encounters

SHANE FERO

above: Shane Fero demonstrating lampworking in Louisville, KY, 2003

on cover: ***The Gold-Winged Blackbird****, 2008*
flameworked glass and fused gold leaf, acid-etched, 4.25 x 6.75 x 2.75 inches

opposite: ***The Fire Lark*** *(detail), 2008, flameworked glass, acid-etched, 4.75 x 7.25 x 3 inches*

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SHANE FERO

July 13 — September 28, 2008

This project is made possible in part by grants from
the *Alabama State Council on the Arts* and
the *National Endowment for the Arts,*
and through the generous support of
The Women's Guild of the Huntsville Museum of Art

above:
***Some Kind of Thrush**, 2008*
flameworked glass, acid-etched,
3.5 x 7 x 3 inches

right (detail) & opposite:
***Shorebirds with Jumbo Blueberries**, 2008*
flameworked glass, acid-etched,
6.5 x 9 x 3.5 inches (tallest bird)

Master of the Flame: Shane Fero's Spirited Works

Shane Fero creates spirited works borne of imagination and fire, utilizing the age-old glass-making technique of lampworking, which involves the heating and shaping of glass tubes and rods over an open flame. While formerly relegated to the science lab and novelty gift trade, lampworking has evolved into a fine art medium in Fero's skilled hands. His engaging birds and anthropomorphic sculptural figures are dynamic and fluid, suggesting active psychological states and emphasizing expressionistic details of unexpected color. Fero is also a skilled painter, printmaker, and mixed media artist who communicates deeply felt metaphysical themes in a lighthearted manner. "I choose to integrate humor and other thought-provoking devices into my works," notes the artist. "My work could be described as colorful, serious fun!"

A veteran of the medium of glass for nearly 40 years, Fero presently works from a studio near the Penland School of Crafts in the picturesque mountains of western North Carolina. It was there that I recently spoke with the artist as we reviewed and finalized works for this exhibition.

Peter Baldaia: How did you become interested in glass, and lampworking in particular?

Shane Fero: I've been fascinated with lampworking, or flameworking as it's also known, since I was a kid. I think I first saw it demonstrated at Wisconsin Dells. When I was thirteen, my family moved from Chicago to Winter Haven, Florida, the home of Cypress Gardens. Close by was The Amazing Howell's Glassblowing Shop. I regularly rode my bike there to watch Bob Howell work.

PB: Were these places producing things like unicorns and swans—the kitschy souvenirs often associated with lampworking?

SF: Yes, *tchotchkes* for the most part. But Bob Howell made vases and pitchers, and usually bought the shop trinkets from others. A year or so later, Bob sold the business to a husband and wife team of flameworkers, Jerry and Lee Coker, whose son I became friends with. By the age of fifteen, I was assisting in the studio after school and on weekends, learning flameworking. Through my association with the Cokers, I got to know most of the older generation of flameworkers, because they eventually all came through Cypress Gardens.

PB: Was there an informal network of them?

SF: Yes, mostly working the attraction and carnival circuit along the East Coast. The Cokers ended up selling the business to one of their students, Roger Smith, with whom I apprenticed through the rest of high school and community college. In 1974, I moved to upstate New York to rejoin the Cokers at Santa's Workshop in the Adirondacks, working part-time and summers as a glassblowing elf while studying philosophy and anthropology at Plattsburg State University. But I wasn't really into making things like laced wishing wells and pianos—I was a bit of a rebel.

left: (left to right)
***Bird Spirit Vessel 2** and **3**, 2008*
flameworked glass, acid-etched, 7.5 x 2.5 x 2.5 inches each

PB: What were you interested in making?

SF: I liked making vessels, and I was interested in sculpture. I thought these were worthy things. After a few years, I opened my own studio in Plattsburg, *Classical Glass*. It was ahead of its time because there weren't many craft galleries around then. In 1980, the Olympics came to Lake Placid. We weren't doing great financially, but I thought that event would make a difference. Unfortunately it didn't, so we closed soon thereafter. Then I worked as a sound technician for a rock and roll band, and blew glass when I wasn't on the road.

PB: At that point, were you selling your work through the art festival circuit?

SF: I'd mostly sell my work through galleries in Vermont and upstate New York, and in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and DC. Around 1985, I returned to Florida and began working in a lampworking shop for a few years, and later just worked independently.

PB: How did you end up here in Penland?

SF: I was doing pretty well with my work in Florida, but I wasn't really happy with the commercial aspect of the business. I felt that I needed something more. So in 1988 I came to the Penland School of Crafts to work with Frederick Birkhill on advanced lampworking and Stephen Dee Edwards on hot glass techniques. I found that I loved it up here, and that the community was creative and supportive. The following year I came back as a visiting artist, and took a class in glass sculpting and casting techniques with Paul Marioni. Shortly thereafter, my wife and I relocated to Penland, and by the following year I was teaching here.

right:
***Bird Spirit Vessel 1** (detail), 2008*
flameworked glass, acid-etched, 11.5 x 2.75 x 2.75 inches

PB: Do you teach here on a regular basis?

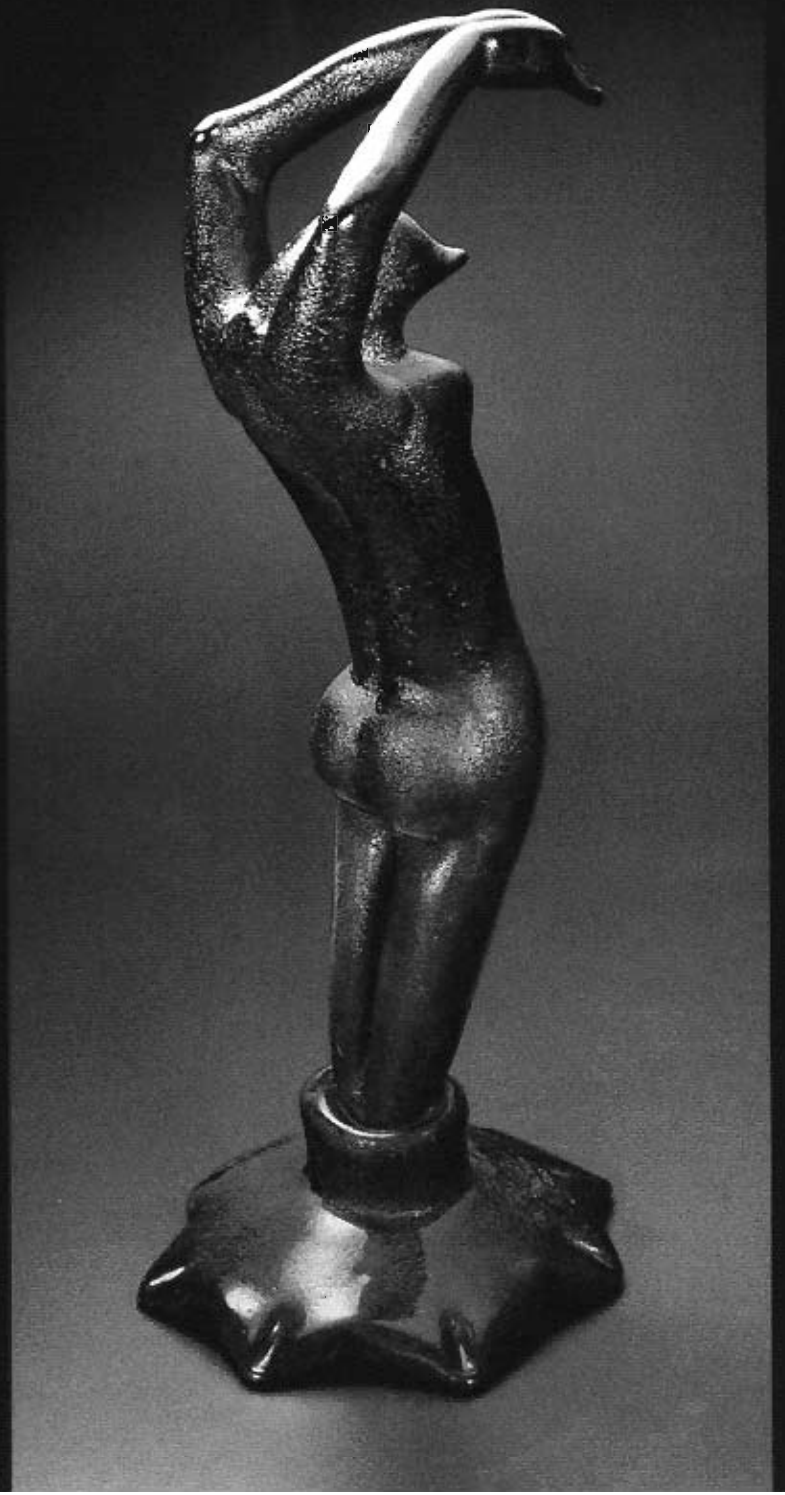
SF: When I first arrived, Penland didn't have a formal program in flameworking. They might offer one class each summer taught by glass artists like Paul Stankard, Godo Frabel and Ginny Ruffner. I eventually helped to develop Penland's program in flameworking, and taught here for many years. Now it's pretty infrequent. These days I mostly teach overseas.

PB: Since you began lampworking, how have you seen the genre change? Are more glassmakers embracing this technique today?

SF: Flameworking certainly lagged behind the studio glass movement. In the 1970s, American flameworkers were somewhat secretive about it, but in Europe it was always seen as a legitimate technique. Things changed in the 1980s as flameworkers began developing a higher aesthetic, and galleries and museums began taking notice. There were more workshops available, and people in university glass programs started taking classes with established flameworkers. Glass artists began to use flameworking as a tool, rather than just a means to an end. That was great, because the tradition was important for the technical knowledge, but generally lacked in aesthetics.

PB: Where did lampworking originate?

SF: Nobody knows exactly where or when it began, but it originally involved blowing air through a pipe into the flame of an oil lamp—hence the name *lampworking*. The air would feed the flame, making it hot enough to melt small pieces of glass. While many ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman vessels and beads appear to be flameworked, the first documented instances occurred around 1650 in Italy and Germany. Old diagrams from that period show people working with a bellows system that pumped compressed air to augment the flame.



PB: What did these artists typically make?

SF: Many things. In Murano, they made scientific instruments that might be shaped like fanciful animals—a true Renaissance fusion of art and science. In Germany, monks set up glass houses in villages like Lauscha to make folk pieces in the form of stags, forest birds and dogs. The town of Nevers, France, became very well known for production of figurines of people, farm animals, and religious reliquaries.

PB: Does flameworking require a special type of glass that melts more easily than glass that is hot worked?

SF: No, you can heat any type of glass in flameworking, provided you have the right temperature. Borosilicate glass, which most people know as Pyrex, requires a higher temperature to melt than soft glass, but a flame torch can get as hot as 3000 degrees, which is much hotter than a typical glass furnace.

PB: I see many glass tubes and rods here in your studio.

SF: Flameworking involves the manipulation of either glass tubes or rods, or a combination of both. I use rods for my sculptural work, like the figurative pieces. The way I use them is like welding and line drawing at the same time. I take a rod and heat it in a torch until it flows, as in welding, and then "draw" with it.

PB: Your figurative sculptures, with their exaggerated forms and anthropomorphic themes, are a signature aspect of your work. How did they evolve?

SF: When I was a teenager I was interested in mythology, and fascinated by Salvador Dali's works—I loved his surrealistic distortion. My sculptures combine these two interests, and developed in large part through dream states. One night I had a dream in which I visited the studio of a former colleague, and saw these wonderful

figures that he had made, in beautiful colors that I wasn't working with. It was a strange dream—I felt proud and intimidated at the same time. Well, I subsequently began making those figures! I went to this person's studio a few years later, and saw that he wasn't making anything like I had dreamed—I was just competing with myself. That's good! A few times a year now, I'll dream that I'm in a studio or gallery and looking at these great glass pieces that don't really exist. That will often inspire me to make them.

PB: Are the birds a new direction for you? I don't remember having seen them years ago.

SF: They're a continuation of something I began when I was younger. I've always been interested in the observation and study of birds. When I lived in the Adirondacks, I joined the Audubon Society and began a Life List for the identification of birds. Around this time I began making birds out of Italian glass rods. They were much smaller than the ones I'm making now—only about an inch or two in length, and mounted on branches of wood. I tried to allude to actual birds back then, and went though about 60 different species. Later, I became more interested in the mythological aspects of birds, and in evolving them into "bird people." Many of my figural sculptures reflect this idea.

PB: When did you begin making the birds for which you've recently become so well known?

opposite:
***Pilchuck Bird Goddess**, 2003, hot-worked glass, acrylic paint (gaffed by Sam Drumgoole and Deborah Czeresko), 20 x 8 x 8 inches*

right:
***Capricorn**, 1998, flameworked glass, sandblasted, 16 x 8 x 7 inches*

opposite left:
***Jade Moon Bottle,** 2008*
hot and flameworked glass,
sandblasted and acid-etched
(bottle gaffed by John Geci)
17 x 7 x 7 inches

opposite right & above (detail):
***Miro Gourd Bottle,** 2008*
hot and flameworked glass,
sandblasted and acid-etched
(bottle gaffed by John Geci)
16 x 8 x 8 inches

SF: Shortly after 9/11, I was invited to exhibit in a multi-media gallery show called *For the Birds*. I wanted to create something that would be engaging and saleable, so I made six birds. For me, the bird symbolized freedom and spirituality, which I hoped might uplift the general feeling of malaise at the time. Well, the birds sold instantly, and the gallery called and said, "Make more!" I really enjoy creating them, because there's no limit to what I can do. They've continued to develop in complexity and size. Now many people know me as the "Bird Man."

PB: They're very appealing, and particularly effective in groups, accompanied by other objects like eggs and berries. Do you make these as well?

SF: Of course. I've enjoyed taking the birds in different directions with the additional elements. While traveling in Australia in 2005, I found a wonderful bird book illustrating the eggs of each bird at the bottom of the pages, and thought, "why aren't I making eggs to go along with them?" So I began blowing them, as well as giant blueberries, cherries and other fruits to accompany the birds. I like having fun with the work—it doesn't always have to be so serious.

PB: How do you make the birds?

SF: They're partly blown and partly solid, so I use both tubes and rods to create them. I begin with a clear tube, which I heat over the flame and roll in colored glass powders. Then I apply colored glass shards and filaments until the desired composition is achieved. If all goes well, it takes about an hour to create the body. Then I add the feet, anneal the piece, and acid etch the surface. The etching creates a matt surface that emphasizes the sculptural aspect of the work, because the viewer is less distracted by the reflective qualities of the glass. I usually have a design in mind before I begin, but there's always an aspect of serendipity that keeps it interesting.

PB: You also recently began making large blown vessels with stoppers comprised of flameworked birds perched on branches with flowers. Are you blowing these vessels in addition to creating the flameworked elements?

SF: Because of their size I can't make them by myself. I usually work with another person, a gaffer, who will typically blow and form the glass while I add color through flameworking. I don't have a hot glass setup here, so I make them at someone else's studio or on location when I'm teaching. The stoppers are flameworked in my studio. I like the idea of combining traditional flameworking techniques with the hot glass process. Years ago not many people were interested in working this way. Today it's become more common since artists like William Morris began working glass with huge torches—which is essentially flameworking on an extreme scale.

PB: It's interesting to me that you've gravitated to an alchemical, transformative medium like glass to express your ideas. It seems a perfect fit.

SF: You're right. The fluidity of glass closely parallels my intellectual interests and aesthetic passions. When I'm working, I'm never bored.

The Alpha Bird, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

Biography

Born 1953, Chicago, Illinois
Lives in Penland, North Carolina

Education

1991 German Lampworking with Kurt Wallstab, Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA
1989 Glass Sculpting and Casting Techniques with Paul Marioni, Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC
1988 Advanced Lampworking with Frederick Birkhill/Hot Glass Techniques with Stephen Dee Edwards, Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC
1974-77 Apprenticeship with Jerry and Lee Coker, Lake Placid, NY
1974-76 Philosophy Major, Plattsburgh State University, Plattsburgh, NY
1971-74 Philosophy/Anthropology Major, Polk Community College, Winter Haven, FL
1968-74 Apprenticeship with Roger Smith, Winter Haven, FL

Recent Solo Exhibitions

2008 *Encounters: Shane Fero*, Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, AL
Shane Fero, Georgia College & State University, Milledgeville, GA
2007 *Shane Fero*, Marta Hewett Gallery, Cincinnati, OH
2005 *Shane Fero and His Aviary*, Vespermann Gallery, Atlanta, GA
Shane Fero: Birds of the Flame, Philabaum Glass Gallery, Tucson, AZ
2004 *Featured Artist*, Vetri International Glass, Seattle, WA
Shane Fero: The Bird Show, Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC

Recent Group Exhibitions

2007 *The Art of Glass: From Gallé to Chihuly*, The Newark Museum, Newark, NJ
Pursuing Excellence: Studio Craft Movement, Western North Carolina, Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC (traveled)
2006 *Two-Person Show with Alison Ruzsa*, Hawk Galleries, Columbus, OH
2005 *Fragile Nature*, Habatat Galleries, Royal Oak, MI
2004 *Men of Fire: International Exhibition of Flameworking Curated by Shane Fero*, Tobin-Hewett Gallery, Louisville, KY
The Nature of Craft and the Penland Experience, Mint Museum of Craft + Design, Charlotte, NC
20th Anniversary Show, Vespermann Gallery, Atlanta, GA
2003 *Shane Fero/Dante Marioni*, Tobin-Hewett Gallery, Louisville, KY
The Electric Goblet: International Glass Artists Curated by Shane Fero, Sandy Carson Gallery, Denver, CO (traveled)
The Glass Vessel: An International Invitational, Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, Louisville, KY
Two-Person Show with Christine Barney, The Glass Gallery, Bethesda, MD

Museum Collections

Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, NC
Castellani Art Museum, Niagara University, NY
Glasmuseum, Ebeltoft, Denmark
Hickory Museum of Art, Hickory, NC
Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, AL
Izu-Kogen Tombodama Museum, Ito City, Japan
Kobe Lampwork Glass Museum, Kobe, Japan
Mobile Museum of Art, Mobile, AL
Museum für Glaskunst Lauscha, Lauscha, Germany
Museum of American Glass, Wheaton Village, Millville, NJ
Museum of Art & Design, New York, NY
New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA
Niijima Contemporary Glass Museum, Niijima, Japan
Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA
Rockford Art Museum, Rockford, IL

For further information, visit www.shanefero.net

ISBN 1-885820-28-3

Catalogue Design:
Altherr Howard Design, Huntsville, AL

Principal Photography:
Tom Mills, Burnsville, NC

Additional Photography:
David Harpe, Louisville, KY
(inside front cover, back cover)
John Littleton, Spruce Pine, NC
(pages 6 & 7, inside back cover)

Printing:
Print USA, Birmingham, AL

Huntsville Museum of Art
300 Church Street South
Huntsville, AL 35801 USA
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The Encounters series of solo exhibitions is organized by Peter J. Baldaia, Director of Curatorial Affairs of the Huntsville Museum of Art, to highlight outstanding regional contemporary art.

left:
Birds of Different Feathers with Mt. Rainier Cherries *(detail), 2008*
flameworked glass, acid-etched
1.25 x 2.25 x 1.25 inches

opposite:
Squiggle Bird, *2004, intaglio vitreograph*
(edition of 20), 18 x 24 inches

back cover:
Neo-Miro Bottle *(detail), 2007*
hot and flameworked glass, sandblasted
and acid-etched (bottle gaffed by John Geci)
21.5 x 7 x 6 inches

Huntsville Museum of Art