

Creativity

—LETTING GO OF PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS

BY MILON TOWNSEND

In making a series of pendants recently for a retail venue, I was able to observe my progression through a series of ideas that came to an unexpected conclusion. The process was accelerated due to the fact that my classroom for teaching was on the other side of a wall of the booth, where my wife sold my work while I was teaching classes. I took the opportunity to make a couple of pieces in the classroom that I was low on in the booth and shared the process with my students in explication of the creative act.

Noticing Details Leads to Discovery

I've long enjoyed the octopus as a decorative element, partly because of its color, shape, and form and partly because I've met them in the wild while scuba diving. They are the quickest color-change artists in the natural world and are as intelligent as your average cat. My interest in them led me to make an octopus pendant a couple of years ago. It was fairly large and detailed and included a layer of colored frit on the outside of the tentacles and head to bring it into organic focus. In preparing for the show, I made a series of octopi much more quickly without the frit that were designed to hit a lower price point. I eliminated the external frit color decoration, and the form still carried the piece.

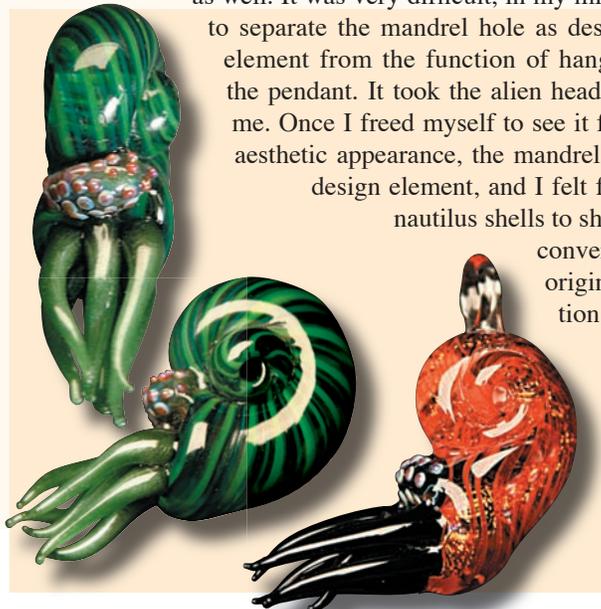
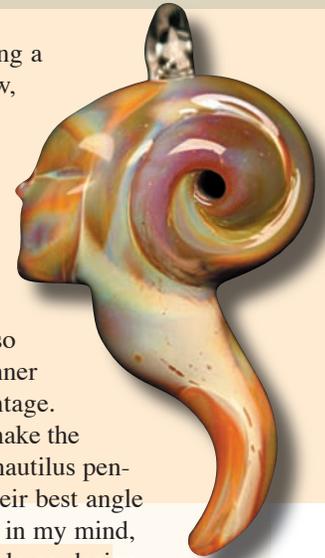
In wrapping the head of the creature around my mandrel, I noticed that the shape of the glass spiraling around it closely resembled the shape of a nautilus shell. I went ahead and made a series of nautilus pendants, using colored cane that was already made and sitting around the shop. (The nautilus is the only cephalopod that has a shell, unlike its close relatives the octopus and the squid.) I very much liked the shape that it gave me. I also liked the fact that wrapping the glass around the mandrel gave me both the distinctive shape of the shell and the hole through which to hang it in one move.



I thought they looked pretty good, but my wife pointed out that because of the orientation of the mandrel hole, the nautilus hung with the tentacles pointed straight forward. Kiyoko mentioned it as a safety concern—people wearing it might injure those they hugged. I regarded it as an aesthetic issue—it looked much better from the side view than the front. But the hole was the hole. What could I do about it?

One Discovery Leads to Another

While teaching a class at the show, I made some kind of alien/Princess Leia head pendant as an illustrative head demo using the same wrapping technique to get the distinctive swirl pattern. It didn't work at all from the front view, so I added a loop to hang it in a manner that showed it to its best advantage. Having done that, I was able to make the mental leap to add a loop to the nautilus pendants, showing them off from their best angle as well. It was very difficult, in my mind, to separate the mandrel hole as design element from the function of hanging the pendant. It took the alien head pendant to do that for me. Once I freed myself to see it from the perspective of aesthetic appearance, the mandrel hole simply became a design element, and I felt free to add loops to the nautilus shells to show them from the side, converting the mandrel hole's original purpose from function to pure design.





Sometimes we get caught up in doing things “the right way.” We tend to forget that *we* make the rules and that *we* as artists determine what is right by what actually works best. Take a look at the two mice that are pictured here, for example. The gray mouse has all its arms and legs and all of the other information that an actual mouse might have. The white mouse has been stripped down to what I considered the essential elements: nose, eyes, ears, body, and tail. Working with a minimal vocabulary of components, I was able to create a form that read “mouse” perhaps more powerfully than the more literal rendition achieved.

Again, I had to let go of my preconceived notion of what was “right,” and be willing to choose what was, in fact, the most effective means of communicating what I felt to be the most significant aspects of the piece. It can be hard to let go, but if we’re lucky we’ll find ourselves discovering the power of saying as much, or more, with less. Following the trail of the swirl around the mandrel took me to a place I’d not anticipated. It not only gave me the nautilus pendant, correctly aligned, but freed me to think in unaccustomed ways of something that will serve me for many years into the future.

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