

MEET *THE ARTIST*

Breaking down walls with blown glass

Nature, cultures of the world are inspiration for 'Joshua'

By Molly Glentzer

Artist, curator and author Michael Petry, an El Paso native and Rice University alum who directs the Museum of Contemporary Art London, occasionally returns to Houston for exhibits of his work at Hiram Butler Gallery. "Joshua D's Wall," featuring 33 unique blown-glass sculptures, each about the size of a

football, is now on view. Exquisitely detailed and begging to be appreciated up close, they're drawn from a larger installation of 250 one-of-a-kind pieces shown last year at the Palm Springs Art Museum in California. The material is slightly ironic, given their preciousness; you would not want to let these "stones" tumble down like the rocks that inspired them.

He explains: "When Palm Springs asked me to create a one-man show, I flew out there, and they took me to see the San Andreas Fault. Where the earth has moved up and down there are sheer walls with different sediments

Michael Petry

"Joshua D's Wall"

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m.
Tuesdays-Saturdays,
through Sept. 28

Where: Hiram
Butler Gallery, 4520
Blossom

Tickets: Free;
713-863-7097,
hirambutler.com

in bands of colors that parallel Palm Springs' geological time. Those are the colors in the designs. I was also shown a famous field of geodes and wanted to capture some of that with beautiful crystalline objects you could

look into. So they're very connected to the physical site of Palm Springs and Joshua Tree National Park, where there's a huge formation named after Joshua and the battle of Jericho.

"All of my work looks at the creation myths of various cultures. I'm interested in how belief systems function in the current world. Joshua was a hero to Christians, Jews and Muslims. What most people remember is that he went to the land of the Canaanites, and for his belief in God he was rewarded with the city, and on the seventh day the walls came tumbling down. But in the next chapter, God tells him



Roberto Ekholm

Michael Petry got the idea for "Joshua D's Wall" after viewing the San Andreas Fault in California.

to kill every living thing there. ... For the last 2,000 years people who practice these three religions have been killing each other because they believe this story tells them to. ... In many ways, this piece is very political. ...

"I envisioned a wall that would tumble apart. Some sections have been shown in London and Norway. They're also sold individually, so eventually it will all be dissipated. ...

"In the 1990s I was known for large video installations. 'History of the World' in 2000 at Rice Gallery was projected onto many tons of white sand in a wedge shape. For a 1998 biennale in Germany, I did 'Twistor,' projecting images into a tornado of white confetti. I first used glass for 'Chemistry of Love,' a

1994 installation in Germany with video beamed through a roomful of 'love ampules' custom-made by Pyrex.

"When I was growing up in El Paso, our parents often took us to Juarez on Sundays, where there's a strong glass-blowing tradition. I learned early that glass was amazing and skill-dependent. My first large-scale glass (only) installation was in 2001, for a festival in Brighton, England, in an incredibly beautiful, curved space with natural light we'd have had to block for video. ... Then another museum asked me to make a piece, and then it snowballed.

"I don't make studio glass. I just design and oversee it. ... It took more than a year to make all the pieces for 'Joshua D's

Wall,' working with glass blowers on the islands of Murano in Venice. They have 500 years of secrets; until the 20th century it was against the law for them to leave.

"These 'stones' are very complicated objects that go through many processes. I work with teams of blowers, and they have teams who polish and cut. Glass often does surprising things, and I like the chance element. Usually if there's a bubble, it's a flaw, and the makers destroy the piece. The more 'mistakes' and happenstance, the more I love it. At first, that made the makers crazy. They're coming at it from a craft position, where there's a right or wrong. In art, there's no right or wrong."

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Hiram Butler Gallery

Thirty-three one-of-a-kind "stones" of exquisite, hand-blown Murano glass make up Michael Petry's installation "Joshua D's Wall" at Hiram Butler Gallery.