

Shine On

Glass artist Mark Roth polishes his chosen art form

A little explosion of water bursts off the glittering edge of the diamond wheel as the studio light catches the vibrant green glass in Mark Roth's hands, giving it an ethereal sheen. "I'm usually wearing gumboots for this," he chuckles as the water drips down onto his feet. "It's the usual—art tries to poorly replicate nature." He holds up an asymmetrical glass-blown piece by way of explanation: it's roughly textured and multi-coloured, with a base colour forming the main piece and "wraps" of a complementary colour banded around the body. But this is just the artist's modesty talking; Roth's handcrafted pieces are exquisite. His glass art does nature justice, somehow capturing the beauty of random but ordered textures, and they look equally at home on a fireplace mantle or in the garden, sitting next to the natural shapes and colours they imitate.

Roth worked at Starfish Glassworks when it was still around, and learned his chops under the tutelage of Starfish owners Lisa Samphire, Morna Tudor and Gary Bolt, as well as fellow glass-artist Jay Macdonell. "My bosses and co-workers were very helpful supporting my efforts to do my own glass work," he explains. "The first pieces I made were from cut-offs left in the scrap buckets because I didn't know how to blow glass yet." Slowly, with the help of his colleagues, he moved into the "hot-shop" and started blowing his own glass. In the way musicians draw on their influences but strive to create a new sound, Roth has used the skills his peers taught him to invent a unique style and look.

That style is starting to get some recognition. A gallery in Ottawa that carries his work sold a number of perfume bottles to the Prime Minister's office, as a gift from Stephen Harper to the Queen of England. (Very posh.) In 2005, Roth's efforts and accomplishments were given notice when he was presented with the B.C. Creative Achievement Award for emerging artist in the field of design. And just last year, Roth was flown out to Ottawa as a juror for the crafts section of the Canada Council of the Arts. "I spent five days looking at over 130 applications for funding," he says. "It was an awesome experience. But now I have no excuse for not writing my own application." His pieces range from the perfume-bottle size to the kind of large art feature that is hard for one person to lift on their own. The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria recently added some of Roth's pieces to their gift shop and, as well as being one of the West End Gallery's featured artists, Roth is also a part of their 12th annual Canadian Glass Show, finishing up at the end of September on Broad Street.

Despite all this success and accolade, Roth still works in a very rough, thrown-together environment. The shelves in his Rock Bay shop are covered by an array of raw materials, supplies and half-finished pieces. Stacks of CDs teeter precariously on a wooden bench. One of his daughter's drawings is pinned to a shelf. "The equipment in my shop has been built to suit my needs

and on a very limited budget," he says, explaining the whole setup is more or less handmade. "My lap wheel, which is used for grinding surfaces flat [i.e. the bottom of a vase], was made by using an old potter's wheel, turning it upside down and welding legs on it, adding a pulley and an electric motor." He turns on the contraption, flicking on a power bar duct-taped to the side of the wheel. "I use diamond-encrusted magnetic pads which attach to what used to be the kick plate for the potter's wheel." It's certainly rustic, but it works. The duct-taped-together feel of his workspace somehow makes the finished product seem that much more incredible.

Roth puts the green piece on a counter next to a variety of other half-finished pieces. It sports a new series of textured ovals, incised by the diamond wheel, which bring it one step closer to the nature it aptly imitates.

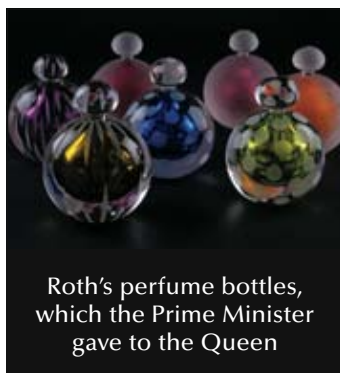
— Matt J. Simmons

Mark Roth's work is available in Victoria at West End Gallery and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria gift shop, and at galleries in Vancouver, Tofino, Seattle, Edmonton, Calgary, Ottawa, Toronto, and Montreal. Go to markrothglass.com for more information.

Story and pictures
by MATT J. SIMMONS



Mark Roth at work in his Rock Bay studio



Roth's perfume bottles, which the Prime Minister gave to the Queen