



glass

Strength and fragility,
transparency and reflection

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For Karuna Santoro, glass is the medium; for the painter Robena, it's the message. Yet both Maui artists are inspired by its contradictions: strength and fragility, transparency and reflection, sharp edges and smooth curves.

"Please keep your shoes on," Karuna Santoro says as she holds open the door. It feels unnatural and wrong to be treading across her immaculate living room carpet in flats, but we remain shod. Her breezy lanai studio is cleanly swept, but still—this is a glasswork studio, and there might be tiny slivers that could find their way into our feet.

The morning sun slants through her studio, illuminating tubs of glass pellets neatly sorted by color and pattern—deep, puckery reds; cool blues; crystalline greens; an occasional opaque yellow, like jars of shimmering penny candies.

Working in a technique called kiln-forming, Santoro, a murrini artist, lays the chips of glass in a flat, round form, piece by piece. Earlier she had pulled and melted layers of colored glass into long strands, then chopped the cooled rods into short, cylindrical pellets, revealing interesting designs within the cross-section. If she's feeling orderly, she might lay them out in a neat pattern; on days that are more free-form, her design might swirl forth like a nebula or a luminescent drop of pond water. Trained as a medical technologist in Germany, Santoro finds an organic quality to these pieces. "Sometimes it reminds me of looking at tissue samples through a microscope," she says.

Santoro's process is half art, half science. "It's a technical medium to work with," she says. Each bowl requires as much planning and preparation as intuition. Pinned neatly to her studio wall, a color wheel of swatches helps her strategize designs. Many kinds of glass will change color after they've been melted and cooled, so she's had to learn to imagine what the final product will look like.

After her pattern is final, Santoro fires the form in her kiln, heating it to a temperature of 1,500 degrees to fuse the glass pellets into a thick, smooth plate. After polishing the edges with a belt sander, she'll fire it again at 1,200 degrees to achieve the finished shape of the bowl. "The glass is just soft enough at that temperature that gravity can pull it into the mold," she says.

A former mosaic and stained-glass artist, Santoro began studying murrini 12 years ago. "It takes experience," she says. "I'm finally at a point where I can anticipate what will happen with the glass.

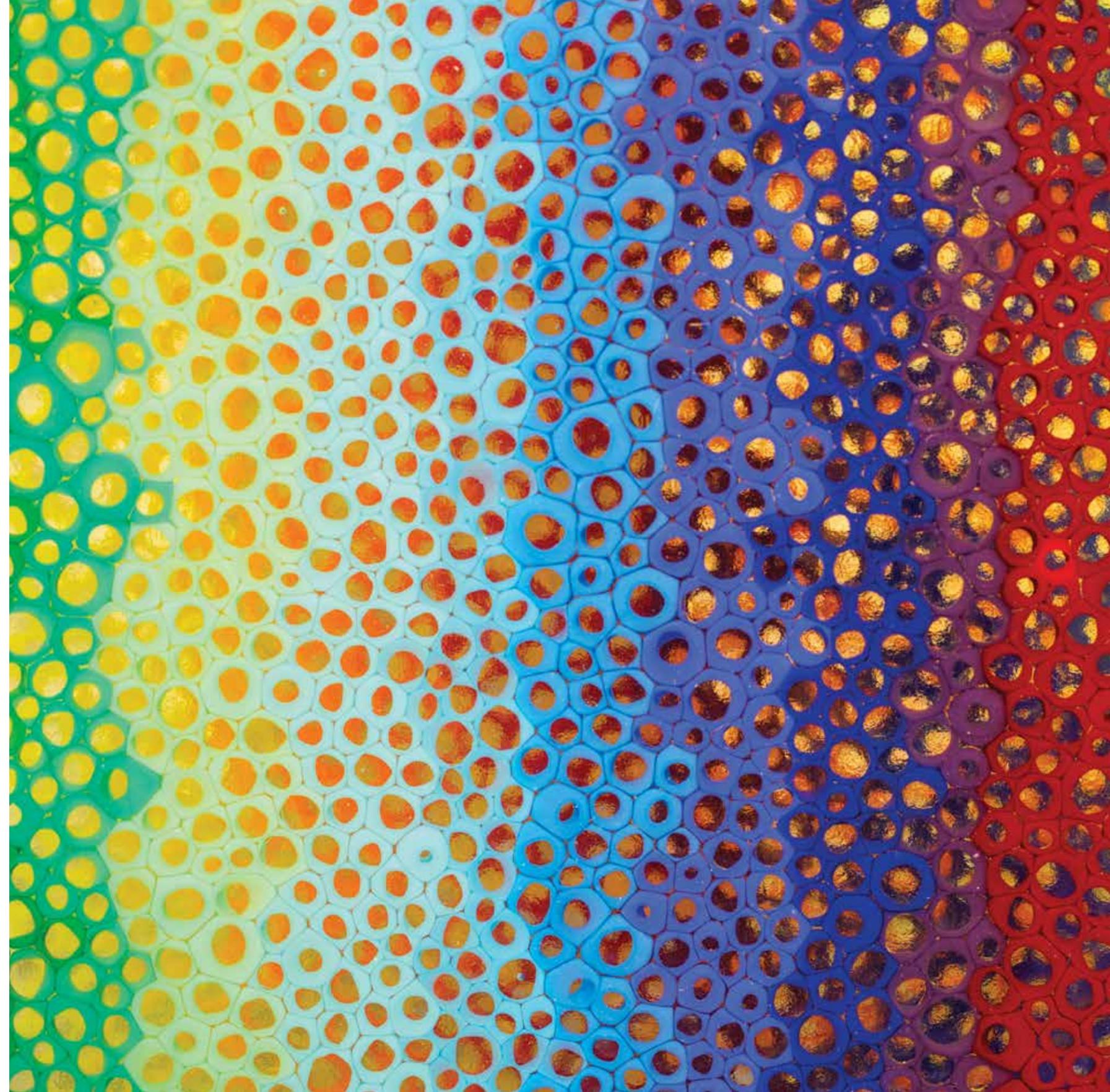
"I still sometimes open my kiln and say, 'Oh my god.' There's a learning curve," she continues. "But that's part of the fun, too. Every time, I'm surprised when I open the kiln."

Santoro leans against her workbench and carefully runs her thumb over the sharp, unfinished edge of her latest piece. "I love glass because it's so full of contradictions—it's fragile, but it's strong," she says. Later, she'll grind this piece against her belt sander to polish it smooth; but when she fires it, she'll need to give it a full 24 hours to heat and cool—any faster and it could shatter.



THE MEDIUM

(This page) Artist Karuna Santoro works in her studio to create her kiln-fired murrini art. (Opposite page) Half science and half art, a finished plate vibrates with color.





“There’s a meditative aspect to laying out the design,” she says. “The other thing is, you really have to be ‘there.’ If you space out, you can cut yourself.”

FOR THE ARTIST ROBENA, space and scale are as significant as form and color are to Santoro. “I always wanted to do giant work,” she says as we view one of her paintings, a rose nearly as tall as she is. “It makes such an impact on the space—you really have to deal with it.”

An early ambition to paint larger than life helped her stumble upon the technique that has become her signature. To stretch her materials on a young artist’s budget, Robena—who mixes all her own colors from a palette of magenta, cyan and yellow—took to watering down her paints and working with a raw canvas. The result was a wash, with the canvas soaking up the colors like a stain to create a smooth, photographic texture with no visible brush strokes.

“Because of this technique, I can get big areas to look really soft,” she says.

We pad across the cool concrete floor of her Pukalani studio to stand before her work-in-progress, a still life of antique Japanese bottles. To blend her watered-down acrylics, Robena paints from the shadows out: she begins with the darker shades and layers wash over wash until the image emerges into the light.

She’s been known for her meditative waterscapes and oversized flowers, but lately it’s glass that has captured her imagination. The way the curve of a bottle’s neck warps and distorts the light, or the way color slides over its raised lettering, pleases her eye. “It’s almost like it has its own light source,” she says.

Robena began painting glass after finding herself stuck with “painter’s block.” Having completed a series of flowers, unsure of what she’d focus on next, she turned to her collection of antique bottles and began photographing them. “They were in the window,” she recalls, “and I was just noticing how beautiful and abstract the shapes were, and all the colors.”

In extreme close-up on her giant canvas, the smooth contours and sloping edges, and the interplay between transparency and reflection, take on a mysterious, dreamlike quality. “I love abstract art, but I’m a representational painter,” she says. “I like the way the light travels through the distortion.”

In one of her favorite recent pieces, a single curving line provides the only clue that the viewer is looking at a near photographic still life of Japanese glass fishing floats. “The rest,” she says, “is all chaos.”

We go upstairs to look at her collection of glass artifacts. Sitting cross-legged in front of her coffee table, we handle them one by one—roly-poly fishing floats; wide-lipped carafes from Haleakalā Dairy and Parker Ranch; a svelte bottle from Takitani’s Star Soda in Wailuku.

Suddenly I laugh, pick up a tiny vial and run a fingertip over the raised kanji, as calligraphic Japanese characters are called. Here is the colossal, abstracted column of embossed glass from her work-in-progress downstairs: a diminutive Japanese medicine bottle no bigger than my thumb.

For Robena, those tricks of proportion and scale are just another beautiful distortion. “It makes me so happy just to be lost inside that wobbly thing,” she says. “You would never look at it that way if it were just a glass on a shelf.” 🌸



THE MESSAGE

(This page) The artist Robena, above, paints in large scale. Her brushes, left, and bottle collection, far left, are creative tools. (Opposite page) A Robena canvas of antique bottles.