Echo (B side), **2020. Deeply engraved blown glass, dual-sided Brazilian plate glass, patinaed copper, plexiglass support. H 11, W 17 ½, D 17 ½ in.**

Not-So-Simple Perfection

Through an elaborate cutting and electroforming process, **Michael Glancy** (1950-2020) birthed objects of exquisite complexity by resolving the opposite processes of removal and accretion to create enduring works.

BY ALEXANDER CASTRO

IN THE STUDIO (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT)
At work in 1971; at RISD in 1976; working at Pilchuck alongside Dante Marioni in 1979; studying the vessel form in Paris in 1983.

Michael Glancy is telling a story. When his debut exhibition at New York's Heller Gallery led to an acquisition by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, mother and son went to see the installed work together. It was a modest piece, eight inches at its widest, but it was his. And what proud mom wouldn't want to see her son's work on view at the Met?

But finding the five-inch-tall vase wasn't easy in the labyrinthine galleries, and he and his mother spent 45 minutes wandering in search of it. When they finally found the sculpture on display, Glancy's mom stood beside it as her son took a picture.

"No flash!" boomed a guard, making a beeline for them.

"My son made this piece!" his mother protested. (Glancy quotes his mother's defiant reply with a cartoonish voice.)

But the guard reiterated: "No flash, ma'am!"

The commotion drew the attention of a much more amiable curator, who began chatting up the Glancys. The young artist was curious about the wall text that accompanied his artwork.

"You have my name there, my birthdate, 1950, and then just a dash. What happens when I die? Do you come in and just put the death date there?"

The question sounded a little facetious when Glancy acted it out during an interview a few months before his passing. But then he adopted the solemn tone of the curator's response: "Oh no, Michael. You get a whole new card."

Thursday morning, January 23

9:37 a.m. The Uber is outside my house.

A few minutes later: "I'm really sorry, but could you turn around?"

I forgot to bring the questions ...

10:03 a.m. Now equipped with the questions I spent all last night writing, I'm getting out in front of Glancy's home in Rehoboth, Massachusetts. I ring the doorbell a few times. No response. I decide to try the studio out back first.

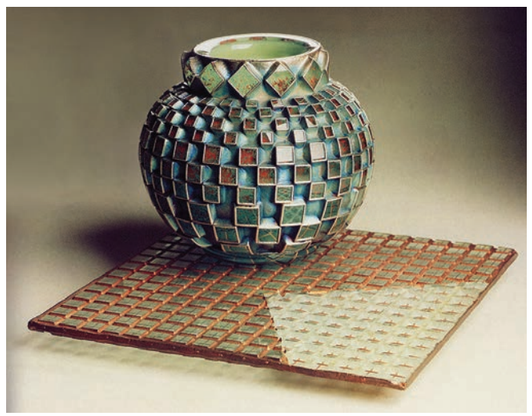
"My assistant, Myles Baer, has been with me over 20 years. He works Tuesdays and Thursdays. You should meet him," Glancy had written in an earlier email.

A third-generation mason whose grandfather made cabochons, Baer has carved, cut, polished, engraved, and sandblasted Glancy's glass for over 20 years. A friend of Glancy's son, he started working for the artist at the age of 16.

"He is central to my practice," Glancy attests. "Myles works for me; I work for Myles."

Baer is working solo at the moment I walk into the studio. Oops. The gentle Baer points me back to the house, where I find Glancy on the back deck. He's chipper for so early in the morning and looks pretty much the same as he does in pictures, maybe a touch older. His dark hair is still fluffy.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT **The Rehoboth, Massachusetts, studio in 1980; the studio in 1990; an interior view of the studio environment.**



Pie-R-Square, **1980. Glass, silver, copper. H (vase) 4 ¾ in. H (base) 1, W 8, D 8 in.**
COLLECTION: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK
GIFT: DOUGLAS AND MICHAEL HELLER

Snow crunching underfoot, we set out again across the backyard and pause outside the studio. "I don't kill anything older than me," Glancy explains. He'll cut down a tree younger than him, but felling an older tree seems to him to represent some kind of senicide. Likewise, his home and studio are both old structures he's decided to repair and upgrade rather than demolish.

A hefty pile of firewood adjacent to the studio provides a scene for another exposé. Like so many objects in Glancy's world, there is a charming narrative attached.

"We're very proud of our woodpile," Glancy explains. The wood comes from a local feed and supply store, now managed by its previous owner's son. Glancy acknowledges the passing of the guard before noting that the wood is better than ever—hence the pride in this stash.

It's cold outside, even though we'd started emailing about this story back in July. The interview had been repeatedly delayed—both Glancy and I were perhaps overconfident re-schedulers of plans.

But after the semester and holidays had passed, Glancy seemed more receptive. "Looking forward to putting a face and a voice to all the messages," he'd texted me.

Now I'm in his studio, surrounded by a lively patina of organized clutter. There's art everywhere, even along the staircase

Glancy's longtime colleague, Myles Baer, engraving in the Rehoboth studio.

leading to a cozy loft space. Baer works downstairs in a space decorated with rows of jewel case CDs. Music is playing.

Upstairs is Glancy's workspace, full of sketches, ideas on paper, and the tools for fine detail work. A wall is covered in an artist's assortment of favorite things: Hieronymous Bosch; a box of Chinese cigarettes; a pocket watch with Mao's face; the album art for Spoon's *Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga*, with sculptor Lee Bontecou as the badass cover girl.

Glancy pulls out the catalogue raisonné on Maurice Marinot, the French painter turned glassmaker who is his biggest influence, besides ancient techniques from pre-Vesuvius Pompeii. The Marinot catalogue holds two points of interest: Glancy's name in the citations and an image of Glancy's favorite Marinot work—a small clear vase, its curved body unfurling in strips like an orange rind or apple peel.

The book is extra valuable given the scarcity of Marinots in existence. Glancy notes that much of Marinot's art was lost during the Allied bombing of France. Things are quite opposite in Glancy's studio.

"Strangely enough, I keep everything," he says, pulling a sculpture out of a closet.

We're soon chatting about galleries. Glancy seems more relaxed than anything when he says he's not showing work anymore.

He'll still work with a few clients. Glancy's among those former fledglings of Dale Chihuly with not only a solid fan base but a well-off one. He says he was lucky to come to prominence when he did. The commercial height of glass art was reached in the 1980s and 90s, when prices sparkled in the run-up to the turn of the millennium, which rivaled the Gilded Age in terms of excess.

At the time, Glancy didn't have any exhibitions scheduled, and wasn't planning on any in the future. A lot of his flashy New York shows were, Glancy suggests, for his adoring mother and family to enjoy.

Glancy adores Marinot's "simple perfection," and, sensing some similar delight in his own work, adds: "I like my work so much I've made it really expensive ... I can only sell it once."

Today his studio shows no signs of slowing down, humming along on its usual Thursday rhythm.

"I'm on the cusp of retirement; I'm not retired," Glancy reiterates later. "You may publish the fact that I'm not committing to gallery exhibitions. But that does not mean I'm not working. We continue to work."

Today he and Baer will take a breather. After the interview we get lunch at a diner down the street. The waiter brings lunch menus, and Glancy steers the conversation toward his upcoming birthday. Eventually, he begins telling a story and asks Baer if he's heard it before. Glancy's good-natured collaborator says yes.

Drinking beer and drawing shapes

The lunch was a fitting epilogue to an interview Glancy had seemed reluctant to agree to at first. That can be understandable for an artist whose story has been written and rewritten about for decades. Glancy's origin stories are extensive, as his sculptures have many specialized parts and processes: engraving, molding, sandblasting, and carving are just a few of the tactics used.

A shot of the RISD studio.

His signature composition is just like that first piece he had in the Met: a modified blown glass form attached to a baseboard. Other pieces are stand-alone vessels. Many are covered in metal applied by electroforming—perhaps Glancy's signature technique, and an obscure one at that.

Electroforming uses electrodeposition to coat something in a layer of metal, usually copper. Glancy has taught a class on it at Rhode Island School of Design, his alma mater, for nearly 40 years. It was also at RISD, as one common Glancy story goes, that he initially found the magic of electroforming, literally in a closet. One day after a metalworking class, Glancy saw a friend tidying up said closet for her work-study duties. Peering closer, he saw a chemical bath and some metal oxides. He wondered what it was all about.

It turned out to be, as Glancy discovered, "intense work, and I [began] taking it very seriously." A more empirically demanding method than most, Glancy said electroforming didn't appeal to many art students in his day. The class he taught at RISD on the technique for decades was always a small one.

But for someone wedded to tradition and anchoring himself in ancient things, it was a perfect match. Technique could bring him closer to the workshops of Pompeii before Vesuvius erupted in 79 A.D., where, Glancy argues, they made a "perfect" vase.

"Making will lead to knowing," he said. "This is why I make the 'Pompeii cut,' 'cause I want to know what it was like in that studio, before Vesuvius."

Or take Sweden, where Glancy went every few years to work with Jan-Erik Ritzman, a master glassblower in the impossibly tiny town of Transjö ("population 25," according to Glancy).

"I sit there with a notebook, drinking beer, drawing shapes," Glancy said. He left the glassblowing to Ritzman, whose thick, heavy-walled, Swedish-style vessels were perfect for Glancy to terraform as he pleased.

For Glancy, the historical is the sacred. This sacredness is not about spirituality, Glancy emphasized in another interview.[1] It's more about linking yourself, with a certain solemnity, into a tradition that's much older than you. The continued existence of old objects, old trees, or old buildings nurtures and generates something of an anchor against the passage of time.

So Glancy spends a lot of time in his studio. It's not far from RISD, the place that transformed him so dramatically. Rehoboth, a "right to farm" community in southeastern Massachusetts, is about 20 minutes from Providence. It's a necessary space, and Baer is necessary support.

"Without Myles, I'd be screwed," Glancy said in his studio's loft.

He shouted down to Baer. "Did ya hear that?"

"That sounds like a quote," came the reply.

The partnership added consistency and reliability to a process that, admittedly, went a little over my head at times. What could be more easily grasped was the iterative aspect of Glancy's work. Call it something else if you want, just don't call it repetitive.

"Some would say we're doing the same thing over and over. I don't agree," Glancy said.

A 2016 studio shot of the artist.

What one historian wrote about Qing Dynasty-era painters in China suffices for Glancy and Baer as well:

> *They produce large, almost limitless quantities of works ... But they also imbue every single work with its own unique and inimitable shape, as nature does in its prodigious invention of forms. A lifetime devoted to training his aesthetic sensibilities enables the artist to approximate the power of nature.*[2]

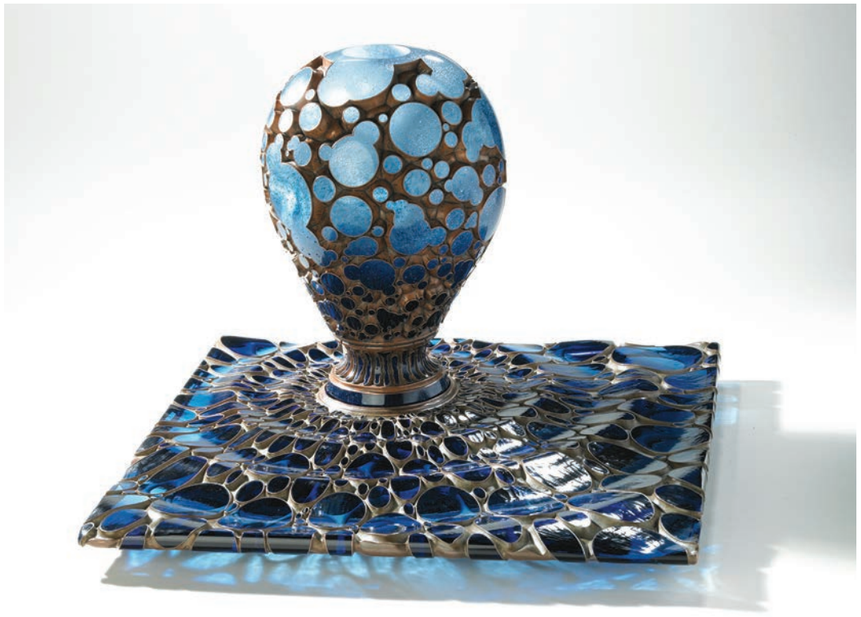
On Glancy's process, curator Tina Oldknow wrote: "Beginning with cell-like patterns and arcane notations jotted on paper, Michael's objects slowly acquire form and texture, shaped and revealed by cutting, sandblasting, and the application of copper. New forms are then made from existing forms, and the evolution continues." The artist felt strongly enough about the accuracy and poetry of Oldknow's descriptive interpretation that he posted it prominently on his website.

Glancy considered the studio his "sanctum sanctorum." Similarly, the best way to get at Glancy's objects purely is to set them apart, in a special space. The ancient Greeks called this the *adyton*—the innermost part of a temple, basically closed off from the outside world, where the god's image could be found.

To get inside Glancy's works requires respecting their singularity. Having spent more time with Glancy than his sculptures, it's hard for me to say much about specific pieces. Whatever era, trend, or just plain whim his sculptures embody, there is always a seriousness to them. It's not an emotional seriousness but more like the seriousness of hard rock. Elements, after all, have no capacity for irony.

My favorite Glancy

The day I spent with Glancy unfurled in a way similar to his favorite Marinot, with its distinctive curve. Caught up in conversation, I took only one picture that day. Like Glancy's picture of his mother at the Met, it depicts a fleeting moment. Well, it depicts the fleeting reflected in the lastingness of steel. The round sculpture, riddled with holes, was from Glancy's "Universe" series.[3] True to its title, its mirrored surface briefly held a galaxy in place. My old phone case stares back at me. I look for Glancy in the reflection, and think



Elliptical Witness, **2017. Pâte de verre cast-glass object, dual-sided Brazilian plate glass, deeply engraved "Zig-Zag cut," patinaed copper and silver. H 13, W 18 ¼, D 18 ¾.**
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY

I see him, but it's actually my coat hanging over a chair. Zooming in on the JPEG, I notice a man-shaped blur. It's Glancy with his back turned, a body at rest in a ruthless, liquid universe.

Epilogue

Michael Glancy was 70 years old when he died of lung cancer. It happened on August 29, 2020, at his summer home in Harwich Port, the same town where he and Robin Stengel got married in 1977.

So Michael Glancy will never read this article. It's weird when an artist can't read what you wrote about them. Criticism often attempts coolness, but it's too linked to specific times and people for it to be totally impersonal.

My wound is salted further by an email Glancy sent me on January 27, 2020, the last one I received from him.

"I just wanted to say thank you for allowing me to tell my story (in spite of probably talking your ear off). You are a very good listener!"

A good listener, maybe, but not a good responder: I filed the email under "RESPOND," and never replied. Soon, the pandemic came, and fate conspired against this article one last time.

I've written about artists who have died. Some have died after I've written about them. But an artist never died in between the interview and the article. Ignorant of Glancy's illness, and assuming his relentless work ethic would power him for years to come, I assumed the article—and Glancy himself—would be there whenever things returned "to normal."

The artist at work.

Constellation Universe, **2018. Mirror-polished solid cast stainless steel, mirror-polished, machine-turned solid stainless-steel core insert. H 11 ¾, W 10 ½, D 10 ½ in.**

That didn't work out, so rather than speculate on the unsaid, I go back to that last email from Glancy:

> *I wanted to remind you to look up the Making and Knowing Project … I encountered this project through RISD's Glass Department's participation in the "making" (attempted) of ruby glass from a formula found in an alchemistic text from France written in 1556 … This project … reaffirms my fascination in my own work with the "Pompeii cut" engraving [and Maurice Marinot] … This project is like a time machine to a era before the organization of the physical world into chemistry, biology, physics, and the creation of empirical science.*[4]

The alchemistic text warranted Glancy's enthusiasm, and I wish I could tell him that. The book's contents are hard to describe, but imagine a 16th-century wikiHow. There are recipes for counterfeiting coral and making hourglass sand. There's a honey-based injectable to fight gonorrhea as well as details for numerous kinds of varnish. Tips on how to make a grenade or a steel mirror. Instructions on how to write letters in gold, erase old letters, or combat vertigo with a peony tied around your neck. Feel a cold coming on? The book suggests the English option of mulled wine as a tonic.

It's not unlike a remedy Glancy suggested to me one morning last December, when I woke up feeling sick and gross. Glancy and I had scheduled an interview, so I texted him to cancel.

"I recommend lots of high-quality bourbon with serious rest—the bourbon will help …"

That night I followed his advice, bought a handle, and downed a few shots before watching *Forensic Files*. It worked.

"The bourbon always works!"

Glancy's wonder and awe at the alchemistic text can be transposed to something as ordinary a bottle of bourbon. It *is* fascinating that corn, fermented and aged in a barrel, can make you feel good when liquified. Just how did all the rich complexity of the world come to exist? How many iterations and exchanges of human knowledge and technique took place between France's medieval coral forgers and the diamond lathe Baer wielded in Glancy's studio?

Action is what links the past and future, though the signal they share is not one of great fidelity. The RISD Making and Knowing course encountered utter failure when they tried replicating one of the book's experiments.

Cherry Bomb Smoke, **2018. Blown glass (Jan-Erik Ritzman, Transjö, Sweden), copper with a cloisonné cut and polished surface. H 7 ½, W 7 ½, D 7 ½ in.**

Dichroic Star (B side), **2019. Blown glass (Jan-Erik Ritzman, Transjö, Sweden), dual-sided plate glass with an engraved lens, patinaed copper and silver. H 10, W 18 ½, D 18 ½ in.**

Michael Glancy (1950-2020).

"It didn't matter that it didn't work. It was the process that was important," Glancy said.

The moment before creation evokes infinite possibility. Some artists find their raw materials terrifying. But what could be more tensionless, and therefore comfortable, than nullity? The unshaped void is an artist's best friend.

"Good luck creating your story," Glancy signed off in his last email.

Tracing a constellation through his life and work has been a large task. Eulogy is a nervous practice, and words can really go anywhere. I bittersweetly appreciated Glancy's last few words to me, and realized he had already supplied this story's ending, chatting in his studio.

"I like starting pieces. I don't like finishing them." ■

ALEXANDER CASTRO *has been a regular contributor to* Glass *since 2017. He writes about artists and art across New England. When not covering other people's creations, he retreats to his own "sanctum sanctorum" in his apartment in Attleboro, Massachusetts.*

[1] See Tina Oldknow's essay in Glancy's book *Infinite Obsessions*, Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2011.

[2] Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

[3] It was on display in Glancy's home and wasn't labeled, but it was probably *Constellation Universe* (2018).

[4] The entire text of *Making and Knowing* can be read in English or French at: https://edition640.makingandknowing.org/#/folios.