

Flameworking Part 2 -- A Conversation with Thomas Riley, Gallery Owner

**By
Debbie Tarsitano**

Artists are creators bringing new ideas into existence. Pulling our work out of kilns is like a birth; hands reach in welcoming new life, warm, shiny and pure.

Ultimately, like all good parents, we face the unknown when we send our progenies into the world to make their way. Will our work succeed or fail? Will people understand or reject our concepts? Will our most beloved work fall between the cracks and not be noticed at all? Who will love our babies? Many artists are reluctant to admit to the exquisite anxiety connected with the birth of new work and its presentation into the world – facing the unknown. What can we do to ease this experience?

Tom Riley, a well-known gallery owner and art connoisseur advises us to prepare our work to face the world by creating compelling designs from conception to presentation. Tom Riley is the owner of the Thomas R. Riley Gallery in Cleveland, Ohio and has been interested in and encouraging the art of flameworking since the late 1970's.

Formerly a practicing endocrinologist, Tom Riley's early interest in collecting and then dealing in contemporary paperweights led Tom to take a bold step. He began showing work by artists like Jon Kuhn and Christopher Reis along side traditional flameworked paperweights. As Tom and his gallery's attention shifted from the traditional paperweight form, to the object as sculpture, Tom was actually inviting paperweight artists and collectors to see glass sculpture as fine art. Showing work of artists like Kuhn and Reis to contemporary paperweight collectors exposed them to sculptural shapes. This introduction encouraged a new partnership between sculpture and flamework.

The contemporary art glass field was developing rapidly in the Seventies, when Tom established his gallery, now recognized as one of the top fine glass art galleries. The art glass field created new opportunities to show a variety of experimental works including more serious flamework. Over the decades, Tom Riley has continued to support and encourage many artists creating flamework, and he has also been instrumental in raising aesthetic standards and respect for that work.

The following interview with gallery owner, Tom Riley, shares the essential information needed to make important flameworked sculptures. His prescription for putting emotion and content into our art is the best cure for the anxiety of artistic creation. Tom's significant message is to point out the importance of content — the ideas we portray in our work — that provoke an emotional response. Tom's message about the necessity of thoughtful content in our work, however, poses risks. Artists will have to give up the security of what the world already accepts and take a chance on more gripping artistic content that art glass lovers may not be ready for.

Tom's message in the interview which follows challenges glass artists to be more daring, to utilize their gifts fearlessly, and to put what they really want to say into their art work. It is a challenge to move forward, to expose unexpected truths in the work. His message to artists is that framework is expressive; use it to tell your intimate story and your work will connect with the world. Tom is asking us to pick up the challenge. Those artists who do take the risk, and make gripping statements, will create the fine art which will live into the future.

DT What was your first experience with framework as an art form? What drew you in, and when did you decide to bring frameworked objects into your gallery?

TR My first experience with framework was with American contemporary paperweight artists. The discovery that this small group of Americans had surpassed the remarkable antique French artisans compelled me to seek representing these artists in my gallery.

DT In the course of carrying frameworked art objects in your gallery, how have the perceptions of the public and museum curators changed?

TR Gradually, art collectors are embracing frameworked paperweights as worthy of collecting and paperweight artists are expanding into innovative forms. Additionally, glass artists are using framework techniques without the limitation of the paperweight form.

DT Do you see any new design trends developing in the work? What do you see happening now in framework that excite you the most?

TR The use of framework techniques to express a concept which evokes an emotional/intellectual response from the viewer excites me. This is the hallmark of breakthrough forms I want to have in our gallery.

DT Artists are putting serious ideas into their frameworked designs. Serious artists are rapidly joining the field, redefining it, and refining it, if you agree, why do you think this is happening now?

TR I think artists, galleries, and collectors are all realizing that the content of American paperweight artists is unsurpassed in history. All are now looking for ways to utilize frameworking techniques to express aesthetic intent. We are leaving decorative art and embracing conceptual evocative art.

DT What do you think are the most important changes and trends in the work?

TR Breaking free from limitations of form and having the work represent an emotional/intellectual concept.

DT Do you consider frameworkers sculptors, if not, what would you call them?

TR Flameworkers have definitely successfully entered the realm of fine art sculpture.

DT The term flameworker can have a wide definition; can you accept that some flameworkers also use a glory hole or furnace to make the work along with a torch? Does it really matter?

TR Use of ancillary aides in creating framework art, if additive to the end result, is only positive and does not detract from or diminish the importance of the work.

DT As you have become acquainted with different flameworkers, what are they like? Do they differ in any way from let's say glass blowers etc.

TR Flameworkers have in common a tenacious persevering nature which drives them to execute (no matter how difficult) what they conceive by manipulating glass under flame – willing into existence – works of art.

DT How does your gallery present framework? Have you had any shows that focus on the art or do you prefer to integrate the art?

TR We show diverse (one of the reasons we like framework) forms by flameworkers both as “gallery inventory” and highlighted by one-person shows. We show many examples of fine framework at SOFA, Glass Week End and Palm Beach III.

DT Do you feel framework need be presented differently than other art glass art objects? Does framework pose any special problems?

TR Frameworked pieces that embody expression of intellect and emotion stand side by side with blown and cast glass pieces on equal footing. Fragility enhances the sense of preciousness which we like. We do recommend protective vitrines (cabinets) when appropriate.

DT Do you find any problems with the presentation of some framework? What should artists consider when creating their work to solve those problems?

TR Fragile pieces need to have resolved issues regarding stability through packing, covering (displays) durability, and willingness of artists to do restorations.

DT Do you feel there is enough scholarship on the subject of framework to support a serious art field? How do you educate your collectors on the subject?

TR Frameworking is alive and well. The artists involved are driven to do what they do. We validate for collectors the difficulty and rarity involved and share with them the beauty and meaningfulness of the finished piece.

DT What would you say to a new collector interested in frameworked art? Are there any typical collector's questions that you can share with us?

TR I advise new collectors to realize how few artists master frameworking and to appreciate how they have evolved to expressing their intellect and emotion in their work.

DT How do you see art of framework evolving in the future?

TR Framework will grow and be acquired by serious collectors as the artists are pushing the envelope resulting in serious fine art forms.

DT How is your gallery instrumental in promoting framework especially to museum curators? How do you encourage artists?

TR We promote frameworkers by gallery representation, major national show exposure, and one-person shows, also by making personal acquisitions for our private collection. We encourage artists by asking for their best work, by pushing them to think of expressing their emotional, intellectual, aesthetic hot buttons in their work.

DT Many frameworkers create narratives; do you think framework is a good vehicle to tell a story? Is framework about story telling?

TR Narrative is similar to "concept" to me – and essential for fine art.

DT Artists are beginning to combine framework with other techniques to create multi media art works. (Many frameworkers today are combining techniques for the creation of new work).

What do you think of multi media frameworking?

TR Using multi-media is SYNERGY-personified and additive to beauty, meaning and value of work. The only "purism" limit on acceptance is that the end result is a fully resolved expression of concept.

DT Please comment on some of the artists you carry in your gallery, tell us a little about them and why you like their work?

TR Kari Russell-Poole, sculptural diverse forms continue to evolve, not stuck on the same idea.

Matt Eskuche – sculptural groupings of architecturally striking forms – nuance of coloration and accomplishes what appears to be blown glass with frameworking techniques which allows for lightness of form.

Milon Townsend – illusion of realistic figures with emotional impact.

Gianni Toso – unparalleled delicacy and detail in figures.

Stankard, Tarsitano, Trabuccos, Banford, Ayotte, Buzzini, masters of content on their way to modifying form.

Karen Willenbrink-Johnsen – unparalleled in complexity, highly detailed, fanciful sculptures

DT Leave us with something to think about.

TR Experienced, astute collectors look for timeless forms that evoke in them both an intellectual and emotional response. Techniques, process, media, and purist limits are of minor importance to them. Flameworkers have an opening to be seriously considered by collectors, galleries and museums. It is up to them to create art, to achieve placement and recognition.

To read more about the Thomas R. Riley gallery go to www.rileygalleries.com