

by Karen L. Mulder, Ph.D.

# The Refractive Expressionism of Guy Kemper

## Transcending Architecture

*So Long Bro, Orlando Airport, 2000. 100 ft. x 14 ft. Blown glass, etched, and leaded. This commission is currently in airport storage.*

Artists and designers generally experience their work on a day-to-day basis of exploration, discovery, or invention. They absorb some influences, reject others, or sometimes, migrate to new levels of innovation in ways that transcend the limitations of scholarly characterizations. Kentucky-based glass artist Guy Kemper, for instance, unstintingly gives homage to that postwar generation of German designers who stressed the importance of correlating glass installations to architectural context and conditions, but in appearance, technique, and conceptual approach, his work has truly taken a completely different direction. Gone completely are the grapefruit jewels of yore.

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### EARLY YEARS

Kemper made his living in traditional stained glass in the 1980's, churning out contemporary and Victorian leaded glass windows. However, after poring through all the books he could find on the architectural approach in glass, and reviewing images of work by the Germans, Frank Lloyd Wright, David Wilson, Ed Carpenter, Graham Jones, and others in Andrew Moor's reviews, Kemper finally made his pilgrimage to Europe in 1999 to see the German approach firsthand.

After receiving the Orlando Airport Commission he planned a trip to the German establishment, Lamberts Glass, famous for its hand blown variety. Kemper was agreeably surprised when, after asking Wilhelm Derix for hotel tips, Derix insisted that he not only visit his fabrication studio near Frankfurt, but that he stay with the family. In fact, Derix was avidly seeking introduc-

tions to the American market, and somehow knew that Kemper, who considered himself a 'nobody' at the time, had won the major Orlando airport commission against some of the top international competitors in the field. Ironically, the Orlando commission, *So Long Bro* (above) along with a companion piece by Kenneth von Roenn's Architectural Glass Art in Louisville, was mothballed a few years ago when the airport expanded. But this commission would soon change Kemper's style by opening up new doors in Germany that would change the way he developed windows back home. "I realized I needed to become a painter." There would be no more Victorian or contemporary leaded glass windows. Kemper would originate the designs back home in his Kentucky studio and then take them back to Germany where Derix Glasstudios would produce them.

### INFLUENCE OF GERMAN EFFICIENCY

When Kemper began working with the German efficiency of Derix Glasstudios, new approaches that capitalized on his natural preference for loose brushwork emerged, allowing him to free himself from the glazier's bench. Now Kemper has ventured toward an art that seems painterly in appearance, but involves tremen-

dous technical acumen. He considers himself a "refractive expressionist."

In fact, the vestiges of "German" influence in Kemper's current practice emerge most obviously in his compelling arguments to potential clients about the need to consider architectural context; he suspects that his deep knowledge of architectonic impact attracts clients who might feel stuck in the contentious gap between artists and architects. This particularly applies to situations influenced by the pressures of "percent-for-art"-type arrangements, where the art is clearly secondary to architectural design and construction. For example, during a competition for O'Hare airport, he persuaded those in charge not to stand the piece on the floor, as they had initially proposed in the guidelines. There, it would have no mediating effect on the glaring light coming through the upper reaches of a huge window opening. "They wanted a piece that sat on the floor. I went up there and looked at [the curtain wall], and told them, 'It's absurd to do that! That's completely the wrong idea!' It needed to be up in the window—this audience isn't the connecting passengers, but the poor suckers waiting in the security screening lines right in front of the window." Half the time, he admits, his per-



*Guy Kemper standing in front of Stellar Wind.*



**Jet Trails**, Chicago O'Hare International Airport, 2008. 50 ft. x 12 ft. Blown glass, etched, vitreous enamels, fired, laminated. Inspired by the mottled patterns of jet exhaust across a blue sky.

sistence may lose the job for him, but ultimately, Kemper says, turning everything on its head when he knows it's the right solution is a consequence of his honest approach to art, business and life in general. In this case, everyone else presented floor versions; Kemper's suspended triangle, *Jet Trails*, won the commission and has cast its subtle, calming presence within Helmut Jahn's terminal since 2008.

Derix is one of the handful of industrious German fabrication studios that provided a creative springboard for German artists in the 1950s and 60s, pressed into service to address the widespread devastation left behind by the Allied strategic bomb campaign after World War II. One estimate tallied the loss of windows and vaults in as many as 70,000 churches in western Germany alone. Trained as painters or graphic artists in the pre-digital era, the Germans literally transferred their strengths in

drawing, graphics or painting into glass, relying on the technical finesse of studio fabricators to realize the ambitious programs they envisioned in freehand sketches. With the studio responsible for locating the proper technical solutions, the artists experimented liberally with floating leadlines and new materials, like Plexiglas. "Johannes Schreiter did not have to figure out how to make his ground-breaking designs," Kemper recalls, "with slivers of one color buried in the middle of another, without any connecting leadlines, and impossible right-angle cuts—he just designed. He didn't have to know how to paint those delicate, subtle lines or burn marks on glass—he only had to do it on paper. I figured if it worked for Schreiter, it could work for me." The added benefits of an open collaboration with the fabrication studio include accurate estimates of the cost and scheduling for the entire installation, as well as arranging its safe shipment to the installation site.

Kemper appreciates the impressive roster of innovations that Derix has accumulated over the years, initiating techniques such as the lamination of stained glass to clear tempered glass, and combining fired enamels, antique glass and Plexiglas into seamless units. He seems most directly influenced, however, by the fruitful symbiosis between artist and fabricator that working with a large stu-

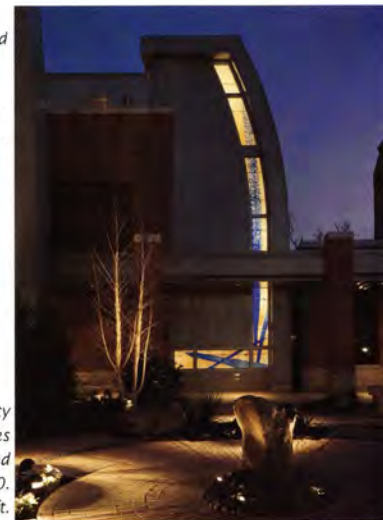


**Sun, Sky, Sea**, St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport, Florida, 2009. 43 ft. x 6.5 ft. Blown glass, etched, vitreous enamels, fired, laminated.



**Rain, Steam and Speed**, Seattle Sound Transit, Mt. Baker Light Rail Stations, 2009. 80 ft. x 20 ft. Blown glass, etched, vitreous enamels, silver stain, fired, laminated, lead crystal prisms.

**Skyward**, University of Tampa Sykes Center for Faith and Values, 2010. 9 ft. x 35 ft.



dio encourages. This arrangement allows the artist a virtually unlimited range of creative options, but simultaneously frees the craftsperson to operate on a correspondingly high technological plane. Now, having completed numerous monumental installations with Derix, culminating in projects for the St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport (2009), Seattle's light rail transit system (2009), the University of Tampa (2010), and half a dozen other sites, Kemper insists with even greater enthusiasm about the merits of relying on Derix's exacting technicians, with up to 25 to 30 working on his installations at one time, well aware that his work benefits from this fully collaborative approach.

#### COMPLICATED TECHNIQUE

Kemper's process can only be explained in sketchy terms, even by the artist, because each project is so complicated in execution. It distinguishes all his installations for the past eleven years, and most recently, creates a visually luscious effect in panels he recently completed, for the Department of Enterprise Services in Olympia, Washington. The foundation of these mid-career windows invariably began with double-lead, mouthblown glass from Lamberts in Germany. Before his composition is transferred to this ground, to avoid the appearance of a mosaic or patchwork effect, Kemper is sure to homogenize the cut panes, visually matching each large piece so that they

harmonize properly as a unit. This glass is intentionally composed of Bleiweiss (lead white) instead of regular Opalweiss because Bleiweiss allows more translucence than the regular opal. As Kemper discovered, initially to his dismay, mere touches of hydrofluoric etching acid on Lambert's aurora doubleflash, which ranges from blood-red to a light peach or coral when sandblasted, unexpectedly turned the Bleiweiss surface cloudy. Subsequent attempts to etch its surface resulted in progressively dingier browns that Kemper describes as undesirable hues of "old, soft brown leather" rather than the fresh "pinkish" undertones or "pops of orange" that he prefers. Unfortunately, successive firing attempts exaggerated the reaction.

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**Seattle Sunrise**: Seattle Sound Transit, Mt. Baker Light Rail Station, 2009. 16 ft. x 11 ft. Blown glass, etched, crystal prisms



## THE REFRACTIVE EXPRESSIONISM OF GUY KEMPER

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During a steep learning curve, Kemper fretted that all the gold from the expensive aurora double-flashed red glass was draining down the sink in the etching room. Nothing if not persistent, Kemper estimates that it took two weeks to figure out the solution.

Working with glasspainter Rahmi Schulz and project manager Karl Heinz Traut, an accomplished designer in his own right, Kemper experienced the benefits of a collaborative expertise that eventually led to a progressive protocol for his design objectives. For the Olympia panels, to offset problems caused by acid etching and firing (which turned the aurora glass brown and dense), Traut devised a solution. Derix airbrushed the yellow and magenta background enamels on the clear carrier sheet beneath to enhance the brightness of the aurora panels. Pieces of blue and green antique glass were applied as additional top layers, retaining their brightness when Derix sandblasted the aurora flash beneath away a process that Derix has used for at least two decades. Plastic foil masks protected each layer of the design throughout the process. Cold paint rubbed over the surface of the sandblasted splashes a process that was new to Kemper at the time accentuated their pure, bold hues of blue-grey. Each of the areas described then had to be perfectly aligned with the colorless areas of the underlying carrier, which had been masked before painting to allow the same areas of pure color, the antique, cold blue-grey elements, and the blue-grey sandblasted splatters. While Kemper calls this process "a real nightmare," the results are patently unique.

The complex technique was brilliantly realized by Rahmi Schulz, the man that Guy unstintingly calls one of the 'very best glass painters in the world.' Schulz, who has plied his careful craft at Derix for more than 20 years, worked out the painstaking choreography.

Kemper feels certain that the process, which is more environmentally friendly than many other glass manufacturing approaches, has the potential to last at least 300 years. In the end, new techniques grew out of the team's frustration with the material's limitations, but Kemper eventually realized that with persistence, the experimental process actually yielded a more visually spectacular, brilliantly refractive quality that particularly animates his installations.

This process of collaborative exploration between Kemper and Derix Glasstudio comes with no guaran-



*Stellar Wind*, Department of Enterprise Services, Olympia, WA, 2011. 12.5 ft. x 14 ft. Blown glass, etched, vitreous enamels, silver stain, fired, laminated in four layers with six layers of treatment

tees. The consequences of missing the objective seem dire: the entire first stage of the large Seattle installation, amounting to \$40,000 in materials, ended up in shards in Derix's dumpster in 2007.

### VISUAL POWER

Competing with the best designers in the nation's capital city of glass, this Kentucky boy (as Kemper pegs himself) with the twangy accent walked confidently into the project overseer's office at Seattle's Sound Transit Light Rail system and convinced the entire staff about the importance of the spatial conversation between architecture and light, and how context ought to dictate the shape of the final submission. During interviews for a PBS documentary, *Painting in Glass: Guy Kemper's Public Art*, Kemper explained how he selected a non-topical, but relatively bright and pure color palette to hold its own during Seattle's rainy weather, imaging the effects at his studio on a 90-acre tract of nature in the much sunnier, climes of Woodford County, Kentucky (see [www.pingreyhdv.com](http://www.pingreyhdv.com)). "As I learned from Schreiter, Schaffrath and Poensgen, you really only need three or four colors in a window-limiting them seems to generate more visual power, but oddly enough, the more paint you heap on the windows, the more they actually start to lose refractive



*Seattle Sunrise*, Seattle Sound Transit, Mt. Baker Light Rail Station, 2009. 16 ft. x 11 ft. Blown glass, etched crystal prisms, laminated. Detail at right.

vibrancy." Basically, Kemper began avoiding enamel years ago because he thought it always darkened the composition, creating the opposite of the airy, spontaneous-looking strokes, marks and splatter aesthetic that Kemper enjoys. The palette he currently favors is restrained only in the sense of its limited range of hues, but certainly not in the intensity it presents. Pure hits or combinations of aurora red/pink, selenium reds, artist's blue in cobalt shades, grass or emerald greens, silver stain or equivalently bright swatches of yellow enamel punctuate his compositions in exhilarated swashes, strokes, splatters, generous "O's, and splayed "V's (which he calls an "icon of celebration," and a tribute to Schreiter's "U-motifs").

Self-taught in model-making and construction, Kemper uses 3-D models to figure out where the visual "pop" ought to make its biggest impact, and to imagine what he calls the "psyche" of the unbuilt space. At the Mt. Baker station, Kemper wanted the best effect for both rail passengers whizzing by, and folks waiting around for trains. The Link system, in process since 1998, debuted more than 40 new artworks in 2009. These continue to inspire art patrons to circulate around the Link simply for the delight of visiting the artworks.

Kemper's process, as always, began with gestural exercises, in circular or splayed strokes, limbering up over a fat roll of vellum (much like a shotput athlete). Splatters and drips added immediacy and action to the

sketch, which the technicians at Derix then reproduced with meticulous attention to detail. Rows of prisms in *Rain, Steam and Speed*, inspired by J.M.W. Turner's painting of the same name, and the smaller accompanying composition on the opposite side of the tracks, *Seattle Sunrise*, throw cheery, otherworldly rainbows onto the sidewalks, girders and railings on the upper platform—should the sun ever make a showing.

Installed in 2009 after a transatlantic trip from Rotterdam to Norfolk, Virginia by sea, and then a transcontinental train ride to Seattle, Kemper's glass wall at the Mt. Baker station surveys the horizon in a combination of clear, tinted and opaque sections that allow a lowering sun or a break in the clouds to penetrate the station's interior spaces. The *Sunrise* panel gradually reveals itself, literally rising to passengers ascending an escalator from the street level below to a landing. The confident simplicity of both works surprises and immediately captures the eye. Kemper delights in

the sensuality, or what he calls the 'juiciness,' of the pure colors, which glow in brilliant, concentrated hues.

Kemper's lifework, in particular, celebrates ancient craft practices that yield fresh, contemporary works. Essentially handcrafted panels mesh companionably with sleek, technologically advanced contexts. Fleeting impressions result from years of careful preparation and collaboration.

Like a master musician or an acrobat, he reflects, "I like to think that making it look easy is the mark of ingenuity and high craft. I want to be simple, not 'challenging.' My main aim is to convey love and joy as architectural ornament *first*--NOT art first." Artwork fashioned by intense labor reads like an asterisk in the workday, interjecting a playful and spontaneous note into ordinary life. The results of such paradoxes contribute to the transcendent interjection of Kemper's vision into architectural spaces, made for all eyes. This evolution, inspired by the German architectonic movement but clearly launching into new territories, is certainly rewarding, and worth watching. ♦

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