At The Fire: An Investigation in the Transformation of Matter

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AT THE FIRE:
An Investigation in the Transformation of Matter
by
Darren T. Adair
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THESIS ABSTRACT

My Thesis Work investigated the infinite possibilities in transformation of matter. I wanted to identify and suspend stages within natural cycles through the manipulation of glass and other mixed media. Furthermore, I looked to explore degradation and regeneration of components—at a microscopic and macroscopic level—to create sculptural pieces.

The body of work I produced for my Thesis Exhibition was a culmination of many components. Embracing process art making was the most successful outcome that resulted from making this collection; through experimentation, I was able to gather more information about the objects I was creating. Another useful aspect to my making was literal observations of scientific material; studying dissected cadavers, for example, and working with tree burls critically influenced the making of my objects. Furthermore, researching other artists, their works, and their processes impacted my Thesis Work. Choice of material affected my results as well. I used glass as my primary medium. I looked to manipulate texture, shape, size, and color of my objects. The first pieces I created were by processes I learned from working in other mediums. As I gained more experience with glass, however, I learned new techniques and produced unique forms in the hot shop. Finally, I combined other materials and strategically used design elements to present my glass objects.

By creating the pieces for my Thesis Work, my intent was to bring attention to otherwise unseen textures and create something interesting to look at. I wanted to make work that took familiar, representational forms and abstract them, to create interest in the viewer. My goal was to develop work that provoked thought and inquiry through successful moments of ambiguity. This collection combined my interest in creating visual information about cycles in nature through research, process art making, and working in the medium of glass.
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INTRODUCTION

The body of work for my thesis exhibition will explore the transformation of matter as it relates to cycles in nature; more specifically, as it relates to seemingly permanent changes, such as the death of a living being or the melting of an eleven-million-year-old glacier.

As humans, we are constantly changing, without end. From the moment we are conceived, we grow, and from the moment we stop growing, our bodies begin to decay, even before our passing. After death, the physical body will break down and return to the ground, becoming part of some new and beautiful thing. In this way, all of us live on. In this way, nothing ever ends.

Similarly, at present, glaciers are natural objects undergoing rapid transformation—ice becoming water. As a glacier melts, it returns to the sea, where it will play a new role in its transformed state. Just as the physical body is different after death, the glacier is different melted. Neither the body nor the glacier have disappeared; instead, they have both changed states.

For my thesis, I want to identify stages within these cycles by suspending moments of transformation, through the manipulation of glass and other materials, including wood, aluminum, and steel. Furthermore, I wish to explore degradation and regeneration of components—at a microscopic and macroscopic level—through mixed media and various treatments to the mediums, to create sculptural pieces.

My Thesis Work is based on my interest of what happens after death. Many see death as a definitive endpoint to something’s existence. I don't believe this to be accurate. In true cycles, like true circles, there are no beginnings and no ends. Therefore, my Thesis Work investigates the infinite possibilities of transformation of matter. It is influenced by science and the way elements and living beings within environments build up, break down, and morph into new phases within cycles.

To create my Thesis Work, I engaged with the medium of glass, using both secondary and tertiary production methods. I looked to manipulate texture, shape, size, and color of my objects. Additionally, to further convey the concept of my Thesis Work, I combined other materials and strategically used design elements to present the glass objects.

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By completing my Thesis Work, my goal was to develop an aesthetically strong body of work with cohesion; to produce work that provoked thought and inquiry through successful moments of ambiguity. This collection combined my interest in creating visual information about cycles in nature through research and process art making, with an experience to work in the medium of glass.

SECTION I: CONTEXT

The body of work I have produced for my Thesis Exhibition was a culmination of many components. For one, I am a process artist. Second, I used glass as my primary medium. Third, my artwork has been influenced by science and nature. Fourth, I have learned about many different artists while in graduate school with whom I connected. From this research, I developed an appreciation for these artists’ use of elements within their pieces and their approach to making work.

Darren Adair: Process & Art

I would describe my artwork as premeditative and intuitive. When I make art—indeed of the medium I am working in—I first think about subjects, concepts, and themes. (Each piece that I make is not from one thought; it is made by thinking about a collection of thoughts I am working to understand.) I then select materials I feel would best express these thoughts visually. As I create art, I subconsciously allow my internal dialog to continue externally while working with my medium; this process exposes more information to me. I frequently reevaluate the piece I am working on, manipulating the material it is made from, until I feel the object is finished, and I am satisfied with both my efforts and the material’s response to these efforts.

The work I created is also shaped by my appreciation for Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. I am influenced by the “highly purified form of beauty” and “extreme form of abstract art” that is Minimal Art. From Abstract Expressionism, my work has been shaped by

these artists’ ability to create abstract objects that are also expressive, emotional, spontaneous, improvisational, and gestural.³

Medium: Glass

The primary medium used to create my Thesis Work was glass. I have not always worked in glass. My experience in glass is that of my time as a graduate student. Although I am somewhat a novice in this medium, I have gained an understanding of its properties. Though difficult at times, I was able to initiate a dialog with glass to create objects.

The first approach I took in my Thesis Work was applying tertiary production techniques to glass. I then experimented in secondary production methods. It was in the hot shop—learning how to manipulate molten glass into successful objects—that I really pushed myself as an artist.

Inspiration: Science & Nature

For my Thesis Work, many experiences during my graduate studies impacted the objects I made. One course that had a profound effect on the making of my objects was Anatomic Studies. I enrolled in Anatomic Studies because I enjoy science, and science influences my practice and approach to art making. Both macroscopic and microscopic imagery from this course were important to the development of my pieces. By studying the biological example of human cadaver bodies, I was able to observe visuals I had only seen in textbooks or on documentary science films.

Also influential in the making of my Thesis Work were tree burls. A tree burl is a mass of plant tissue that develops over a wound and “grows maniacally…[forming] a distinctly knobblly growth on a tree.”⁴ A burl does not cause harm to the tree, but rather, it serves to protect the tree from further damage.⁵ In Casted Burls, Clear Blow Molds, and Color Blow Molds, I used burls to create glass objects as a way to investigate the transformative process that occurs in the natural cycle of tree burls.

Inspiration: Bacon, LeWitt, Kapoor, Littleton, Eisch, Spriggs, & Cattrell

⁵ Bonnevay, “Knobbly growths on tree trunks.”
Researching artists, their work, and their processes played an important role while making my Thesis Work. Not only did I gain insight and perspective on the objects I was making, but I was also able to draw connections between my Thesis Work and that of the artists I researched.

Early in my graduate studies, I was impacted by Francis Bacon. He pushed and refined his thoughts and images through process. Bacon’s pieces augmented and distorted his subject while preserving part of its original essence. In *Head VI*, for example, Bacon combined imagery from *The Battleship of Potemkin* and *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* to create a piece that was familiar yet new to the viewer.\(^6\) This idea of altering or transforming subject matter, based on one’s conceptual thought, was similar to the way I approach making objects. For my Thesis Work, I manipulated form, color, texture, and size during my process to expose more information about my subject.

By studying Bacon, I felt I had found an artist who was able to get the true feeling of his subject. Bacon wasn’t afraid to make art that was different from what was being made during his generation. He wasn’t afraid to make art that was authentic to him. Looking at Bacon’s work made me want to make work.

Sol LeWitt was another artist that informed my Thesis Work. What I admired about LeWitt was how he could create a piece that was minimal and representational. When LeWitt’s *Wall Drawing #1268* is viewed at close range, for example, the piece appears to be scribbled graphite lines drawn on a wall; when viewed from afar, however, these lines form “a jumble of vertical and horizontal steel tubes”\(^7\) that occupy the space of a gallery’s two-story stairwell.

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Similarly, in my Thesis Work, I juxtaposed representational with abstract through minimalistic use of elements to convey the concept of transformation.

Anish Kapoor became important to the making of my Thesis Work after reading about his use of texture and form to create *Cloud Gate*. *Cloud Gate* is a ten-by-twenty-by-thirteen meter sculpture, made from highly polished stainless steel.\(^8\) The mirrored quality of *Cloud Gate* gives the object vitality; because it appears “to be constantly changing,” a viewer gets the impression that this sculpture is in a continuous state of

I felt this concept applied to my investigation of transformation. The high gloss black paint I applied to all non-glass objects in my Thesis Work, created a similar reflective texture. I also identified with Kapoor’s use of non-form. Non-form does not fix the viewer’s focus on any one particular point of an object, allowing for “the chance to see anew.”10 I felt this idea pertained to my exploration of matter’s ability to change forms infinitely.

A turning point for me, in my experience with glass, occurred while visiting the Corning Museum of Glass. When previously at this museum, I found myself drawn to Harvey Littleton and Erwin Eisch’s work. I identified with Littleton and Eisch’s use of form. This inspired me to explore these artists’ work and artistic process.

In my research, I learned Littleton encouraged his students to be unique; he valued “experimentation with material, and the exploration of color and motion”—which I value too.11 Furthermore, I found Littleton’s approach to glass—slicing it, slumping it, stretching it—and the forms he produced interesting. For Eisch, I found not only was he a friend and close colleague of Littleton’s, but also he was known to “completely disregard function in the service of poetry” when making glass objects.12 I connected with this philosophy. Additionally, Eisch’s Eight Heads of Harvey Littleton motivated me to continue my process of making blow molds. I felt his forms were strikingly similar to forms I had recently made; and our process and engagement with glass on parallel trajectories. The making of my blow molds, and identifying with Littleton and

10 Jacob, “Being with Cloud Gate,” 181.
Eisch, made me feel like my Thesis Work was naturally evolving through connection with material and concept. It gave me clarity and encouragement to continue making variations of blow molds.

Two additional artists who influenced my Thesis Work were David Spriggs and Annie Cattrell. Spriggs was an artist I came across who stacked images to create finished pieces. In his work, Spriggs has been able to make a static image feel like it is in motion. In *Vision*, Spriggs created this illusion through his use of white paint on stacked film. Visually, I found this very interesting. I wanted to find a way to replicate his idea of movement in my own work. As for Cattrell, she was someone who stood out to me because she was influenced by science, made objects I liked to look at, and was successful in the presentation of her work. One of Cattrell’s pieces that I found particularly interesting was *Conditions*. In *Conditions*, Cattrell documents different types of clouds via “a series of twelve sculptures in sub-surface etched
optical glass.” I felt her use of minimalistic elements to create this piece was effective. The use of texture in Vision and Conditions informed the making of my pieces.

SECTION II: EVOLUTION

While making my Thesis Work, the technical approach to the pieces, as well as the size, shape, and color of my objects changed. My understanding of glass also evolved.

The original idea for how to physically make my Thesis Work came somewhat intuitively. My pieces were made as process art objects. As I made each piece, I spent time with it; observed it; saw what information I had gathered by creating it. I continued this process—making edits along the way—to yield new results. As I made more objects, I found myself reacting to the materials I was using in conjunction with what I was thinking and researching. This was very interesting to me because each piece was intuitively connected, and each object evolved or was influenced by the previous objects, through the connection of thought and physical instrumentation.

To begin, I started making pieces by myself. I embraced the abilities I had prior to working in glass. I engraved glass lenses in my first piece; and I screen printed glass lenses in the second piece I made.

As I became more confident in tertiary production techniques, I turned my attention to developing glass objects made by secondary production methods. For Casted Burls, the glass objects were made by kiln casting. Because the process of kiln casting felt familiar to my previous experiences in casting metal objects, it was a technique I was comfortable attempting earlier in my making with glass.

As I continued to gain confidence, I desired my work to become more ambitious. Clear Blow Molds and Color Blow Molds were the last two pieces I made for my Thesis Work. Creating objects for these two pieces took me out of my art-making comfort zone. In the hot shop, to manipulate and shape the molten glass into the forms I wished to create, I learned tools and techniques I had never before encountered. I began adding new texture to the interior and

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exterior of the blow molds. I came to appreciate and rely on the collaboration of an assistant; having a second set of hands became necessary to achieve the new forms I was creating.

With repetition of practice, patience, and time, what at first felt overwhelming—learning hot shop tools and skills—gradually began to feel more comfortable. I began to produce blow molds I felt were successful.

From my experience with glass, I developed respect for this material. Glass was different from any medium I had worked with previously, especially when I approached object making in the hot shop. Glass set boundaries I was forced to follow. Once I learned its nature, however, I was able to use glass’s idiosyncrasies to my advantage. I carved it to produce textures; stacked it, utilizing its translucent and transparent nature; heated it, which created a performance within the material; allowed it to cool, which enabled yet another performance; and exploited its ability to be shaped by molds to create visual memory of form.

Additionally, the transient nature of glass in the hot shop demanded my attention while working with it. Glass forced me to understand and work within the parameters of its capabilities and limitations, to create pieces that had the quality and form I wanted. Glass taught me—more than any other medium I’ve used—how to be present with my artwork during my process. Glass taught me how to be a more refined artist.

SECTION III: THE BODY OF WORK

Conduits was a mixed media piece fabricated in glass, metal, wood, light, and paint. First, I started carving two-inch glass lenses to replicate the macroscopic imagery I observed in the gross anatomy lab. After producing carved glass lenses, I stacked the lenses on top of each other, creating nine stacks, each with three lenses. I felt the stacking of these lenses was similar to the way tissues are layered in the body.

Second, I cut, sanded, and reamed nine steel tubes, each approximately ten inches tall and having a two-inch diameter. Using a lathe, I then adjusted the steel tube heights to match each other exactly. Each stack of lenses was assigned a tube and fit snugly inside, in a vertical orientation. These nine tubes were then arranged into three rows and columns, to form a square arrangement. I was looking to achieve a symmetrical and minimal appearance that would mimic my impression of the gross anatomy dissection tables.
Third, I fabricated an outer pedestal; this outer pedestal was constructed to have an opening at the top for which the metal tubes would emerge. Fourth, I placed a light panel on a smaller interior pedestal; the interior pedestal fit inside the housing of the larger outer pedestal.

Once all components were together, the entire exterior of Conduits was painted in high gloss black paint. In this uniform color and texture, the piece looks like a solid, abstract sculpture when viewed from afar; however, as the viewer approaches Conduits, the illuminated glass lenses are revealed and an entirely new experience occurs.

My second piece, Disks, was made of aluminum, glass, and paint. To start, I used nine smooth aluminum disks, four inches in diameter. Then I worked with the engineering department to design a blueprint on the 3D CAD program SOLIDWORKS. The blueprint created a two-inch-in-diameter, round indentation design on the discs, accomplished by Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machining. The purpose of CNC machining the disks was to create symmetrical housing for nine, two-inch glass lenses, one lens for every disk. Once the CNC process was complete, the disks were painted with the same high gloss black paint that was applied to the exterior surface of Conduits.

Next, I prepared the glass lenses. To do this, I first gathered images of brain tissue from an electron microscope. The brain tissue was harvested from a cadaver sample, photographed under the magnification of an electron microscope, and saved as computerized image files. I converted these files to transparencies, and I screen printed the images onto the outer surface of my lenses. As I was printing, I found myself layering different samples of images on several of the lenses; this created some interesting, complex texture and imagery.

Last, each printed lens locked into place within its disk, based on the precision fit achieved via SOLIDWORKS and CNC machining. The disks were hung in three symmetrical rows and columns, to form a square arrangement—same as the configuration used for the tubes and lenses in Conduits.

Casted Burls was a piece comprised of three glass casted objects on risers. To create Casted Burls, I used the kiln-casting process. The original models for my molds were three tree burls. Once the glass completed the annealing process, I broke out my objects from the burl molds. I cold worked them minimally to remove excess flash and sharp edges. Last, to display the three glass burls, I designed a wood riser. This was finished in high gloss black paint, and the casted burls were placed on the riser.

For Clear Blow Molds, I completed three glass blow molds on risers. For each glass object I created in Clear Blow Molds, I worked with an assistant. The first step in making Clear
**Blow Molds** was to fabricate iron molds from the same tree burls used to create the molds for *Casted Burls*. Once the iron molds were completed, two to three gathers of glass were collected on a blow pipe. The hot glass was placed into the iron mold and was blown. While blowing, I allowed the glass to inflate and deflate. I then slightly moved the blow pipe; this method allowed textures from the iron mold to impress onto the glass surface. When the glass started to cool and solidify, I took the object out of the iron mold and flashed it before cracking it off into the annealer. After the objects completed their annealing cycle, I finished each object by cold working them. I cut and polished each blow mold where it was cracked off from its blow pipe. Finally, each blow mold was placed on its own individual wood riser. The risers were painted in high gloss black paint.

The final piece created for my Thesis Work was *Color Blow Molds*. Four gathers of glass were collected on a blow pipe. Color bar was prepared in the kiln. I applied color bar to the gathered glass. I then directed my assistant to place the glass into the iron mold and blow, inflating the glass. I would observe the glass’s behavior and interaction with the blow mold. I evaluated what textures were being created and what was unfolding in front of me. I then torched areas of glass I wanted to move, while I had my assistant blow. I pushed or pulled the form, based on reactions of the rapidly cooling glass and still glowing molten areas.

This process manipulated the form of the blow mold into various ambiguous shapes and sizes. When I felt a blow mold was complete, I allowed the glass to cool and suspend the movement of its final moments. The glass was flashed once more and placed into the annealer. To complete *Color Blow Molds*, this process was repeated over many sessions in the hot shop. Last, these objects were cold worked comparatively to the methods used on *Clear Blow Molds*. By this process, I created numerous blow molds of different form and color.

**ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION OF THESIS WORK**

*Conduits* was my interpretation of the experience I had in the gross anatomy lab. There, everything was clinical and minimal. (In many ways, it was reminiscent of a modern art exhibition.) The bodies were covered in large metal canisters on dissection tables; everything was symmetrically organized. When the canisters were opened, the environment and my observation of this environment changed dramatically. I was hit with an overload of intense imagery.
Once I acclimated to being in the lab, however, I was drawn to certain areas of investigation. I became interested in particular points of focus. Instead of being preoccupied by thoughts that I was in a room full of corpses, my attention was consumed by the visual dialog I was having with what was before me. It was my first time seeing the internal biology of the human body, in person. What interested me most was the macroscopic textures our bones, muscles, and tendons reveal. The experience allowed me to appreciate the engineering of the human body. *Conduits* was my way of recreating the moment of inquisitive intrigue and discovery I felt when observing the dissected cadavers.

When compared to *Conduits*, *Disks* was more two-dimensional, almost like a painting, rather than frankly sculptural. *Disks* was a piece that a viewer sees on a gallery wall and interacts with there. Similar to *Conduits*, for *Disks* I wanted to keep the imagery ambiguous, so the viewer did not exactly know what he or she was looking at. Layering screen printed images allowed me to develop more variations, or transformations, of the original brain tissue image. In *Disks*, I made images from a microscope macroscopic.

*Casted Burls* was both a representation and an abstraction of the original objects. By taking wood tree burls and creating the same forms in glass, I was able to document and suspend natural behavior of the burls that I felt was not appreciated when the objects were in their native, wooden state. I felt the result was a metamorphic occurrence.

*Clear Blow Molds* was an abstraction of, and juxtaposed forms of the objects in *Casted Burls*. Making *Clear Blow Molds* was pure Process Art in the hot shop. Observing and manipulating these objects as they physically morphed into new forms within the iron molds was interesting. This process connected me to the medium of glass. When making *Conduits*, *Disks*, and *Casted Burls*, my impression of glass was that it is a material that does what it wants to do. By contrast, in making *Clear Blow Molds*, I felt like my actions were impacting—and a part of—the objects’ transformative process.

The influence behind *Color Blow Molds* was to continue my investigations with blow molds. For each new object, I continued to explore form. I also used an array of colors. I did not feel limited in my color selection; instead, I saw using many different colors as a way to gather information about my medium. The hot shop forms that resulted from making *Color Blow Molds* were biomorphic, botanical, and anatomical. When cold working these objects, the functional process of slicing off the blow pipe breakpoint emulated visual information I observed in Anatomic Studies, when the cadaver organs were purposefully sliced open to expose
additional information. This is another example of where I took representational imagery and abstracted it.

Last, though certainly not least, I would like to discuss the importance of the application of high gloss black paint in my Thesis Work. I wanted to have a refined and finished surface for my objects to rest in and on. I felt the color black stood out and commanded attention, inviting curiosity. I also felt using the color black for the wood and metal objects was not distracting and did not detract from the glass objects—which were intended to be the main focus—in my pieces.

I felt the quality of fluctuation that the reflective, high gloss surfaces created complemented my attempts to visually demonstrate transformation of matter. I felt the juxtaposition of the darkness of black with the lightness that a reflective surface affords, created its own transformation within the surface: dark was made light, and light was made dark. Furthermore, the ability for this texture to be reflective allowed the viewer to observe the glass objects from different perspectives and provided additional optics.

CONCLUSIONS

By creating my Thesis Work, I set out to explore the transformation of matter, focusing on suspended elements of degeneration and regeneration, influenced by both macroscopic and microscopic imagery. I wanted to make a body of work that was aesthetically successful while being ambiguous and making the viewer curious.

Overall, there were effective elements, and there were elements I would improve. For me, the most successful aspect of my research was embracing process art making. I was able to gather more information about the objects I was creating from the results I obtained through experimentation. I learned from, and still took information away from, my less desirable results. This type of research inspired my making, and the making inspired further investigations with my medium.

Another research strategy that was useful to my making was literal observations of my subject matter. For example, I was interested in finding out what becomes of the human body after death. In Anatomic Studies, I was able to observe dissected cadavers. Having the
opportunity to experience, learn, and partake in an actual gross anatomy lab was very influential to the objects created for my Thesis Work.

The artists I read about while completing my graduate studies impacted my Thesis Work as well. Utilizing sources from the library and internet gave me access to other artists’ imagery and process. The availability of new information helped me stay inspired when I felt I was having creative block. Also, professors and visiting artists provided fresh insight to objects I was making. Being able to have a dialog about my work with other artists gave me more ideas and techniques for making art.

If I had to say what I would have changed or what I might change moving forward, it would be to minimize and specify my subject matter more than I did in this Thesis Statement. By narrowing the focus for future bodies of work, I think it will be easier for me to successfully convey my visual investigations. Having many options to explore made my selection process more vast and difficult.

Having said this, however, I do feel I was successful in visually presenting transformation of matter. I feel the variety of ways one can manipulate glass and the physical properties of this material were complementary to my concept. I investigated degradation using reductive methods like carving and slicing the glass. I explored regeneration through layering paint, stacking lens, and adding color and heat to various pieces in my Thesis Work. Additionally, the fluctuating imagery that the objects coated in high gloss black paint afforded my pieces also heightened the viewer’s experience; these reflective surfaces created a sense of curiosity and intrigue.

I also considered microscopic and macroscopic imagery, and how it related to transformation. My interest and intent for these elements was to bring attention to otherwise unseen textures and create something interesting to look at. I wanted to make work that took familiar, representational forms and abstract them, to create interest in the viewer.

I felt my Thesis Work was mostly resolved. The questions I asked or the visual representations I sought to produce have, for me, satisfied this curiosity. Making my Thesis Work has, however, introduced me to entirely new processes for creating objects; approaching research more successfully; and exploring new endeavors of artistic investigation.

In my next body of work, I would consider other possibilities inherent in my blow molds. I would add elements to, and further manipulate the interior and exterior surfaces of these objects to gain and expose additional information. In the future, I would like to sand blast, carve, and cut away different areas of my blown forms (similar to methods used by Marvin Lipofsky).
Last, something I would change was my choice to use aluminum. It did not take the high gloss black paint as readily as the wood and steel did, making the finishing process of these pieces more difficult. If I am to use a similar painting process on future objects, I do not intend to use aluminum.

In closing, completing my Thesis Work has had an incredible positive influence on my future art making. It has made me more committed to my work and the way I research, evaluate, edit, and refine my pieces. From this process, I more assiduously consider the factors and elements needed to make a successful body of work. I see myself as a professional artist now and no longer just “a person who just makes art.” Moving forward, my goal as a contemporary artist is to create bodies or collections of work that can evoke a dialog through visual expression.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Darren Adair
*Conduits*
2018
Glass, Steel, Wood, Paint
16.5” x 13.5” x 45”
Darren Adair

Disks

2018

Glass, Aluminum, Paint

4.5" x 4.5" x 0.75" per individual disk
Darren Adair
*Casted Burls*
2018
Glass, Wood, Paint
56" x 24" x 7"
Darren Adair
*Clear Blow Molds*
2018
Glass, Wood, Paint
42" x 12" x 7"
Darren Adair
*Color Blow Molds*
2018
Glass, Wood, Paint

Left: *Red Blow Mold*
28” x 8” x 7”

Right: *Gray, White, Black Blow Mold*
18.5” x 8” x 10”

Left: *Clear, Black, White, Red Blow Mold*
22.5” x 8” x 10”