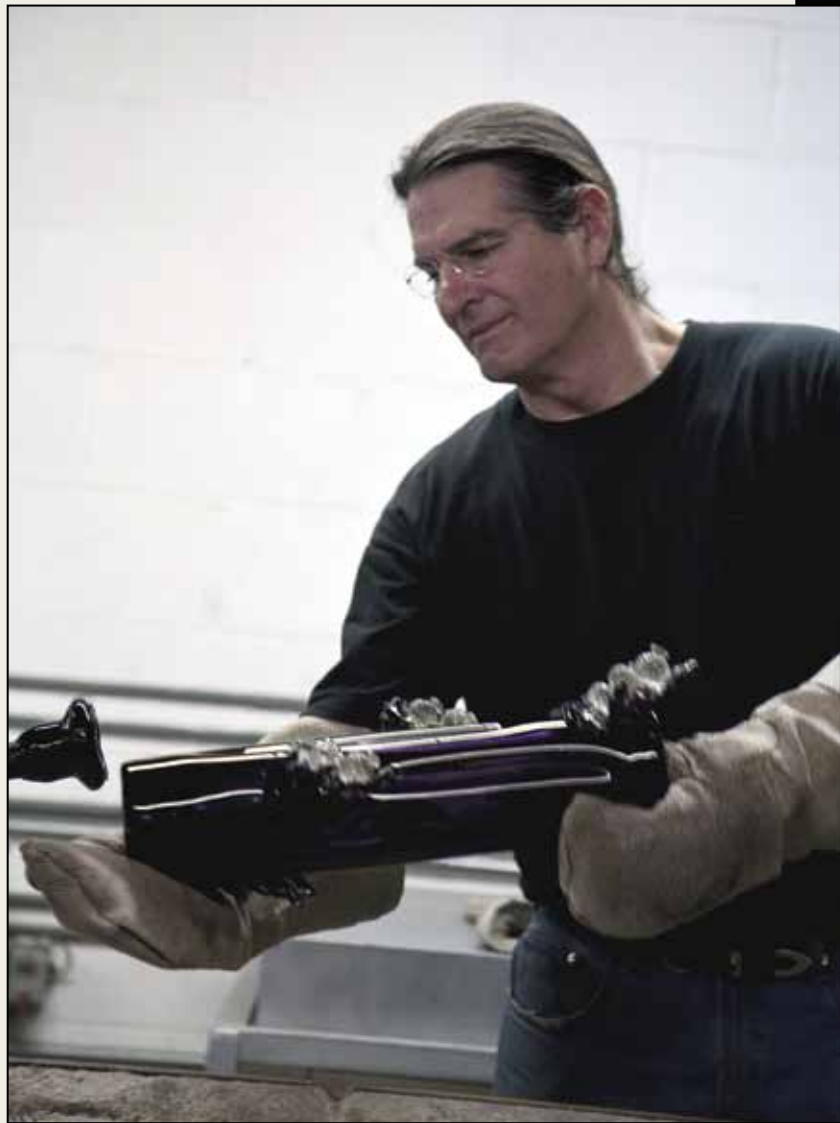
Jolley's next series, *The Busts* (1990–1994), were maquettes made using a saturated black glass that emulated highly polished marble, considered a “legitimate, recognized art material.” At its inception, *The Busts* dealt in a straightforward way with the issues of human dignity. As the series evolved, the pieces became baroque, more technical, complex, and an expression of virtuosity and fluidity. Interestingly, *The Busts* were often mistakenly referred to as cast glass.

Drawing, printmaking, and other two-dimensional pursuits have always held an important place in Jolley's work, and he considers that work of equal stature to his glass. One informs the other and vice versa. “One of the true joys of being an artist is experimenting and learning about various materials, which brings information from one source to another.” *The Torso* series was developed in 1994 as a personal reaction to the complexity and physical rigors of creating *The Busts*. “I wanted to make a series that was more formal and introspective.” During that time, Jolley began to seriously investigate the use of mixed media to address the issues of surface treatment and embellishment previously denied in his glass works. This greatly expanded his artistic vocabulary and use of various materials to realize and contemplate universal and timeless ideas such as defining one's place in and relationship with the world, both locally and universally.

Richard Jolley,
Translating Substance #25.

The Totems (1994–2001) returned to a more narrative format. Works such as *Same Skin, Different Color* (the concept that our interior, not our exterior, defines us) and *Tour de Femme* (the concept of women being the backbone of society) have obvious and simple messages. Later *Totems* deal with more complex themes such as the ideals and definitions of beauty and the passage of time. “I cringe when I hear *The Totems* called totem poles, because while I do have two or three drops of Cherokee blood, the reference is much more akin to architectural caryatids.”

Jolley’s next series, *Tabula Rasa* (2001–2003) which means blank slate, provided him with a new start and the challenge of making something that had never been done. With a nod to early Modernism through the object’s form and pedestal, these works enabled him to work on the front and back surfaces of the sculpture. “With this series, as with all my work, I have intent at the start, then let the work have a life of its own.” To realize this series, he developed a direct hot carving technique.



Richard Jolley forms glass elements for *Cycle of Life*. Photo by Hei Park.

Richard Jolley, *Suspended in Dreams* #10, 20" x 17" x 11".



Richard Jolley, *Solar Guardian*, 20-1/2" x 10" x 8".



Richard Jolley, *Floral Still Life* #2.



Richard Jolley, Earth and Sky #2.



Richard Jolley, Three Red Fade Dove
Amber Branches Blush Pomegranates.

The New and Unexpected

There is an underlying and continuous flow to Jolley's work, though he is always working on more than one project, series, or concept simultaneously. His later work includes *The Suspended Figures*, *The Translating Substance* series, and *The Garden*, as well as other wall pieces including *Everything and the Cosmos*, permanently installed in the lobby of 7 World Trade Center in New York. *The Suspended Figures* relate to the body as a pendulum alluding to one's sense of place. *The Translating Substance* series addresses the classical ideals of balance, harmony, and order while assuming a contemporary counterpoint depicting male/female relationships, human dignity, and our impact on and relationship to the environment. Wall mounted works such as those of *The Garden* series explore similar themes using a circular format, just as thoughts and processes are often circuitous.

Some of Jolley's unexpected projects include designing a stage set for the Mozart opera *The Magic Flute*, designing and participating in the Absolut vodka ads and the Bombay Sapphire martini ads, and creating a custom bowling ball, to name a few. "Along the way you feel fortunate to have the opportunity to work on projects that are unexpected, challenging, and equal measures of enjoyment and frustration. Frequently these junctures lead you to a point you may not have anticipated."

With his multiyear, permanent installation *Cycle of Life* completed and installed at the Knoxville Museum of Art, the world awaits Jolley's next project or series. "As an artist you must put the poetry first and be fiercely brave and ready to dive off the cliff. Every time I start a new body of work, there must be something that is akin to this giant leap of faith . . . and it feels great."

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Based in part on "Surviving, Then Thriving While Trying Not to Be Compromising or How Did This Happen: 35 Years of Being Out of the Loop," Richard Jolley's lecture presented at the 2010 Glass Art Society (GAS) Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, and published in the 2010 GAS Journal. For more information on GAS, visit www.glassart.org.

See the July/August 2014 issue of Glass Art for more information about Richard Jolley and his new masterwork for the KMA, Cycle of Life.

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