

LIGHT

With exquisite precision, sculptor Christopher Ries frees dancing rainbows of shapes from cold, pure glass

SHOW

As he does most days

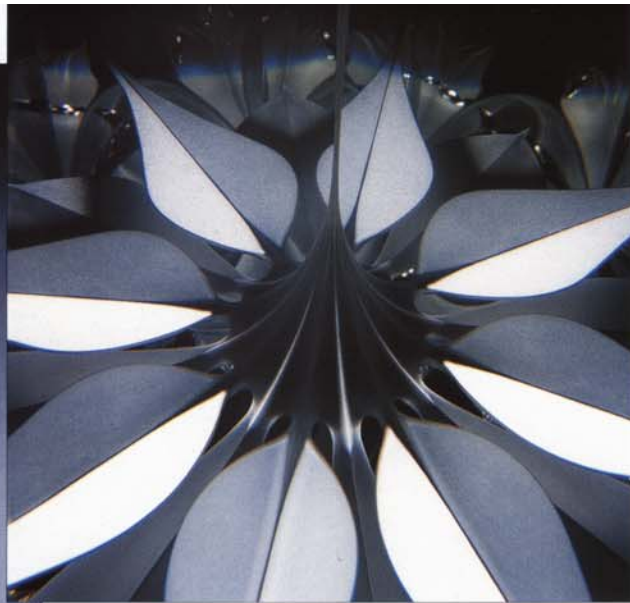
of the year, Christopher Ries steps out the front door of his 1830s Pennsylvania farmhouse at 8:30 a.m., setting off to work as if in accordance with some predestined plan. On this particular morning, something is out of order: the bird feeder is lying on its side in a pool of scattered seeds and broken glass. "It was knocked over last night

By LEE LAWRENCE • *Photography by* JAMES F. KANE





On view in the gallery above Christopher Ries' barn studio are, from left to right, "Wild Orchid," "Celebration," "Triumph," "Desert Flower," the egg-shaped "Moonstone" and "Afterglow," created in 1999.



"Desert Flower," left and in detail at top, was created in 2001 and stands 42 inches high. Ries works on smaller pieces in a barn he renovated, with easy access to his workshop through double doors on the near side. The barn also houses a gallery and guest suite.

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by a black bear," Ries explains matter-of-factly, barely breaking stride.

Maybe it is because Ries successfully runs two frenetically busy studios or perhaps because his glass art owes as much to precision and control as it does to inspiration, but the possibility that the bear problem might slip out of control is never a consideration. He is too busy working out a practical solution. "I'll use Plexiglas when I fix it," he declares. The matter thus resolved, Ries moves on, his steps long and sure as he descends the slope toward a gurgling stream. Followed closely by Harry, the cocker spaniel, he lopes from rock to rock to the other bank, where a barn rises white and high amid evergreens.

Anyone familiar with typical hot shops is in for a surprise. In Ries' barn studio, there is no flaming glory hole, no blaring music, no improvised dance with long pipe and red-hot gather. Instead, there are three polishing wheels against one wall, a large sander at the back and, to the left, a diamond saw so encrusted in glass slurry that it looks recently recovered from Antarctica. A radio is barely audible over the whirring, buzzing and grinding generated by Ries and his team of Richard Atkins, David DeStefano and Wendy Lindsey. Now perched on a stool, holding aloft an electric circular saw that surgeons use to cut bone, Ries looks up through safety glasses and deadpans, "Spontaneity is not something you're going to see much of here."

He cuts along the edge of a triangular piece of glass while DeStefano stands by, spritzing water to prevent overheating and to wash away the swarf. The principle is simple: when Ries carves into the glass at a 60-degree angle, the shape reflects and refracts into a 360-degree circle so that a single leaf blooms into a crown of petals, as in his "Desert Flower," or a curved notch refracts into fluted column, as in "Point of View." But the angle has to be just right and the cut precise, something that comes only with years of experience.

Once Ries is finished carving the sculpture, his team polishes, and polishes and polishes. The sides then act like facing mirrors, bouncing light back and forth in an endless dance of reflections. These so-called hinge reflections create holograph-like forms

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"Pont of View," a 1999 work, is more than 2 feet high and 3 feet at its widest point. Ries works on larger sculptures at Schott Glass Technologies, where, at left, he is air tooling a rough form "Embrace."





that emerge from the work into the surrounding space. “A lot of optics is math,” Ries explains, adding that, ironically, he is not good at math. “When I started doing this, it was empirical. I’d act and analyze.” After 20 years of assiduous experimentation, “I started to get it,” he says.

As an undergraduate at Ohio State University, Ries had gravitated away from ceramics toward glass, helping to build the school’s first hot shop and teaching glassblowing. Later, as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, he was an assistant to Harvey Littleton, founder of the American studio glass movement. It was this affiliation that first prompted his journey into optics.

As Ries puts it, “Harvey explored innovative uses of materials,” and consciously or not, he followed the master’s lead. As Ries worked in cold glass to make stands for Littleton’s sculptures, he puzzled over the way light is deflected or absorbed by impurities.

Turning aside the temptations of color and extravagant forms, Ries focused on carving glass into handsome shapes and finding ways to essentially sculpt light by dictating its path in and through glass. “I have chosen a pure material and pure form,” Ries declares. “It is analogous to singing a cappella. Few singers have such a pure voice that they rivet you in time and space, but it can be an even more

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The Ries home, a renovated 1830s farmhouse, has a commanding view of the Susquehanna.

powerful experience than singing with accompaniment and embellishment.”

But first Ries had to find a glass free from impurities. In 1982, his quest brought him to Schott Glass Technologies, in Duryea, Pa., where he found LF5, a glass so refined and homogenized that as light travels through it, only 0.2 to 0.4 percent of its photons are absorbed—as opposed to the full 30 percent that gets absorbed by windowpane glass. He also found the forward-looking marketing services manager David Schimmel, who saw the advantages of partnering with Ries to help carry the Schott name into the world of galleries, art collectors and museums.

By 1986, Ries was commuting weekly from Ohio to be Schott’s artist-in-residence. Six years later, Ries, his wife, Colleen, and their three children moved to Tunkhannock, a bucolic little town in eastern Pennsylvania. Their Federal-style house sits on 13 acres with a weeping willow in the front, a sugar maple to the side and the Susquehanna River just a stone’s throw away.

Ries, who grew up on a farm in Ohio, set to work on improving perfection

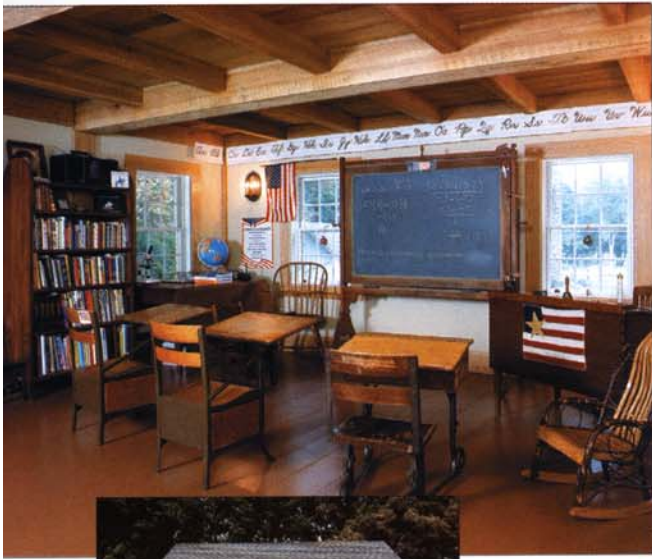




to the benefit of both his art and his family. He expanded the barn to create an upstairs suite for guests, a basement workshop and, in between, a showroom where three- to five-foot tall sculptures rise atop dark pedestals, their surfaces reflecting the surrounding mullioned windows, hardwood floors and the criss-cross of ceiling beams.

Ries now runs two separate studios, whose exhibition schedule and sales he manages with the help of an assistant. At the barn, he showcases his work in beautiful surroundings while running a thriving studio where he and his team create pieces up to 18 inches in height and \$10,000 in value. Thirty minutes away at Schott,

Strength and precision: Ries and assistant Richard Atkins, opposite, flip a block of optic glass at Schott. Above, Ries puts finishing touches on a bevel.



he splits ownership and sales revenue with the company in return for free glass, use of heavy equipment, access to in-house expertise and the help of team members Ernie Hubert, Kevin Rail, Kori Bormann and Doug Leidy.

Kenn Holsten, whose Holsten Galleries in Stockbridge, Mass., was one of the first to specialize exclusively in glass, places Ries in “a category of his own.” Most artists working with optical glass melt it down and cast it or cut it up and stack it. “Chris is the only artist of any importance who takes a solid block of glass and works it like a piece of marble, in the traditional, reductive sculptural mode,” Holsten points out.

This unique approach to the material was not the only aspect of Ries’ work that attracted Holsten, who began representing the artist 10 years ago. Ries, he says, combines technical mastery with an often lyrical artistic vision and knows how to “take full advantage of all the qualities of glass: transparency, translucency and reflectivity.”

And he is not afraid to think big. In Schott’s studio, Ries and his team create works that weigh between 200 and 500 pounds and retail for tens, sometimes hundreds, of thousands of dollars. In an ambitious move last year, Ries made “Opus,”



Ries built the one-room school, where his wife, Colleen, home-schools their children. He also expanded and did detail work in the barn, including the guest quarters with its central galley hex designs, and the carved lintel, above the gallery doors, opposite.

a disc-shaped sculpture and his largest work to date, weighing 1,476 pounds and spanning 4½ feet. Marvels Holsten, “The fact that Chris with his assistants at Schott could create a piece on that scale in optical glass is groundbreaking.”

Now with an international reputation and represented in dozens of galleries, Ries maintains a home life reminiscent of a simpler, gentler time. His family has grown since the move to Pennsylvania. Today, in addition to Banks (now 14), Chase (13) and Catherine (10), Christopher and Colleen have 3-year-old Caroline. Colleen home-schools them a short distance from the house in a one-room schoolhouse that Ries built.

Step through the white door with its proud American flag and there’s a large blackboard filling the left wall. Desks scattered with notebooks form a loose semi-circle. The teacher’s desk bears rectangular smudges of white chalk along



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its front. “Caroline,” Colleen explains, laughing. Not far away, wooden stairs lead to a loft with hand-hewn eaves; this is Banks’ and Chase’s room.

Not that they spend much time there. Life in the Ries household is very much geared toward the outdoors, and when rain or cold closes that option, the center of activity shifts to the eat-in kitchen, its mantelpiece festooned with red, yellow and blue ribbons that Banks has won in horse-riding competitions.

Nearby, the top of a dining room cabinet is filled with flints the children have collected with their father. In the den, the corner cabinets house shelf upon shelf of bowls, vases and plates that Ries bought as a student, when clay had not yet ceded to glass and light as his passion.

A glance through the gallery guestbook shows it’s a passion that many share, describing their interaction with particular works as “a spiritual experience.”

To Ries, this is not particularly surprising. “Whether we know it or not,” he says, “we are in the age of light.” He does not mean this metaphorically; he means photons, the myriad ways visible and invisible light shape our world, from X-ray diagnostics to supermarket scanners to laser surgery.

“Someday,” he believes, “there will be a greater reverence for the power of light,” and people will, in hindsight, link the rise of the glass movement with the emergence of light’s scientific uses, as though artist and scientist had simultaneously and unconsciously recognized light’s vast powers. Powers that Ries celebrates in his sculptures and continues to experiment with—experiments that promise soon to marry his love of nature with his love of light and glass. ☐

With the Susquehanna River in the background, Christopher and Colleen Ries pose with their children, 3-year-old Caroline, Catherine, Chase and Banks, holding onto Shy Boy.

