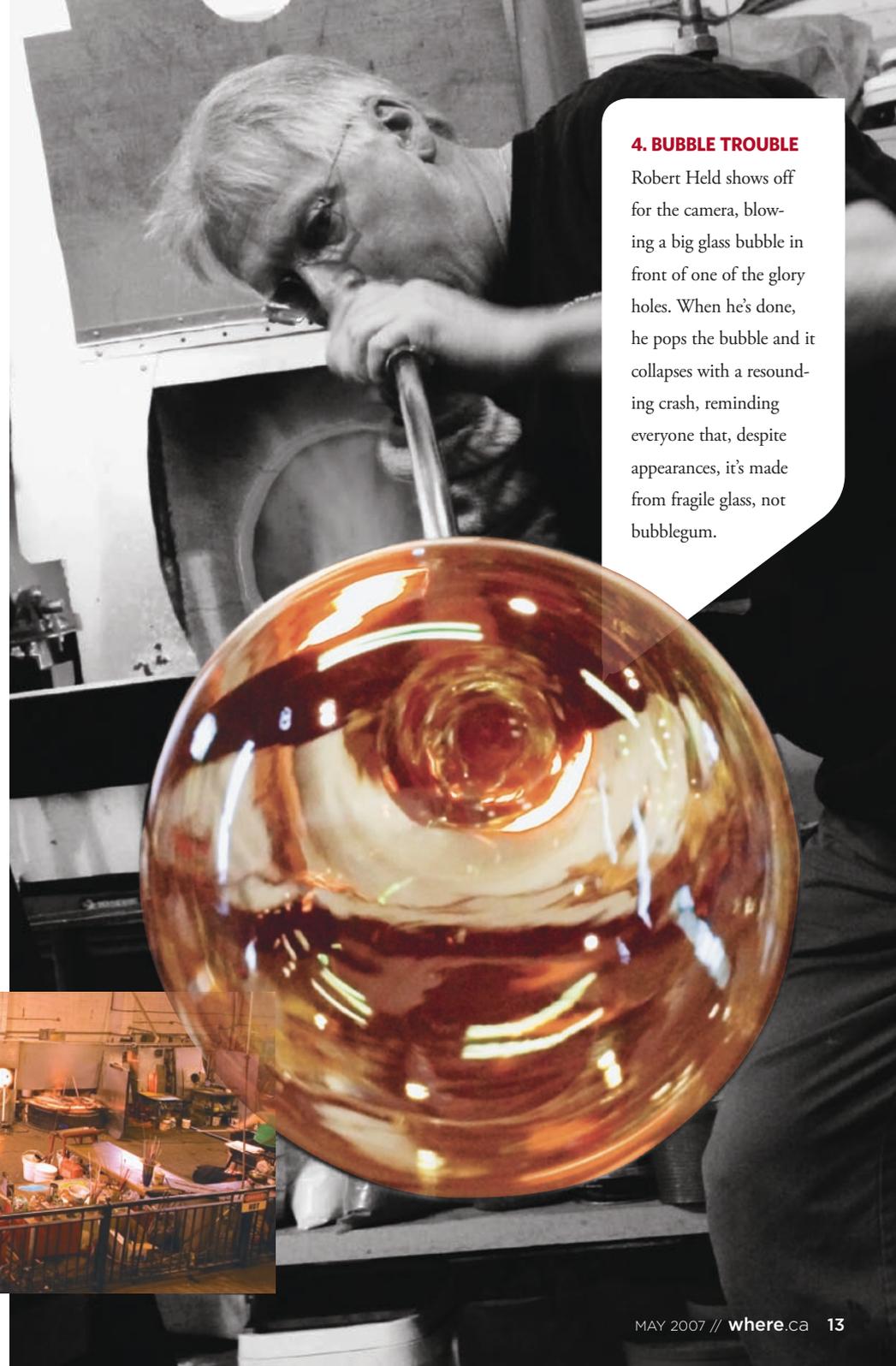


GLASS BLOWING

Rise early and make your way to Robert Held Art Glass, Canada's largest hot glass studio, where the artists put on quite a show

BY SHERI RADFORD, PHOTOS BY ROB STEFANOWICZ



4. BUBBLE TROUBLE

Robert Held shows off for the camera, blowing a big glass bubble in front of one of the glory holes. When he's done, he pops the bubble and it collapses with a resounding crash, reminding everyone that, despite appearances, it's made from fragile glass, not bubblegum.



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1. IN THE BEGINNING Raw glass, called cullet, comes from a manufacturer in the US. Made specifically for blowing, this new glass must first be charged in the furnace.



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2. AMAZING ARTWORK The adjacent gallery displays creations made in the shop, such as vases and bowls, and pieces by other artists, including the playful marbles shown here.

3. LAUNCHING PAD Seven glory holes stretch across the back of the shop floor. Each artist alternates between a work bench and a glory hole, which is used to heat the glass. The shop floor is busiest (and therefore most entertaining) early in the morning.





5. INTO THE FIRE

In a process called blocking or papering, Held shapes the fiery glass using a bundle of wet newspaper. Held must centre the glass, much the same way a potter centres a piece of clay. The wet paper cools the glass slightly, but it can't be allowed to cool too much—there's a strict time limit for creating these works of beauty. Repeatedly, the glass must be plunged back into a glory hole to reheat. With the glory holes hovering around 1,200° C (2,200° F), this work isn't for the faint of heart. And Held doesn't wear any hi-tech gadgets to protect himself from the flames, just an old, cut-up sock. Playing with fire is merely another day at the office for a glass blower.

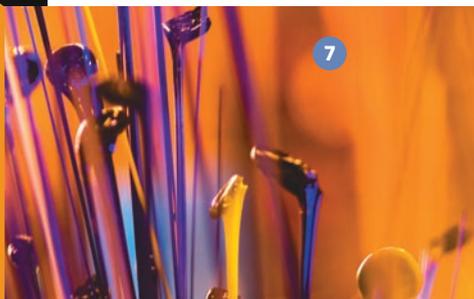


6. HOT STUFF

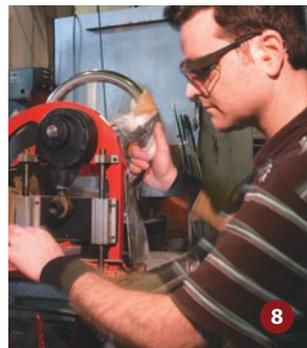
Running 24 hours a day, the furnace averages a sweltering 1,350° C (2,450° F). As you can imagine, scarfs and parkas are not popular working attire. All the artists tend to strip down to short sleeves in the heat, and the doors to the vast, barn-like room remain open to let in gusts of the cool outside air. Just be grateful you're not the one stuck with the electricity bill each month.

7. OODLES OF COLOURS

They look good enough to eat, but these colourful goodies would be hard on the teeth. Called frit, the tall, slender pieces of coloured glass become thin, delicate decorations once fused to the outside of a vase or bowl.



8. CHOP CHOP Brian Spence demonstrates how to use a cane cutter. Much goes on behind the scenes to get everything ready for the artists, and they have to work collaboratively, especially on larger pieces. All the artists work their way up through the ranks to achieve a coveted spot at a glory hole, progressing from paperweights to vases in the process.



9. BITS AND PIECES

Bits of glass, called threads or canes, are chopped with a cane cutter and ultimately become patterns on the outsides of vases and bowls.



10. ALL DONE

The completed pieces are all ethereal works of beauty, especially the popular poppy series shown here. Held mentors the other artists, outlining his vision up front, then giving regular feedback. "My vision is never exactly what I get," he says of the finished art, but fortunately, "sometimes what I get is better." **w**

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