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Reflections on glass

From a glowing furnace come windows, vases and artwork of many colors

BY INDRANI SEN
STAFF WRITER

It was 30 years ago that Michael Davis, hitchhiking around Britain on his junior semester abroad, saw the York Minster Cathedral and fell in love with its stained-glass windows.

Those medieval panels, with their geometric shapes, brilliant colors and echoes of the Gothic stonework they were set in, still haunt him. Now 50, Davis is a prolific glass artist with his own Long Island City studio, where the windows of another time and place inspire him — drifting

into the vases he blows using sheets of multicolored fused glass and inhabiting the stained-glass partition doors and windows he makes on commission.

But between that day in 1974 and today, Davis' path has meandered. Via training in painting and 15 years as a modern dancer; through many years puttying and installing windows, cutting glass and being what he calls a "bench monkey" in other artists' studios; and, most recently, by way of fatherhood.

A talent for art

Art has been the constant thread, however, since Davis' childhood in St. Louis, Mo.

"There weren't many other things I seemed to be very talented at," he explained at his studio in a brick industrial building just south of the looming on-ramp to the Queensboro Bridge.

A look inside the studio provides a glimpse of an artist unwilling to limit himself to one medium. Sketches of the stained-glass windows Davis designs and builds are pinned to a wall. The curves of his multicolored vases, bowls and glasses compete for shelf space with the lamp shades and the glass mullers he makes to grind paint pigments. A glowing red furnace

COLOR MAKES Michael Davis' world of stained, blown and cast glass as he works in Long Island City.

See GLASS on B50

COVER STORY

Artist's talent glows in glass

GLASS from B52

gives up gobs of clear glass to be infused with brilliant hues by young glassblowers who come for the studio space Davis rents out and for the expertise he shares with them. His assistant, James Corporan, a student at Parsons School of Design, works on cast-glass molds.

This broad perspective on the possibilities of glass came into play a few years ago when Davis designed a three-panel sliding door for art collector Susan Landau. The door represented a perfect solution, she says, to the complicated problem of creating a separate music room that didn't cut off the natural light to the living room of her 1920s-era house in Mountain Lakes, N.J.

Davis found a metalworker to make the steel frames, then filled them with images of swirling, musical streams that intersect rectangles of rippled clear glass. "The panels are interchangeable, so when they overlap and the light comes through them, they're never the same," Landau said. "It's more than just the glass, and it's more than having this living, light-capturing and re-distributing barrier in the house. I think of it as a piece of art to live with."

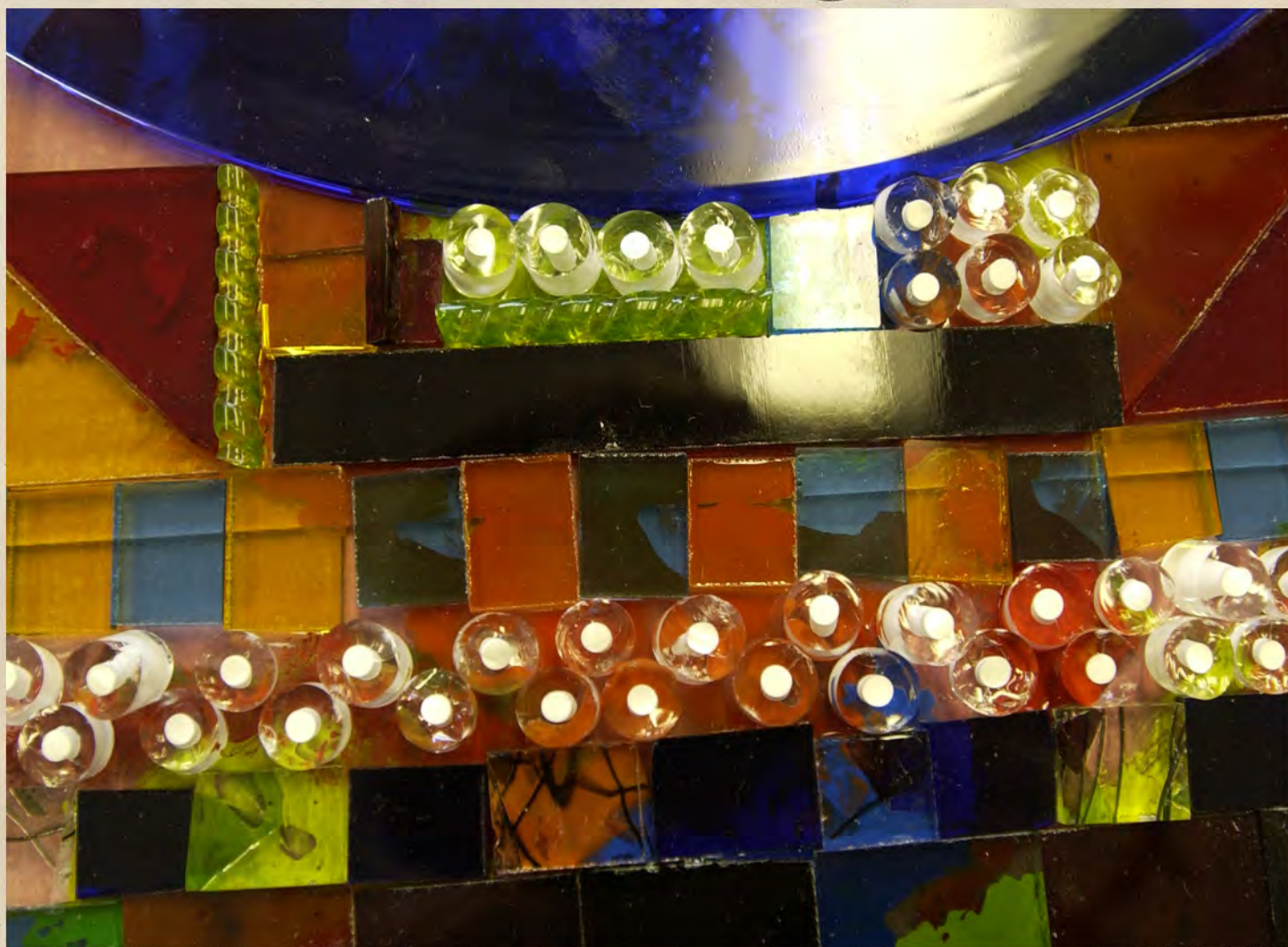
Dancing with glass

Committing himself to glass is a relatively recent decision. His first love was modern dance — he spent 15 years performing with companies in San Francisco and New York. But in the 1980s, out of curiosity, he started taking glassblowing classes. "I thought, gee, maybe sometime I can make something good enough to sell," he recalled. He worked in stained-glass studios by day and danced by night. Over the years, he learned the process of sketching out stained-glass designs, tracing the shapes onto butcher paper, then cutting the glass and piecing it together like a jigsaw puzzle to be fused with lead.

By 1994, when Davis and his wife, Donna Fish, had their first child, Nicole, he realized he had to make a choice between dance and glass. "To me the new exciting adventure was having a kid," he said. His glass work seemed more conducive to family life. Besides, Davis was selling his blown-glass vessels at small boutiques and, within a few years, at Barney's and Tiffany & Co., among other stores.

As his business grew, so did his family, with the births of two more daughters, Sophie, now 8, and Lulu, now 4. Eventually, the family moved from a tiny West Village apartment to the Upper West Side.

And then two years ago, Davis opened his own studio, renting space in the industrial but rapidly developing water-



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / KEN SPENCER



front of Long Island City. The building, which he shares with several commercial kitchens, was one of the few where the furnace he runs 24 hours a day to keep the glass workable did not raise eyebrows.

A versatile artist

The first summer in his studio, Davis made 1,000 vases for Tiffany & Co. The space has allowed him the flexibility to do stained-glass and blown work, along with specialized commissions such as cast-glass fireplace moldings or replicas of Art Deco lamps. He also rents space to other glassblowers.

The process that most fascinates him at the moment, however, is one that combines the imagery of stained glass with

the fluidity of blown work: "Roll-ups" employ a technique of creating fused panels of colored glass, heating them until they're soft and then rolling them onto metal blowpipes, through which they are blown to create vessels.

Davis is not the only artist using the technique, but, he said, "what I find is that a lot of people who are doing these roll-ups are coming from a glass-blowing bias, and I would say mine is really from a stained-glass bias. . . . I'm really interested in taking some of the graphic ideas

that I've developed in stained glass and putting them into a vessel."

In the finished products, strips of brilliant reds, greens, blues and yellows cross squares and circles, or float suspended in clear or colored glass. They're reminiscent of York Minster's windows but also of Abstract Expressionist paintings, of Indian textiles, of tropical fish.

"The glassware that he makes is exquisite," said Lauren Malis, a spokeswoman for Riverview Restaurant and Lounge on Long Island City's waterfront. Many of Davis' stained-glass vases are on display at the restaurant as well as on his Web site, www.michaeldavisstainedglass.com. "The colors are vibrant and

there's energy in the glassware," Malis said, pointing out that the restaurant is arranged based on feng shui, and Davis' work "really complements the flow and energy of the restaurant."

With glass, as with dance, Davis was a latecomer to the field and seems at times to measure himself against what he cannot do or what he has not yet done. "Some glassblowers are virtuostic," he said. "They can do, like, the equivalent of 15 pirouettes. I'm not one of those glassblowers."

Despite all he has achieved, Davis is still spurred on by a desire to improve, a compulsion he admits is a blessing and a curse. "For an aimless person," he said with a smile, "I have pretty high ambitions."

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MICHAEL DAVIS works in stained glass, left and above, and, with assistants, in glassblowing, right and below. His Long Island City studio turns out such things as glasses, vases, doors and windows.

