

robert dane
NANTUCKET

Playing with fire for ageless art

Glass artist Robert Dane is part of the studio glass movement, which began about 50 years ago. “A couple of ceramics teachers and a glass chemist got together and built a glass furnace in Toledo, Ohio where they then blew glass outside of the factory for the first time,” Dane explains. “Glass before then was created in factories because of technical secrets and also the inaccessibility of the techniques.” Eventually schools started teaching glass blowing, collaborating with international artists. Dane says it was after attending Boston’s Mass College of Art that he learned the Italian way of blowing glass. “To me, the Italian techniques are very refined and they have been mastered over the last 600 years. It is a really dynamic, yet delicate art form,” says the artist.

Dane’s work can be found in many galleries across the country and in his own gallery, which he opened on Centre Street in Nantucket in 1996. His pieces are also in the permanent collections of several museums, including the Smithsonian Institution’s Renwick Gallery, which features eight of his popular Tutti Frutti Goblets.

Dane creates his pieces in his Heath studio in the Berkshires. The day we visited, he was working on the Tutti Frutti Goblets that he says are inspired by Italian Venetian glass. “I make mine a little heavier, so they are more functional and people aren’t afraid to use them,” he explains. “The Venetian glass is so light and

by mindy todd



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so ethereal. I also throw a lot of color in. The Italians would make their glasses all the same size, the same color, and you would get a set of 12 or 16. I like to mix it up and make things fun.”

Glass starts to melt at 1,000 degrees. The ovens Dane and his crew of three are using are at 2,000 degrees. To watch the artisans work is like watching a carefully choreographed dance. Dane says it has to be minutely choreographed. “Over the years, we have figured out exactly what needs to be done to make everything move smoothly and as quickly as possible. You have to move quickly because if the glass cools off too much it cracks and if it gets too hot, it slumps.”

Dane says he was first attracted to glass blowing as a ceramics major at Mass Art in the mid 1970’s. He noticed a little shed in the back where some students were glass blowing. “I’m watching this stuff and it’s hot and noisy and it looks like fun and everybody is moving around, so I tried it, liked it—and that was that,” says Dane. “The fire is a big part of it—the heat, the movement, the interaction with other people.”

Dane and his wife were visiting friends on Nantucket in the mid 1990’s when the suggestion was made that they open an island gallery. Their elegant Centre Street gallery has evolved since then and today also features the work of other well-known artists. “We started with functional decorative glass pieces and quickly realized the real market was for lots of color and fun,” says Dane, who frequently works with collectors, interior decorators, and architects. “Then we realized there was money for big sculptures by important artists. Because I had been in that world for 20 years, I was able to invite friends to bring their work to Nantucket.”

The Dane Gallery, at 28 Centre Street, Nantucket is open from April to December. For information, go to www.danegallery.com.

Mindy Todd hosts *The Point*, on Cape and Islands NPR stations WCAL and WNAN.