

A Touch of Glass

Suddenly, glass is everywhere. We knew this city had surreptitiously become a serious glass town, but only this month has it become inescapably obvious. That glass is overflowing our galleries may not be surprising considering that the Glass Arts Society had its annual convention here a couple of weeks ago, but the volume of work by local glass artists is startling. And not only are there a lot of them around, but some have also revealed that they have some new tricks up their sleeves.

Take James Vella. In the past he was known for finely crafted urns, lamps and the like, rendered in a baroque decorative style derived from the Venetian glass tradition. It was all so elegant, perhaps a tad overdone, but his new work at the Big Top employs his virtuoso skills to a more subversive end. *Oysters on the Half Shell* is a plate of a half-dozen oversized glass bivalves arranged around glass wedges of lemon. The plate rests on a pedestal-table with a pile of shucked oyster shells, also glass, at its base, so the whole thing has an earthy, realistic feel that contrasts with the elegant baroque technique. Other luncheon settings include actual vintage radios amid the comestibles, and other funky flourishes. The rest of the show is mostly made up of hallucinatory oversized

flowers that transform the gallery's stage area into a hothouse of gargantuan botanical genitalia (which is what flowers really are, if you needed to be reminded). While Vella has made glass flowers in the past, these are so vastly super-sized that most have to have metal stems and armatures just to support the weight of all those pendulous petals. Rendered in bright floral colors, their effect is psychedelic, evocative of trippy 1960s special effects. They are also beautifully made.

So are his pieces in the *Glass and the Bigger Picture* show at the Jonathan Ferrara Gallery. In a corner is one of those black city trash bins with the fleur de lis design. This one appears overflowing with refuse, beer or wine bottles, go-cups and a bunch of those white foam plastic fast food containers. How gross — you can almost smell it. Something left over from the opening? No, look again; all that garbage turns out to have been elaborately crafted in glass by the devious hands of Vella as a piece titled *See Ya Next Year*, a commentary on the way this city measures the success of big events like Mardi Gras by the amount of trash left behind. As with his other work, it's all finely rendered by an artist who employs his flair for the baroque in a playful new naturalism that makes us think twice about things we usually take for granted.



James Vella's hallucinatory, oversized flowers dominate his *Through the Bourbon Glass* show at The Big Top, evoking a psychedelic effect.

to crack something, maybe itself or maybe your skull.

Lit Spring Rod #3 is similar, only here the glass rod droops down horizontally on a bent spring. It glows deep blue from within, lit by optical fibers emanating from a pair of blue lighted tubes housed in a metal box built into the table-like base. Looking like some sort of psychic laser device for wiping out memories that Homeland Security might find threatening, *Spring Rod #3* possesses a sinister beauty evoking the dark dreams of an earlier industrial era. Pendulous and foreboding; it is an enigmatic reminder of things that go bump in the long, dark night of science and technology. ☺

- *Through the Bourbon Glass; Alice's Adventures in New Orleans* — New works in glass by James Vella
- Through Saturday, June 26
- The Big Top Gallery, 1638 Clio St., 569-2700
- *Towards the Breaking Point* — New works in glass by Carlos Zervigon
- Through Sunday, June 27
- Cole Pratt Gallery, 3800 Magazine St., 891-6789

In contrast to Vella's exuberant vitreous extroversion, few glass artists have been more low key than Carlos Zervigon, whose new work is on view at Cole Pratt. In the past, Zervigon has invoked science as a context for his elegantly minimal concoctions, but his new stuff ups the ante in objects that evoke retro science fiction or 20th century futurism with overtones of Brancusi, Hans Arp or maybe even Doctor Who. *Large Spring Rod #2* is a very long solid glass rod towering like an obelisk on a spring attached to a metal base embellished with steel roller bearings. The rod is clear, rounded like a thermometer, and very heavy — shove it and it swerves back at you with enough heft