

David Huchthausen: Capturing the *Mysteries* of *light*

by: Alex Maynes

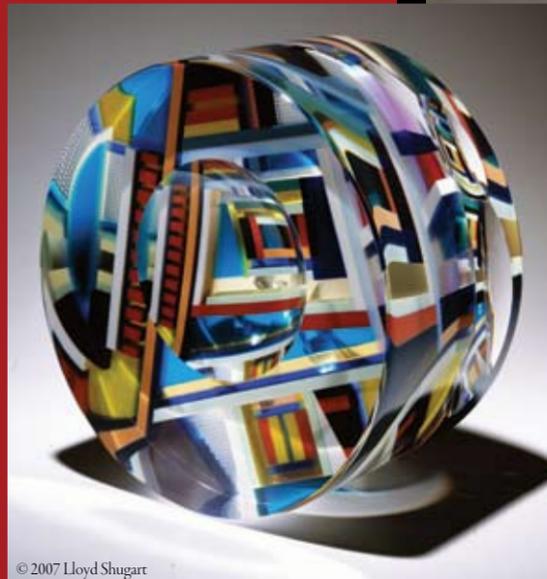
To see one of David Huchthausen's creations in print is a visual feast. But like a picture of a fine meal, satisfying the eyes but not the palate, something is missing from the experience. Indeed, it is only when you walk around his sculpture, watching the patterns of colors diffuse, reflect, shrink, and magnify that you see that the art is at once both cold and warm, confined and free, static and dynamic, vibrant and mysterious. And when you start to see how the light reflected through the glass interacts with your movement around it, you begin to understand how limiting the two-dimensional space is in presenting his work.

To move around one of Huchthausen's pieces is to literally see it in a new light, as each is designed to be viewed from any and every angle, and each and every angle reveals a new and different facet, as the colors reflect and refract in countless ways. Each piece is a study of the interaction of light and color with the abstract shapes and carefully placed lenses and fractures.

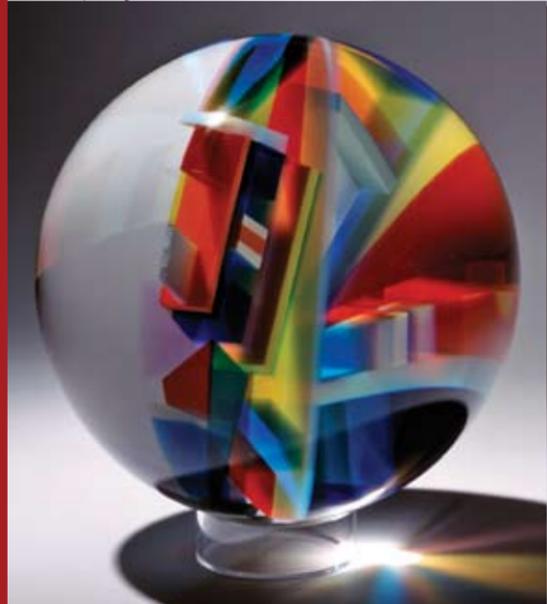
"I've always been interested in using the full 360 degree circumference of the piece, creating something that is fully volumetric, fully three dimensional," Huchthausen says, "where literally every angle you look from gives you a very different impression, and looks like a completely different piece."

The experience is seemingly unconstrained by the physical borders of the glass itself. Light and color reflect off lenses and fractures, creating the impression of depth and size well beyond the physical perimeters of the sculpture.

Peering inside the glass, the reflections make it difficult to determine the source of the color, with each reflected image in the glass an illusion, an echo of another. To engage the piece is to allow that there may be things beyond us.



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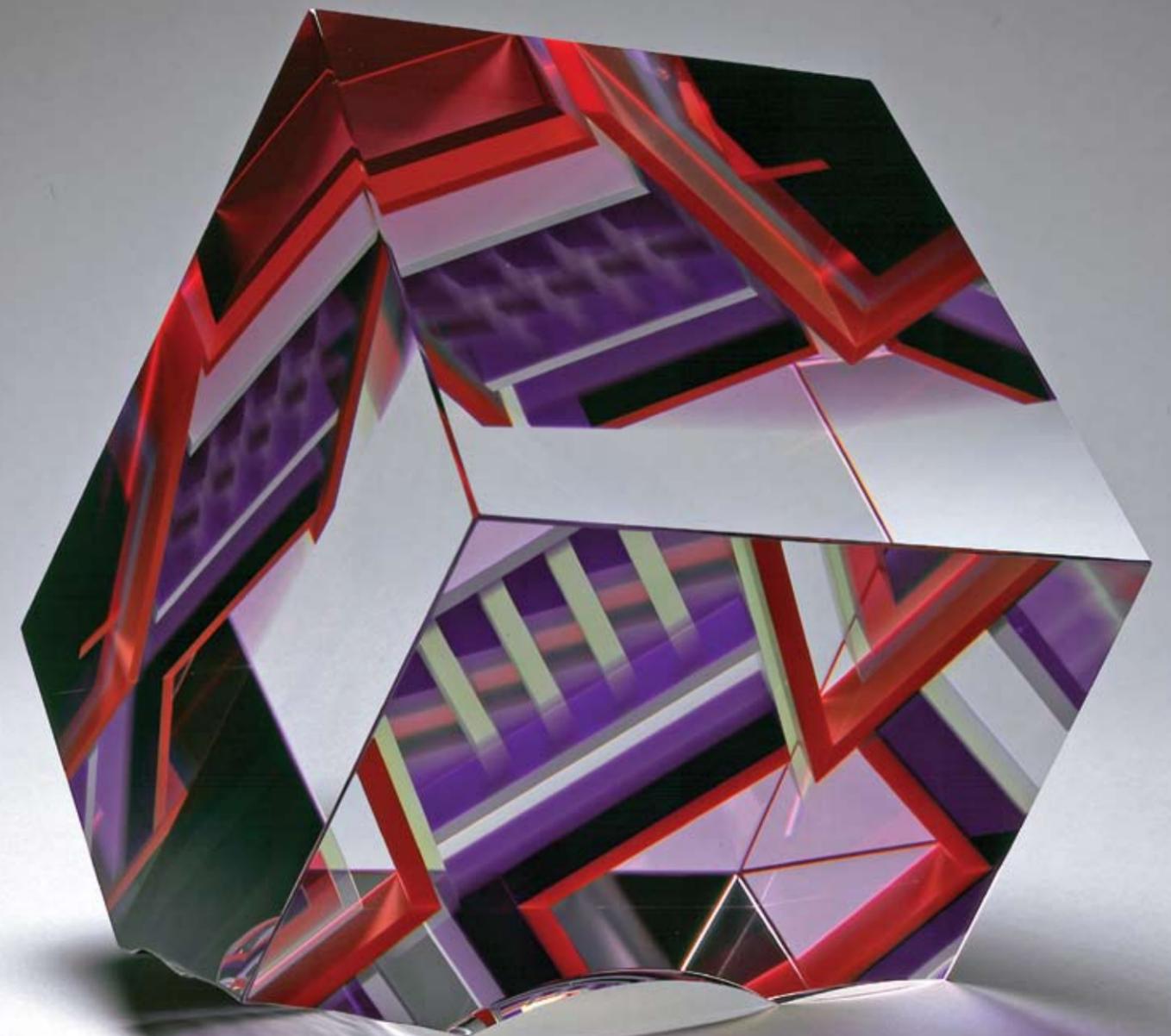
more dimensionality to the world than what we may recognize. And while Huchthausen is careful to leave the interpretation of his art to the viewer, he does admit an interest in exploring and capturing a certain mystery and elusive dimensionality in his art.

These glass-encased studies of light and color are so different, unique and unexpected, that it's not unusual for some to question the source of his creations. "People ask me, 'Where did this come from?'" Huchthausen says, "and I say, 'well, it's 35 years of evolution.'"

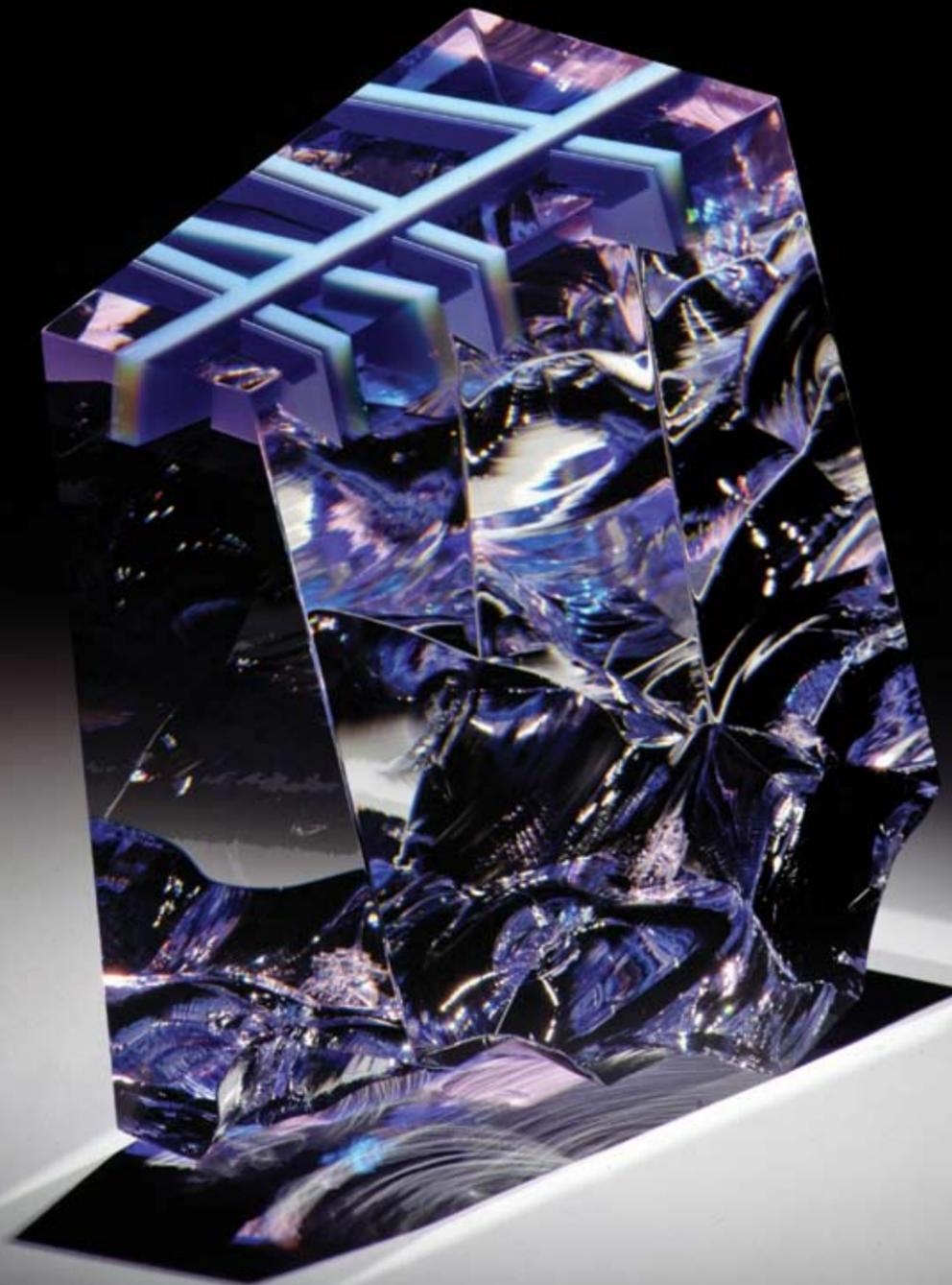
This evolution has been nothing short of amazing, as Huchthausen's ever-evolving techniques and ideas over the past thirty-five years have progressed and complemented each other, resulting in increasingly complex and fascinating pieces.

Earlier works, such as those in Huchthausen's Leitungs Scherben series, started with light panels containing fewer colors and little of the clear optical glass that serves as the medium for the panels in his current work. These light panels, thrust up and supported by opaque black or white glass plates, were jaggedly cut and seemingly precariously balanced. The colored panels, made up of opaque, transparent, and translucent glass sections laminated together, projected the light passing down through them in patterned displays onto the surfaces below.

From there, Huchthausen began to support the colored panels with polished optical glass center columns. This transitional direction is represented in his abstract Winter Strike series, which was influenced by the precision-guided weapons demonstrated during the 1990 Gulf War. These pieces project light into the fractured edges of the



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colored panels and down through the center column, which is also surrounded by a highly focused geometric shadow.

“An interesting thing happened during that series,” Huchthausen explains. “I discovered that if the glass plate was an inch or more thick, and I had at least an inch of glass between the fracture and the panel, that the light reflecting off the color bar would project out and fill up that fracture with color. I started playing with those possibilities, adding stripes and controlling the color patterns, so that I could actually reflect specific colors back out into all of the fractures. I just kept pushing that and making the panels thicker. This led me into making the pieces solid so I could create the huge fractures at the bottom of the blocks.”

Then, in addition to the jagged fractures in the pieces, Huchthausen began to cut lenses into the bottoms, sides, and corners, as well as into the fractures themselves. This allowed the light to bend and reflect back through the glass in a more ordered manner, projecting patterns of light and color back up, across, and through, both filling the spaces and creating the illusion of more space and dimensionality.

The current evolution has brought Huchthausen to spheres. He looked at the dome-shaped lenses in his Echo Chamber series and started to wonder



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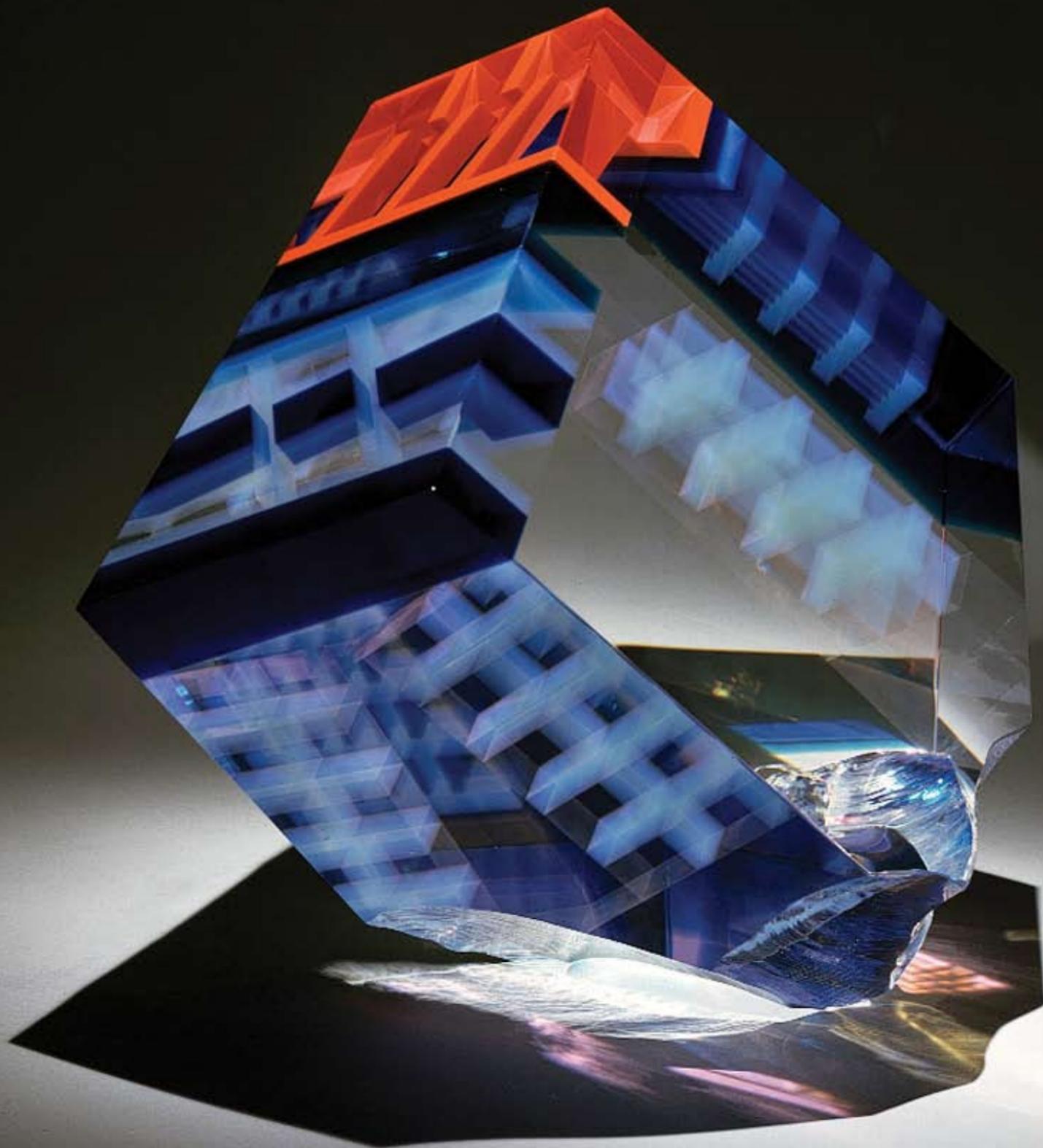
what would happen if he took the lens, and instead of making it hollow to reflect, wrapped that lens around the color panel, putting the panel inside a solid sphere of optical glass.

“We started working with the spheres about three years ago and I’ve really been having fun with them,” he explains. “It moves the work into another realm, where the hard-edged geometry in the center plane bends and wraps around the interior edge of the sphere, distorting it out into infinity.”

While David Huchthausen’s experience has served him well, he started building from a solid foundation. His resume is long and distinguished, and includes degrees with Academic Honors from the University of Wisconsin and a Master of Fine Arts degree from Illinois State University, also with Academic Honors. He spent time in Europe as a Fulbright Scholar in the mid 1970’s, and has been an influential member of the American art scene. His work is in the permanent collections of over 60 museums worldwide and



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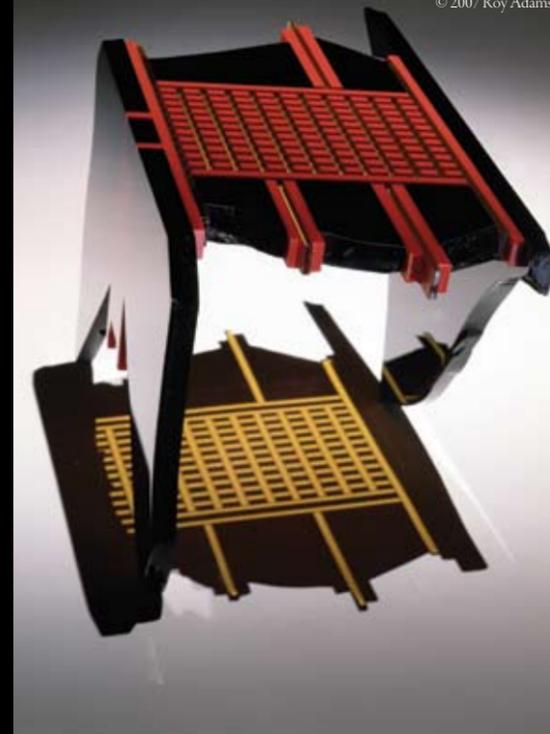
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he has been included in biographies such as *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in American Art*, and *Who's Who in the West*. His work, accomplishments, contributions to the art community and other interesting facts are well documented.

It was in the United States in the early 1970's that he began developing the cold-working techniques and visual aesthetic that has evolved into the art he creates today. His interest in architecture was a strong influence, as was his penchant for collecting things (see the fascinating "Obsessions" section of his website for more information on this topic). However, he had to teach himself many of the processes he uses currently and invent others from scratch. "Cold working in the United States back in the Seventies was almost non-existent," Huchthausen says, "though it had always been an aspect of glass I was drawn to. I started laminating pieces together with adhesives because I was frustrated by the relatively small scale achievable at in the furnace."

Since then, Huchthausen has cultivated and developed his instincts for how colors should be combined in his pieces. He is intrigued with colors and how they interact with each other and respond to light, refraction, and diffusion. His interest, study, and experience have served him well. "I've been doing this for so long," he says, "that it's like a painter grabbing various tubes of paint, I know exactly what will happen when I put different colors together in a panel."

Along with his intimate knowledge of the characteristics and properties of the many types of glass he uses, Huchthausen is also a glass historian of sorts. He acquires glass from all over the world, and much of it from eclectic sources. And so, hidden in the glass color panels, is another facet of his art: the unique histories of the glass he uses.

A faint blue opal glass made by the Asahi Glass Company in Japan in the late 80's is one type of glass Huchthausen uses. Created for a few specific architectural projects in Tokyo and the US, it was discontinued in part because it was very corrosive due to its silver and cryolite content. Screen glass developed by Corning Glass as Fluorescent light covers in the 1930's was mostly destroyed when plastics were developed to replace the glass. Huchthausen rescued a few sheets of this glass, and small pieces have appeared in various works. Huchthausen also uses a thick black plate glass that he salvaged from an Art Deco restaurant in a train station in Buffalo New York when the restaurant closed. He bought crates of old Vitrolite and Carrera glass in the 1970s. This architectural glass was developed in the late 1920s as a substitute for marble, but eventually became unprofitable to make, fell out of fashion, and by 1954 it was discontinued. In fact, much of the material he uses for color is "obscure glass" designed originally for optical or architectural use. "And by obscure," Huchthausen says, "I mean it's no longer produced."

In several of his pieces, he has used some of the difficult-to-obtain Asahi glass to create ghost-like grids. One of the most notable of these is in an eleven and three-quarter-inch sphere titled "Tholian Web." The grid has an ethereal, almost Escher-like appearance. It appears bent and stretched through the curved surface of the otherwise crystal-clear sphere. And depending on the viewing angle, it appears as solid-edged or dreamily soft. "It's deceiving," says Huchthausen, "it looks simple yet it was very difficult to laminate that grid, to get everything to line up and work visually."

Attention to detail and studied precision are two of the "secrets" of Huchthausen's success. But he has other secrets. In the studio, as Mike Barrette, Huchthausen's studio manager, works grinding a sphere, Huchthausen smiles as he lightheartedly



Mike Barrette



David Huchthausen

warns against taking pictures that could reveal his secret methods, tools, and processes. “Yeah, big secrets,” responds Mike as he leans into his work, his voice straining with effort as he grinds a new lens into the side of a sphere, “you mean secrets like hard work and skill?”

Creating the color panels for Huchthausen’s pieces is a painstaking process that takes equal parts hard work and skill. Huchthausen carefully selects each piece of glass he uses to create the panels. He chooses his glass based on many factors, including the color, opacity, texture, and how he knows the light will interact with adjacent colors and textures. Once he has selected the glass for the panels, the pieces are cut, laminated, machined, and the process repeated until the panel has the desired properties and the required dimensions. Then the color panels are laminated to the carefully machined pieces of optical glass, ready for final finishing.

“The processes we use are long and drawn out,” explains Huchthausen. “Each lamination takes a couple of days to prepare and cure. It’s a painstaking process of cutting, laminating, cutting, re-laminating, re-cutting, and then doing all the final machining.” Each piece is assembled and finished by hand. It is very labor-intensive and that’s the way Huchthausen likes it. “I’ve never wanted a production studio,” he says, preferring to work with the precision and care necessary to make the high-quality, low-volume sculpture for which he is so well known. Although Huchthausen might be working on three

or four pieces at any one time, it can take up to five months or more to complete a piece. The labor-intensive part of the equation includes manipulating the heavy optical glass blocks and carefully grinding and polishing them to perfection. “Some of the pieces weigh 80-90 pounds,” Huchthausen says, and laughs as he continues, “That’s why I have young people working for me.”

What can we expect next from the studio of David Huchthausen? He is hesitant to reveal exactly what his next project will be. After all, there are some secrets that he does keep. But it promises to have all the mystery, dimensionality, and volumetric expression found in his current work. Precision crafted, painstakingly finished, and thought-provoking creations that feed the imagination, speak to the soul, and just may be the next step in the continuing evolution of his art. ✨



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