

# TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

## ***Richard Jolley***

*The following text is from an interview with Tom Spleth on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007 on behalf of the curator.*

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### **In general, why do you do what you do?**

There are a number of reasons; the idealization of youth to change the world changes to the pleasures of doing the work as one grows older. Visual orientation drew him to art as a sixties alternative to a corporate path.

### **What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?**

Early on, Richard was fascinated with immediacy. Now it is more the actualization of the intellect by the hand. Craft comes into the work more and he enjoys the escape into solitude the studio provides. His temperament is to strive for excellence and he is happy that his life makes that quest possible. He is becoming more driven as time goes by. Also, that he can be in charge gets better every year. It is not dissimilar to excellence in sports. As he gets older, he recognizes that all systems of excellence are similar.

### **What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?**

Media: as one gets older, one becomes very good at what one does. Richard uses glass maquettes for his bronze work because the glass is his way of making form and other materials would not work as well. When he got involved with glass,



*Richard Jolley- Translating  
Substance #30*

*Photo by Richard Jolley*

glass as a material was a clean slate. It did not have a sculptural tradition or relationship to any contemporary material or figurative use.

The prominent early 20<sup>th</sup> century artistic movement in Tennessee was the Fugitives/Agrarian movement of poets and writers who dealt with the change from agrarian to the industrial South. This movement included the figurative/narrative and influenced his thinking. Being around the world class minds at Oak Ridge where he was raised, he got an idea about the extreme abstraction of science. In contrast to the real abstraction in science, he wanted to talk about human narrative.

He is connected to early modernism: Modigliani, Matisse, Brancusi. His work is about inner life. Taking things from his travels, he re-forms them in relation to classical modernism. He is interested in the iconic response to the human condition.

### **How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?**

Utility has not been a part of his work for a long time, not since he learned about glass in function.

### **Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?**

Richard opened his studio in 1975 in a two-car garage. Now it is ten thousand square feet and he works with a number of employees—at this time five. He works a number of series simultaneously, including 2-D works on paper. In the hot shop he has a team and choreographs the work. He uses steel armatures for some work, and directs welders as well because all of the metal fabrications are done in house at the studio. He keeps the studio closed to visitors so that the work is not entertainment but focused on content. He does, however, work with “at-risk” middle and high school kids in the studio every year. (He doesn’t like labels like “at risk”.) He was recognized by the community through an exhibition at the Knoxville Museum and feels that the community embraces him. He leads by example.

### **What does “mastery” mean to you?**

Richard looks at mastery in two ways: one is technical virtuosity like a trained pianist—a more public side; two, he is someone who likes to develop the craft, assimilate techniques, and has behind him thirty years of assimilating methods. This is a more private matter and involves the personal issue of pride in always being aware of trying to progress. He takes on glass chemistry and does not rely on external solutions. Doing all of what it takes to make something. It is a very small step from mediocre to great. Many times just one or two small things make

the difference. 80-hour weeks lead to mastery in the development of the touch of the hand. Concentration is extremely important.

**Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there?  
How long have you lived in the south?**

He is basically Midwestern in disposition--Midwestern, with an affinity for the lush green of East Tennessee. He moved to Oak Ridge when he was four, and so is a long-time resident of Tennessee, but he was born elsewhere and will never be accepted by the locals as a native. His entire education from elementary school to graduate school was in state.

**If born in the south, how do you think you've been influenced by it?  
Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?**

The Fugitive/Agrarian literary movement was a purely Southern thing but with far-reaching effects, and truly influenced his ideas and caused the narrative to surface. Any talk about human experience incorporates awareness of place. He deliberately elected to not live in New York City.

**In your opinion, are there features, factors, conditions that distinguish contemporary craft being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country?**

It's a hard call. A lot of people have chosen to live out of the mainstream, but, today, all are connected through communication, and all locations can seem the same. There is less eccentricity than there was thirty or fifty years ago, less naiveté, less opportunity for the harmless oddball. Things are more homogenous now. We are all subject to pervasive pop culture. Artist's issues are universal now not so much anchored in place. Richard's own operation has changed: he has a new furnace he is building is getting half its refractory parts from China. Local refractory suppliers and manufacturing in Ohio valleys no longer exist.

**Do you see yourself as an innovator?**

Innovation is not a central issue or dwelt upon. Rather, he has a pretty Midwestern, blue-collar work ethic or nothing would get done in the studio. Is aware of his uniqueness? No one makes what he makes and no one will, but it isn't an issue on his mind.

He sees this moment in history as a prime moment for glass art and that it is passing. Gas will become too expensive, for example. And there were so few glass artists earlier that innovation, which is the product of the individual, was

possible. Now there is a massive crowd doing it, subject to trends like the current infatuation with Italian glass art, so that any innovation is watered down.

Innovation requires a morally stubborn perseverance. Innovation means to make it predominantly for oneself. It means to make things and then figure out what to do with it, an attitude that many young people consider unthinkable. The truly independent geniuses that he knows want to fly below the radar. The artist as a public leader or visionary is a role most artists want to duck.

**How is your work evolving?**

“I know it is, but I am not thinking about it,” he says. Work evolves by working. When one door closes, another opens. The anticipation of the future robs that moment of its magic and spirituality. The main question is how to keep it fresh. Working is a controlled delusional state, a desire to always be naïve. “Forgetting is a way of remembering” (Walker Percy). He is in his Lion Years—50’s and 60’s: accomplished but still capable physically. His desire is to keep it fresh, keep the poetry first, and to make something off the radar of those round about.

**Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?**

No, no shared art movements. He isn’t involved because of the homogenization of the country. A certain amount of like-mindedness all over that is unavoidable, and he isn’t seeking a connection outside of studio. However, he enjoys very much working and interacting with middle through high school students, feeling that he can make a difference.

**Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would you like your legacy to be?**

An artist’s contribution is not necessarily mainstream and one may not even be accepted in one’s time. Richard is interested in how one or two people caused Barcelona to be recognized as a center of architecture. So the activity is important.

**How did you learn your craft?**

He attended a Tennessee liberal arts school. His professor received a Tiffany grant and used it to go to go work with Harvey Littleton, offering a course afterwards. Richard got involved there as a student and the rest is history.

**Do you share your knowledge with others--the next generation of artists/craftspeople? What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the south?**

He intentionally chose not to teach. But it is important to give back. He teaches some each year at Penland or at similar places. The exciting thing about Penland is that it is a utopian environment with no boundaries where one may see, through the example of instructors and fellow students, that it is possible to have a real life in art. This message is not the academic message, most of the time. He is aware of the academic tension between the conceptual theorists and the object makers where arguments are made in meetings that \$6000.00 for a furnace is unnecessary when thinking about it is adequate. But academia is not his area.