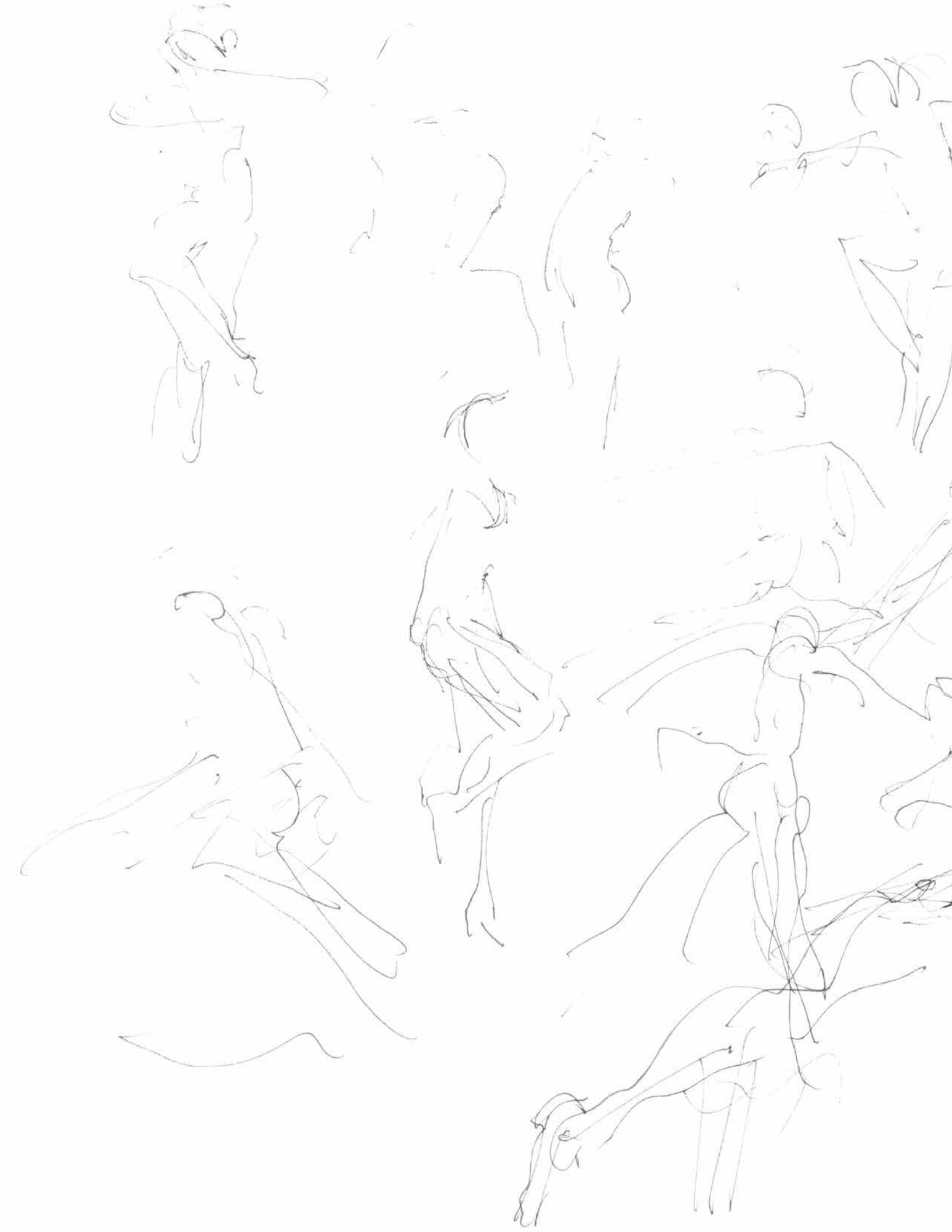


Life Art Life

WILLIAM BERNSTEIN | 50 YEAR RETROSPECTIVE



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ABOVE FROM TOP: *Young Americans*, 1972, blown glass, 9 × 7½ × 5 inches. *Mug, Dessert Cup and Cordials*, 1979, blown glass, tallest 5 × 4 × 4 inches.

PREVIOUS PAGE: *Figure Cups in Terracotta with Blue Specks and Stripes*, 1990, blown and hot tooled glass, tallest 17 × 6 × 6 inches.

INSIDE FRONT COVER: *Dancers* (detail), c. 1980s, ink on paper, 9 × 12 inches.

OUTSIDE FRONT COVER: *Self Portrait with Red Glasses* (detail), 2014, acrylic on paper, 19 × 15 inches.



WILLIAM BERNSTEIN

William Bernstein, known to most as “Billy” was born in 1945 and grew up in the New Jersey suburbs just a few minutes from New York city. Raised in a politically active family his early teen years found him on frequent marches for civil rights and anti-war causes. He also became involved in the Greenwich Village folk music scene of the late 50s. He attended Newark’s Arts High School where he was introduced to drawing and painting and working with clay, metal and other craft media.

At age seventeen after the sudden death of his father, Billy moved to a fifth-floor walk-up in the East Village working at a documentary film studio and taking night classes in film at City University in New York. After two years, he applied to and was accepted to the Philadelphia College of Art where he immersed himself in creative learning, eventually finding himself drawn to craft media, and under the mentorship of William Daley, especially ceramics which became his primary interest. In his last semester, the ceramics department lead by instructor Roland Jahn, added a small glassblowing studio and this provided his first introduction to working in glass.

Though he had been accepted to Harvey Littleton’s glass program at the University of Wisconsin, a late invitation to be an artist in residence at the Penland School in North Carolina was offered to him, and in the summer of 1968 he and his wife Katherine were married and a few weeks later the couple moved to North Carolina. At Penland, Billy was given a glass studio to work in while Katherine, who had been a sculpture major at PCA, set to work in the ceramics area.

The Penland residency was a time of great experimentation and growth in Bernstein’s work in glass. He was inspired by his earlier work in clay, and the fanciful forms of early Jersey glass gaffers. It was during this period that he got to know many other glass artists as they passed through the Penland program. In 1971, he joined with friends Fritz Dreisbach and Mark Peiser to envision and plan the first meeting of what would be the Glass Arts Society at Penland in 1971. Attended by about twenty people, GAS has just celebrated its 50th and has a membership in the thousands.



LEFT FROM TOP: Billy and Katie Bernstein, 1966 at Philadelphia College of Art. *Pitcher with Purple Trailing*, 1973, blown glass, 8 × 7 × 4 inches. *Goblet with Blue Line Cane Drawing*, 1977, blown glass with cane drawing, 5 × 3¼ × 3¼ inches.



In 1971 the Bernsteins moved to nearby Celo Community in Yancey County and restored a log cabin to live in and a disused dairy barn was converted to a glass and ceramic studio. Billy established his glass career and Katherine continued her work in sculptural ceramics until the mid-70s when Harvey Littleton convinced her to start casting her work in glass crystal. The resulting pieces were a great success and she started working exclusively in glass.

They made their art, gardened, raised chickens and generally got back to the land. They raised two sons, Josh and Alex, in a community land trust called Celo Community, sharing approximately 1000 acres with then 20 other families. Finances were always tight and eventually they found that the work they collaborated on sold much better than either's one-of-a-kind pieces. As time went on, they established a balance of keeping their individual work going forward while paying the bills with a highly successful line of functional glass under the business name Bernstein Glass.



Billy's career has included many years as Penland faculty, and teaching workshops at Haystack, Pilchuck, UCLA Westwood and Bezalel in Jerusalem. Through Harvey he met German artist Erwin Eisch and was later invited to the Eisch Factory in Bavaria as a guest designer. He was greatly affected by Eisch's work which was visionary and intensely personal. During his stay at the factory, he learned to use vitreous enamel to decorate glass, spending his free afternoons painting on glass blanks designed by Erwin.

In the late 80s, Billy set up a painting studio about a mile from Celo and had a place to work freely on painting and continue his work in enamel on glass. It was here that he really started to develop his distinctive approach to work on canvas and paper. Billy's work is represented in many publications, books and in public collections through out the United States and abroad.



ABOVE FROM LEFT: Billy at Penland, 1969. The Bernsteins in their home in Celo, 1971.

LEFT FROM TOP: *Face Goblets* by Bernstein Glass, 1990, blown glass with hot cane drawing, each 7 × 2½ × 2½ inches. *Pitcher and Cups* by Bernstein Glass, 2015, blown glass with hot cane drawing, tallest 11 × 6 × 4 inches.



TOP: *New Viking Stove*, 1993, oil paint on canvas, 48 × 48 inches.

ABOVE FROM LEFT: *Dancer with Iris and Baseball*, 1981, blown glass with hot cane drawing, 8½ × 5½ × 5½ inches. *Dog on Carpet*, 1981, blown glass with hot cane drawing, 7½ × 6 × 6 inches. *Landscape on Violet*, 1986, blown glass with hot cane drawing, 5½ × 4½ × 4½ inches.



Fangs Jar, 1978, blown glass, 7 × 4½ × 3 inches.



Bear, Bottle and Bird, 1972, blown glass, 8 × 6 × 5½ inches.



Portrait of Robin, 1980, blown glass with hot cane drawing, 10 × 7 × 7 inches.



WORKING THE NERVE

William Warmus

JUST WORDS AND IMAGES?

Billy Bernstein describes himself as a diarist. But a diary is a book that records the ephemeral on a daily basis. Part of its attraction is that you don't need to reflect much on those events. Bernstein's art is more like a journal of subtle personal thoughts and deeper observations, one he has been keeping for at least 50 years. During that time, it has become a place where he can dwell and drill down, expand an experience into a transparent bubble, heat up emotions, color memory. He makes little distinction between public and private realms, no weighty ethical or moral judgments about either. But we live in a world where roots can be shallow, memories short, traditions lost, our observation skills atrophied. Bernstein creates challenging work about this loss, and how work and the simple act of looking carefully can enrich our lives.

The early development of studio glass equipped him well for this research. It had an earthy, hands-on, risk-taking flavor that was profoundly appealing, which he helped to pioneer, and to which he remains true. It is a social art, often requiring teams and collaboration, with roots in blue collar labor. Contrast this with the detached, laboratory-like conditions that prevail in many artist studios today, the clinical and big data analysis of academic art, better suited to portraying the health and demographics of the group than the eccentricities and humanity of the individual. Billy just wants to tell you a story, rather than publish a peer-reviewed clinical study.

Helping him with his project is the way glass handles perspective. Painting developed using rectilinear perspective, placing us and our pair of eyes at the center of the world, which is laid out like a flat map rather than a globe. Glassblowing produces globes, full of curvilinear energy. Lines zip around, leading the eye as well. Curvilinear perspective challenges the idea that we are at the center, makes us think about our place in the world rather than the world's place in our eyes. Bernstein, as both painter and glassmaker, uses both approaches and this opened him up to telling two very different kinds of stories, enriching the ways he tells both.



FROM TOP: *Woman in Flight*, 1976, blown glass with cane drawing, 4½ × 3½ × 3½ inches. *Portrait of Maria*, 1986, blown glass with vitreous enamel, 7½ × 6 × 6 inches. *Portrait of Robin*, 1980, gouache on paper, 9 × 6 inches.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to such a fundamentally narrative art is its relationship to time rather than space. We will probably never truly understand why there is a past, present and future. Science is good at defining cosmic time, the time of the universe, and parses it into milliseconds. But we all sense that human time is fundamentally something different from cosmic time. I think the true brilliance of storytelling is that it captures the time of the universe, which flows in only one direction, in webs of narrative and orders past, present and future in any way it wants. In Bernstein's best work, they can all be compressed into a single moment, the gesture of a hand, the expression on an anguished face.

Why we have moods is also incomprehensible, at least to me. In a series of interviews for this essay, Billy remarked that this exhibition is important to him because "My work has hardly been shown, especially the glass." Although this is not literally true—he has been in many important exhibitions and his work is in leading museum collections including the Smithsonian and Philadelphia Museum of Art as well as leading European and Australian museums—it suggests his mood. "Speak to me about how I feel when down," he says. He has been depressed on and off his whole life, and is drawn to painting portraits of himself and others when in such moods. And yet one portrait, done in bleak midwinter, during the deepest part of the COVID pandemic, has its subject wearing a funny hat with vegetable decoration including orange carrots (page 23). Done in oil paint and stick, with scratchy surfaces, it's a nuanced interpretation of the complexity underlying any frame of mind. And after all, isn't that one of the higher callings of art, to frame a mind?

I also wonder, does Billy's decision to remain in a rural setting mean anything? I too live in the country. It really does change your outlook. There is more time. That's a good and bad thing: more time to be thoughtful, more in which to be bored, or feel empty like the surrounding landscape. Most 21st century art is urban, political, academic and frankly a little paranoid. Pastoral values are different. Bernstein explores them. And yet his roots are urban, and he tells us that, "My family was really lefties." Reconciling blue collar labor, which is essentially what glassblowing is all about, with the rhythms of country life has become part of his art. Glassblowers sling glass around as if harvesting a crop. There is a lot of urban angst, but suffered by people who wear hats decorated from the farmers' market.

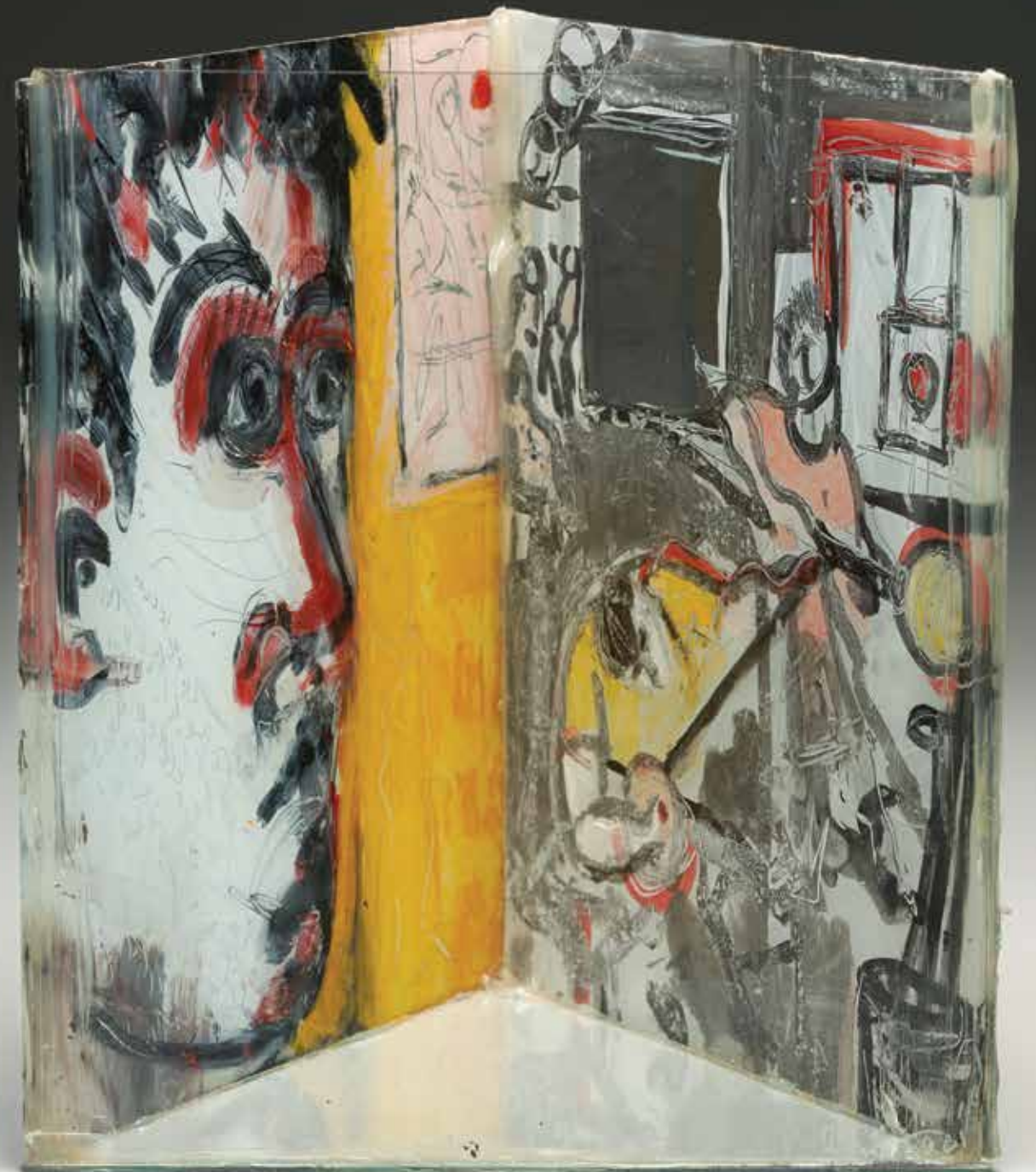
LEFT: *Paul Revere Bear*, 1976, blown and hot tooled glass, 21 × 5 × 5 inches.

FACING FROM TOP LEFT CLOCKWISE: *Vase with Two Figures*, 1988, blown and hot tooled glass, 16 × 18 × 8 inches. *Clear Figure*, 2002, blown and hot tooled glass, hot assembled, 16 × 9 × 9 inches. *Blue Vase with Green Figure*, 2001, blown glass with hot cane drawing, 11 × 6 × 6 inches. *Vase Form in Blue with Arms*, 2001, blown glass with hot cane drawing, 14 × 6 × 6 inches.





FROM TOP CLOCKWISE: *Gianni Toso with Jonathan at Penland*, 1988, lithograph crayon on paper, 15 × 22 inches. *Glassblower at the Penland Studio*, 1997, lithograph crayon on paper, 20 × 15 inches. *Penland Glass Studio Imagined as a Cafe*, 1998, lithograph crayon on paper, 17 × 22 inches. FACING: *Teaching at Penland*, 2001, assembled flat glass with vitreous enamel, 11 × 10 × 8 inches.





LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Billy's studio originally had a dirt and gravel floor, in the tradition of early studio glass spaces like those of Josh Simpson and Tom Patti, or the rustic beginnings of Pilchuck. There was a food co-op within walking distance, a craft shop (Toe River Crafts) nearby and the 1000 acre Celo Community based upon Quaker principles and ideals of land sharing, where they lived. The Bernsteins were enmeshed in Celo, and it shaped their identity. There is a school and summer camp, and a strong sense of community pervades the space. Bernstein would demonstrate glassmaking techniques to students at Celo, which was not a utopian community, but an experiment in living rather than an attempt to create an ideal world, not unlike our studio glass ideals. Micro exhibits of Bernstein's work are scattered around because many members of the community own utilitarian vessels created by him: stemware, tumblers, pitchers and decanters.

Billy's humble aspiration was to own a log cabin in the woods, and the environment around Celo allowed him to achieve his goal, as notably did Penland, where he was the second resident in the glass program after Mark Peiser. Both were like a "dream come true" in the words of his son, Alex Bernstein. And at first, he showed work in equally humble craft fairs around the region. The tone began to change after Rob Levin, Harvey Littleton, Gary Beecham and John Littleton and Kate Vogel moved into the area: Bernstein was no longer isolated from the studio glass community, they were now his neighbors as well as colleagues. And the increasing success of glass meant more attention by art museums, for example the *North Carolina Glass* exhibitions curated by Joan Byrd.

Bernstein began to work and design in Frauenau in Bavaria, invited by his friend Erwin Eisch. Soon enough, because of the presence of Littleton and Penland, the "world came knocking at our door." Generations of glassmakers have gotten their start at Penland, some settling in the area, and in the last decade Asheville has seen a tremendous revival and influx of art collectors and artists. And yet the region remains true to its rural and pastoral roots. Harvey Littleton's batch factory was for a time the hub of the village of Spruce Pine, harking back to medieval and 19th century European glass factory towns like Murano, and inspiring Billy to paint *Celebration at the Batch Factory*.

IMAGERY, CHARACTER, NARRATIVE

Billy says that, "Half of my imagery has used glass and glassblowers. The way glassblowers move." The way they move, and the way their art captures movement, spins it out, throws a curveball, colors our emotions.

FROM TOP: *Bavarian Sketch*, 1985, vitreous enamel on Erwin Eisch form, 12½ × 6 × 6 inches. *Hootenanny*, 1999, blown glass with vitreous enamel, 8½ × 5½ × 5½ inches. *Tennis Situation*, 2007, blown glass with vitreous enamel, 11 × 10 × 4½ inches.

FACING FROM TOP: *Celebration at the Batch Factory*, 1995, acrylic on paper, 15 × 22 inches. *Blowing Glass in a Cow Barn*, 1992, acrylic on paper, 15 × 22 inches. Inspired by a dream described to the artist by Laura Donefer.



FROM TOP CLOCKWISE: *Glassblower*, 1996, oil stick and oil paint on paper, 29 × 38 inches. *Glassblower Lifting a Gather*, 1995, acrylic on paper, 30 × 28 inches. *Bringing Home Work*, 1992, oil stick on paper, 30 × 28 inches.

FACING: *Double Glassblowing*, 2002, blown and hot tooled glass, 21 × 18 × 11 inches.





His wife Katie told me that, “A lot of the work is journalistic, dealing with family, moods. Not as a reporter, but how you might convey feelings in a journal....I don’t think he thinks of social versus personal, private versus public. It comes from within.” She talked about drawing get-togethers with friends as models, that was, “how we were living.”

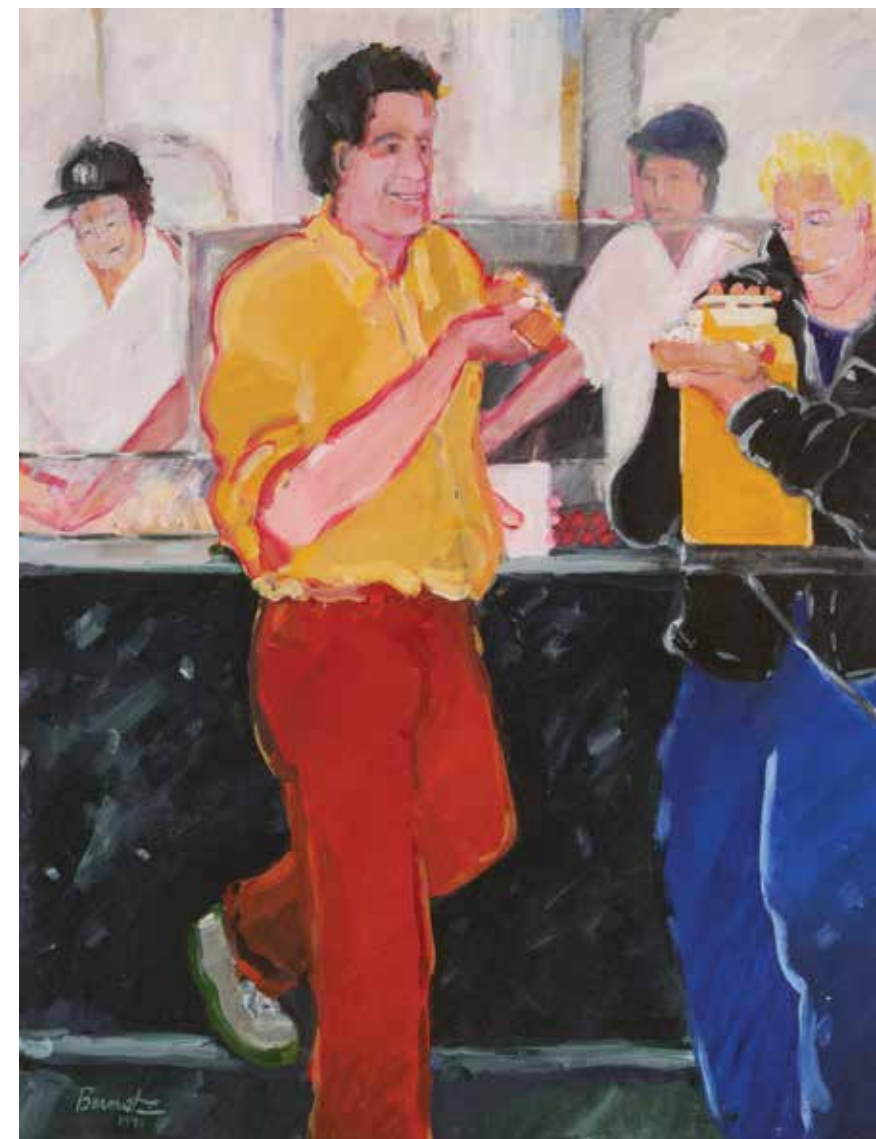
Billy adds that his interest includes, “The art I relate to is about the everyday. The relationship between men and women, including when working together on glass. The dynamic.” He also probes the individual, as in his *Portrait of Dave Wilson*, a neon artist who was Billy’s helper for many years. Bernstein was, “Going for an emotional impact. Sad but not crying. Dave had found the body of a friend and colleague after his suicide.” Another painting, the 1991 *Papaya King*, captures the scene at the mundane 72nd Street Papaya King on the west side of Manhattan. Billy and I both know and love Papaya King: when I was the registrar at Forum Gallery, a stop at the Upper East Side branch frequently became dinner, a hot dog and papaya juice. Definitely worth enshrining as art.

WORKING AND MAKING

Bernstein has one studio for glass, one for painting. He keeps sketchbooks. Uses different palettes based upon the themes. Prefers oil. He has never been shy about moving from realism to abstraction in the details of a painting or work in glass. And his style has not changed so very much over the years. Bernstein is a minimalist whose aesthetic is based upon dedication to the concepts of honesty, modesty and humility. Not really influenced by any given trend in studio glass such as Venetian style glassmaking, he has rebelled—his work has more gesture and movement, for example. He asks himself, “How do you put your soul into something?” The work is earthy, not finely polished. It has a feel of its surroundings and of the people of the region.

Is there a connection to folk art? “In many ways I consider myself related.” Both deal with the same things: unrefined, unsanitized experience. Appropriately, his painting technique is self-taught. In glass, he made beer trays before custom brewing became a thing, even imagined his own beer label. This was all part and parcel of the early studio glass era of the 1960s and 1970s, a time when Fritz Dreisbach made his iconic *Farm*, an assemblage of dozens of components representing a working farm, with a barn and silo, tractor, geese, pigs, pond, all surrounded by a delicate glass fence in need of a little repair, as at most farms: it was naïve in the best American way, with a wink, and made without Venetian techniques or the use of a glory hole for reheating the glass. This attitude, “Let’s see what we can do—make a fire truck. It was a dare.” and inspirational as well. Fritz and Bernstein often collaborated on work. Billy blended these *unrefined* folk ways with a healthy dose of leftist labor relations, the *glory of the working man* thing, as in the *Jersey Giants* (page 20) series he made at Wheaton Village (now WheatonArts) in Millville, New Jersey.

FROM TOP: *Dave Wilson*, 1995, oil paint on canvas, 38 x 28 inches. *Self Portrait in Blue*, 1991, blown glass with hot cane drawing, 8 x 5 x 5 inches. *Blown Out Self Portrait*, 2003, blown glass with hot cane drawing, 9 x 5 x 5 inches.



FROM TOP CLOCKWISE: *Papaya King*, 1991, acrylic on paper, 53 x 41 inches. *Yemenite Restaurant Tel Aviv*, 1997, acrylic on paper, 22 x 30 inches. *Self Portrait*, 1995, acrylic on paper, 49 x 39 inches.



At 25-30 pounds of glass each and 20 inches tall, they are massive figures made through the heavy labor of the glassblower. His *Convention Piece* alludes to early American glassmaking traditions, but has three teddy bears around a television set with rabbit ear antennas and a little train being pulled by a bulldozer. Made after the 1972 convention that nominated Richard Nixon for a second term as president, it's a political set piece. But also symbolic of childhood, and influenced by a Claes Oldenburg *Teddy Bear* monument for Central Park, a proposal he thought was very cool.

Although Bernstein's paintings and glass cover a wide variety of topics—the painting *Floor Plan of Dachau* documents a 1980s visit which shows a human figure next to a ghost, along with a mundane coffee cup and saucer, but the green lines are the cell blocks, bringing us back to the reality of the camp—many of his works are about glassblowing. In *Glassblower* (page 16) from the early 1990s, he asks, "Which is the glass and which is the glassblower?" In some, the glassblower's face is illuminated by the striking and intense orange light of the furnace. He has portrayed the famed glass artist Gianni Toso at Penland with big muscled arms. In this he took full creative freedom. "The piece is too big, but that is OK." Influences of a leftist upbringing, WPA art, glorifying the worker. He loves labor, the ways workers move, all that dynamism. What's not to love? And yet he also adores silence. In another painting, we see Billy seated in a car, turning his head to look through the window, capturing a quiet, contemplative moment in time, as opposed to the louder action works that depict glassblowing.



In his glass, how you handle and respect the material is important. Billy talks about making, "early white pieces from a Mark Peiser opal glass recipe. A very gushy glass, soft." This is essential, recognizing the way the material handles and affects the final artistic composition. Around 1995, he made a glassblower turning into glass. Billy is that person. And he is usually the male figure in his work in glass. The female with strawberry blond hair is his wife, Katie. One favorite is a vase with irises, a baseball,

FROM TOP: *Political Convention*, 1972, blown glass, 7 × 25 × 5½ inches. *Floor Plan of Dachau*, 1984, acrylic on paper, 18 × 14 inches. *White Cup and Vase*, 1970, blown opal glass, tallest 5½ × 4½ × 4½ inches.

FACING: *Jersey Giant*, 1990, blown glass, 18 × 11 × 9 inches.



Katie in a leotard, some trees (page 5). It's a springtime piece, evoking his son playing little league ball. A small *Woman in Flight* vessel (page 9) from the late 1970s is one he has always loved and kept because of the way it captured motion and pattern. When you hold it up to the light, you realize the colors are transparent, made by drawing with a glass cane that is melted into the surface. Like a hot pencil or paint brush.

LEGACY

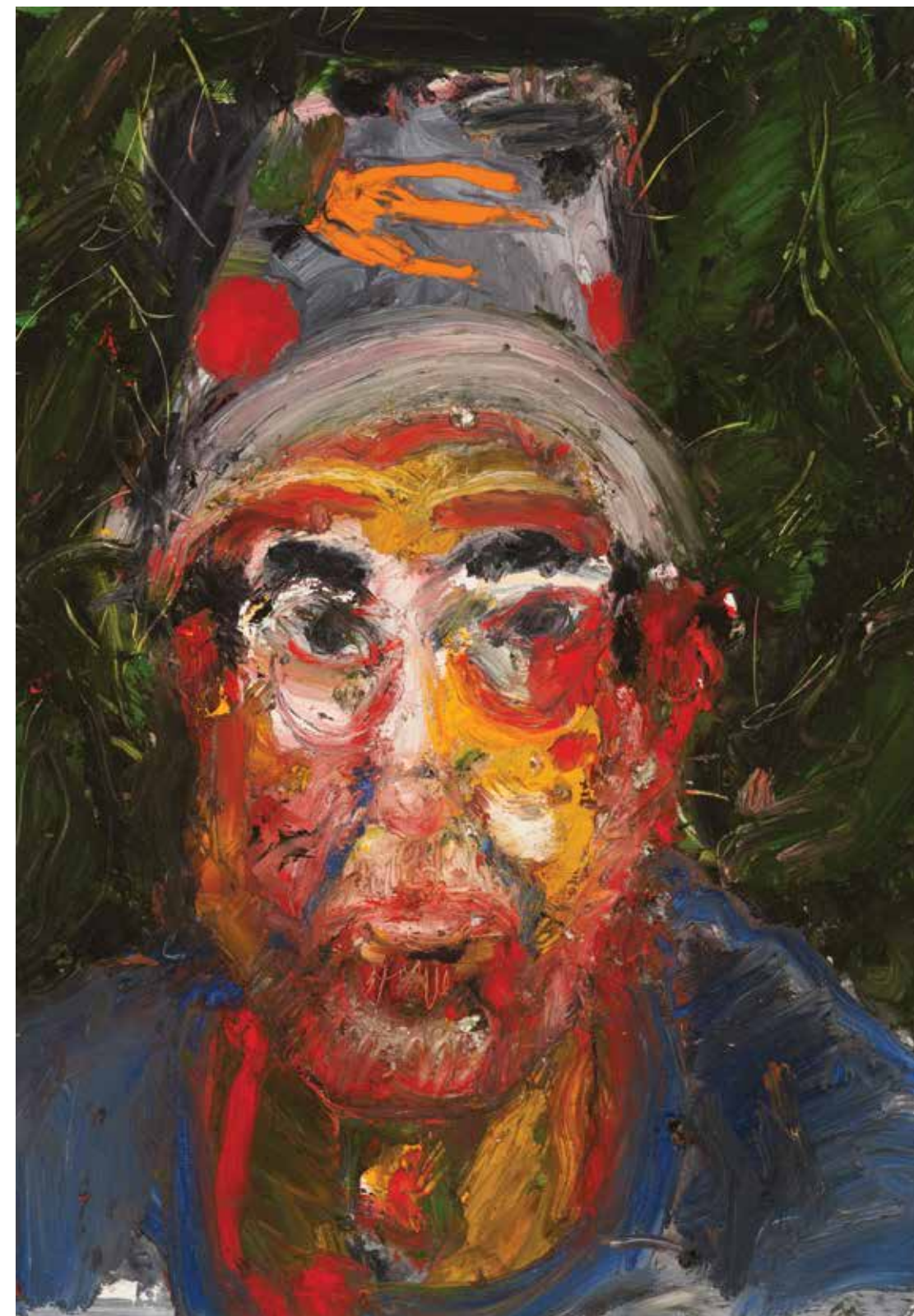
I am drawn to Bernstein's art because he has remained true to origin, place and mood, even as origins, places and moods change through time. The minimalist and abstract artist Anne Truitt wrote in her journal about, "the strict discipline of forcing oneself to work steadfastly along the nerve of one's own most intimate sensitivity." That's what Billy does, and why his work is so compelling. We all lose our nerve under the right circumstances. We all lose our way. Strict discipline and steadfast work can redeem us. Bernstein can also point us toward possible directions ahead for studio glass during the 60th anniversary year of its founding. Maybe the naïve and earthy era at the beginning should be reconsidered. As Lino Tagliapietra said of those early days, "People had a very primitive technique....But I liked the spirit and the fantasy. Now people try to have more technique than fantasy...the spirit is a little bit less, a little bit chilly." Bernstein is the opposite of chilly. Maybe we need to take a closer look at his aesthetic, follow along the nerve, dig into the earth and roots.

William Warmus is a Fellow and former curator of Modern Glass at the Corning Museum of Glass. The author or co-author of over 20 books, he studied with art critic Harold Rosenberg and philosopher Paul Ricoeur while at the University of Chicago, and was the advisor to the estate of the art critic Clement Greenberg. His most recent exhibitions include *Venice and American Studio Glass* co-curated with Tina Oldknow for the Stanze del Vetro museum in Venice in 2020 and *Years of Glass* curated for the Norton Museum of Art in the Palm Beaches in 2022. He was born in Corning, where his father was a glassblower for Corning Inc., and lives in Ithaca.

ENDNOTES

Unless otherwise noted, quotes from the artist and his family or colleagues are from a series of interviews conducted between January 6, 2022 and April 15, 2022. The quote from Anne Truitt is from *The New Yorker* (June 15, 2022) "How a Sculptor Made an Art of Documenting Her Life" by Megan O'Grady (accessed online on 6-15-22). The quote from Lino Tagliapietra is from *Venice and American Studio Glass* edited by Tina Oldknow and William Warmus and published by Skira in 2020 (p.50).

FROM TOP: *Self Portrait 1 with Beard*, 2014, blown glass with hot cane drawing, 8 × 7 × 5 inches. *Self Portrait as a Dog*, 2001, cast glass, 7 × 7 × 4 inches. *Artist in the Laurel*, 2019, blown glass with hot cane drawing and gold leaf, 12 × 9 × 9 inches. Courtesy collection of Andrew Blumenthal.



Depressed Self Portrait, 2021, oil stick on paper, 22 × 16 inches.



Published in conjunction with the exhibition
Life Art Life, William Bernstein, 50 Year Retrospective

August 6 – October 9, 2022
 Toe River Arts, Kokol Gallery
 269 Oak Avenue, Spruce Pine, NC 28777
www.toeriverarts.org

November 30, 2022 – January 21, 2023
 Cary Arts Center
 101 Dry Avenue, Cary, NC 27511
www.townofcary.org

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Support for this project has been generously provided by the following: North Carolina Arts Council, a division of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources; Toe River Arts; Cary Arts Center, Cary Public Art and Exhibition Program; Mountain Electronics, Inc.; Blumenthal Foundation; and Art Alliance for Contemporary Glass.

Thank you to Andrew Blumenthal and Glen and Florence Hardyman for lending pieces from their collections to include in the exhibitions.

William Bernstein would like to thank his wife Katherine for almost five years of support, wisdom and patience bringing this project to fruition. Thanks to dear friends Mike House and Jeff Goodman. A special thanks to Denise Cook, who without her skills and support this project couldn't have happened.

COLOPHON

Jordan Ahlers — Curator and Exhibition Design
 Momentum Gallery, Asheville, NC
 Steve Mann — Photography
 Black Box Studio, Asheville, NC
 Susan Rhew — Graphic Design
 Susan Rhew Design, Inc., Asheville, NC
 Conveyor Studio — Printing and binding
 Elmwood Park, New Jersey
 Adobe Caslon Pro font family throughout

ABOVE: *Gathering*, 1997, oil stick and oil paint on paper, 31 × 38 inches.

FACING: *Dancers* (detail), c. 1980s, ink on paper, 9 × 12 inches.



