

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Richard Ritter

The following text is an interview summary from 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?

My family taught me to work— there was a strong work ethic growing up. That is where the commitment comes from. Whether I was taking grease off of a machine, or making a work of art, the same work ethic applied.



Richard Ritter-Floral Core Series #72

Photo by John Littleton

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?

Sometimes I think that glass as a material chose me. It is through interpreting the qualities of the medium that my work is directed. We all have a link to the past, and can't ignore it. I wasn't a scholar ...I didn't study how the ancients made *murrini*¹ ...but I can look at what they did a thousand years ago and see that they were directed by their material to solve problems in creating imagery the same way that I am.

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

¹ A glass technique to make small disks of glass with the same design by fusing colored glass canes together and then cutting them crosswise.

I work in relative isolation, and very independently. I have never really worked in collaboration with anyone. At times, I may have one apprentice, but most of my time is spent working alone, or with my wife and fellow artist Jan Williams in our studio. I have had some terrific apprentices over the years ...those who really understood my work and who really became a part of our family. It has been a great joy to me that each of my three children, as they have grown up, have contributed in some special way in the studio.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

I have seen kids who are only 20 years old be a master at what they are doing. I think that understanding the material, and not doing what it instructs you to, but doing what you want to do is very difficult. If mastery means learning a technique well ...it doesn't necessarily mean that the artist is doing something creative with it. I love artists who work in different mediums, who know different mediums, painting and ceramics and design. But in the end, knowledge of your materials and creativity must go hand in hand.

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

I first came to North Carolina to the Penland School of Crafts to be a student in 1970. I moved here to be a resident artist in 1971. I have lived here 36 years, longer than I lived in my home state of Michigan.

If born in the South, how do you think you've been influenced by it? If you moved to your current home from outside the South, what brought you to the South? Is your work influenced by the South in any way?

Penland brought me to North Carolina. I love the slow and peaceful pace in the mountains. I have time to reflect on my surroundings. One of the reasons that we stayed in the mountains was because I knew that it would be a wonderful place to raise my children, among good honest people, in a place of great beauty.

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?

I love the land here. I garden, and I like to dig in the soil. I am curious about what animal rips bark off the tree in my back yard, I wonder at the way the bark fell in strips to the ground and the patterns it made. As I wander about my small farm I see patterns everywhere ...I have been doodling these patterns for as long as I can remember.

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?

I do not feel that there is a difference in contemporary crafts being made in the South from work being made in other parts of the country. I do think that country people are resourceful people wherever they may be. They are more likely to find a way to solve a problem themselves than to drive 50 miles to purchase a part or have something repaired.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

If I am an innovator, it is because I like to figure out how to do things by myself.

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

I am very involved in my community. I have been a volunteer fireman for 26 years. I have been very involved with my children and their activities in art, music, and sports. I have loved being part of the Penland community, and try at every opportunity to participate in activities there.

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?

Yes, I do feel that I am a keeper of the culture, the culture of the studio glass movement and the greater American craft movement, of one artist knowing his or her art, in one studio that he or she has built by hand. This artist is the designer, the gaffer, the batch mixer, the cutter and polisher. This artist mixes his or her material from scratch, from the raw materials themselves. If I need to have a pink glass to work with, I mix and melt my colors through experimentation until I have my own personal pallet. I hope that my legacy is my work, that I wanted to make some beautiful art.

How did you learn your craft?

Most of my work in glass has been self-taught, but that discipline came from the education that I received from an incredible art school, The Society of Arts and Crafts in Detroit, Michigan, now called the College of Creative Studies. I didn't have to settle for one or two painting instructors, I had 10. I had such exposure to different knowledge and technique and philosophies.

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

Do I share my knowledge, yes I love teaching! That is why the contemporary crafts movement grew in such an incredible way ...everyone shared their knowledge and their souls in everyway.

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

I think that the colleges are doing an adequate job, and few of the colleges or universities in the South can come close to the impact that the alternative schools like Penland, John C. Campbell Folk School, and Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts have had to the development of craft. It is wonderful that some universities, like Western Carolina University, are now partnering with these alternative schools. I am more worried about how little our children are being taught about art and music. If our children are not learning how to be creative in their developing years they won't even know that the possibility of a life as a craftsmen exists.