

Mark Peiser

The following text is an interview summary of a conversation conducted by Tom Spleth on behalf of the curator in May, 2007.

**In general, why do you do what you do?
What underlies the commitment you
bring to your work?**

The simplest answer is that he has always made things. Since he was a child he was always making things and ultimately he did it for approval. This is the bottom line without going into deep analysis.

Mark: My father always had a workshop in the basement. It seemed

like he was happiest when he was making things. It turns out I am too.

I began making things as a child to satisfy certain desires as well as to gain approval. When I became involved with glass, I immediately felt at home with the challenges of discovering, or rediscovering, the properties and processes of this material. The more I learn, the more possibilities I envision, and that keeps me going.

Glass is an unbelievably beautiful material. Its processes can be very elegant and direct, beautiful in their own way. I try to honor that. My work is realizing all I know and imagine could be done with the material.

In his particular situation, and having been in glass from the beginning, the nature of the field has changed. In the beginning, no one knew how to do anything. The compulsion was to learn how to make *something*, anything.



**Mark Peiser- Contrition Second Study
Photo by Douglas Schaible**

Mark: Since I left the advertising business in 1967, I have been committed to making quality work. For me quality is more than the sum of material and workmanship. It is a gestalt that changes with the reality of every piece. It is a moving target that I recognize when I hit it.

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?

When Mark first got involved with glass no one knew anything. The field was a 'tabula rasa'. Harvey Littleton (founder of the Studio Glass Movement) and his disciples were intent on making art out of the material and had an attitude of "just do it." What he saw coming out of that approach left him very unimpressed. For him, the history became very important.

Glass is very different from clay which had at the time a more tangible relationship to studio work and an extended tradition in this country as a viable studio practice. Harvey was advocating a break with all tradition, a rallying cry that was ludicrous. Mark felt that he needed to learn everything about the material. He was very concerned with his intention to make craft and against the whole art idea. Non-crafted 'art' was stupid. His heroes were craftspeople. He did typical vessels, cups, glasses, and vases in order to learn the medium and hot glass techniques that defined the product. The question was, "How do you make anything with it?" A desire to understand the material is the essence of the work and caused him to stick with it. Since he had elected to make his way as an independent craftsman, he went to every length to find out more.

He had a degree in industrial design from The School of Design in Chicago and he worked for design firms in the city. The last place he worked was designing the small point of purchase displays, essentially advertising. He was repulsed by what he was doing. His life's desire was to live in the woods (a sixties concept); to have a trade and live independently. So it was imperative to do whatever it took.

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

This is an evolutionary thing. His first objects were hot blown glass, and the objects were presumably functional. Maybe the necks would be too small for flowers, but by and large, the work was utilitarian.

Later, he made what he referred to as the 'paperweight vases', the imagery of which would be destroyed if flowers were ever actually put into them. Since then, utility is not an issue.

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

This also changed with the nature of the work he was trying to do. His preference is to work independently but usually he has had some helpers. His current work requires four sets of hands to accomplish it so there are three other people in the shop. What happens is a kind of collaboration. All of the thinking is done in isolation but, in the shop, he uses others to help solve the problems that come up.

Community was essential in the beginning as glass artists helped each other get somewhere. All discoveries were shared. It was basic research and sharing which accelerated everyone's progress.

What does "mastery" mean to you?

Mastery is the ability to materialize dreams - to realize vision, concepts and ideas so that they are recognizable to others. He sees this as a moving target that changes as the world changes and as the work itself demands other ideas.

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

I have lived here (in Penland, North Carolina) for 40 years.

What brought you to the South? Is your work influenced by the South in any way? 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 answer to the first question is unequivocally, Penland School of Crafts. The school is how he got here and what brought him down. His whole relationship to place is to Penland School and the 15 acres he lives on rather than some idea of the South. He was a resident artist at Penland and intended to return to Chicago after he finished the three years. As little as he knew about glass, he was able to teach workshops because no one knew anything and he traveled around the country teaching. While in Hawaii, itself a very beautiful place, he realized that the mountains of North Carolina were one of the most beautiful places in the world and the craft community at Penland encouraged him to come.

The South as such has no effect on the work. He thought about returning to Chicago and looked for buildings where he could set up a glass studio. He found a building and he had an epiphany that if he were to live in Chicago his work would be very different. Landscape and nature were already in his work and the urban environment did not do much for him. For the first several years on the Penland land, he spent time just looking and he felt nurtured by the landscape.

Currently, it is another major shift in direction.

Mark: Part of me says that I can evolve it into landscape, but the real emphasis is his changing relationship to glass.

He has always seen his work as collaboration with the material. It is a relationship. He sees hot glass as a living thing. It is a dance and he has finally decided to let glass have the lead, to let it do its thing, and to see if this long partnership was worth the trouble.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

Yes. He was discovering all he could about the material. It was his job description to be innovative. He is surprised and pleased to see so many students out there making stuff. The Italian influence has been significant. Italian techniques came over and creativity was replaced by dogma. This has had a homogenous effect on what is being made in glass today and it changed the playing field. The Italians swept the country and now glass artists call up suppliers and get furnaces, materials, and formulas already prepared. It caused him to question what he was trying to do because he and a small group of people continue to solve basic problems about chemistry and technology (and this basic research is the product of the imperatives of personal work/ the work is a product of the technology that is discovered.) Now, the field buys what it needs and it just comes in delivered. He is on a different path.

Mark: My work has also been about investigating and discovering new processes. When you choose to investigate a new process—a way of seeing that has no history, no examples, the only way to discover new possibilities is to try something and see what you get. Sometimes you can theorize what is possible, and that works, sometimes- but more often something unexpected happens to show possibilities you couldn't imagine. You build a vocabulary of possibilities and if there are enough of them, and the process will allow you to combine them- to compose and grow- perhaps beauty can evolve and grow.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture?

What a beautiful idea. The early work was forensic glass blowing, a constant inquiry into how was the work was done. Since then, he has been very vocal about extending and discovering craft tradition.

What would you like your legacy to be?

“I did the best I could at the time.”

How did you learn your craft?

He learned by basic trial and error, self-taught.

Do you share your knowledge with others—the next generation of artists?

He has always taught.

What role do you think places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, and the John C Campbell Folk School have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South?

He only knows about Penland. After fifteen or twenty years he quit being so involved with education. He thinks that Penland is the most influential place in the country or in the world. For him, the critical exchanges took place here. Instructors came in each summer to share what they had learned over the course of the year. This is where real information was disseminated.