NARCISSUS QUAGLIATA

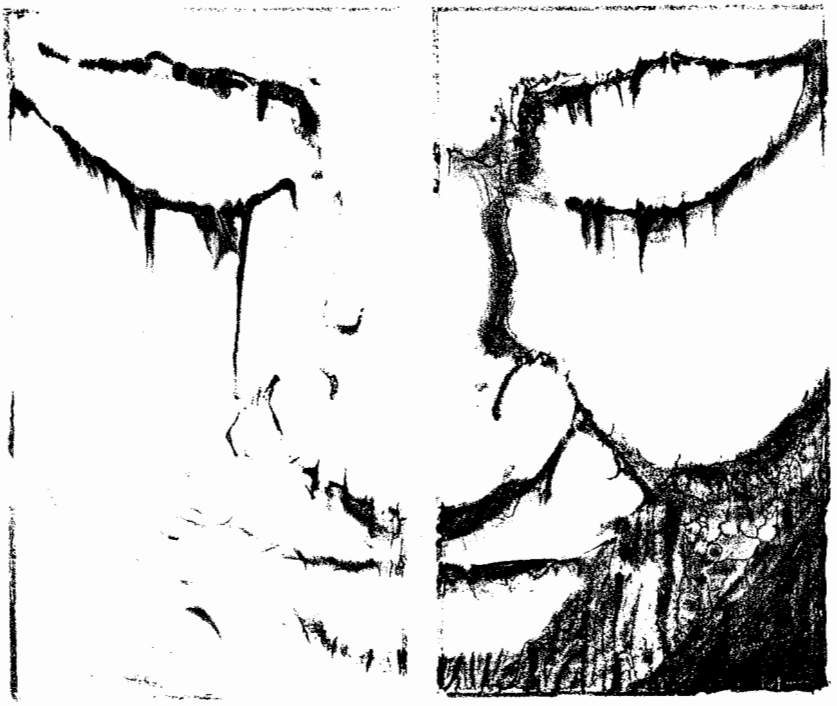

Photo by Lee Fatherree

Above: *"Marine Buddha, #1 and #2." 1983. Watercolor. Collection of the artist. Each panel: 90 by 51 inches.*

Facing page: *"Neil, A Portrait in Glass." 1983. Work in progress. Executed by Sheryl Cotleur. Each panel: 11 by 37½ inches.*

Text by Dolores Blalock
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His admirers consider his work mythic and poetic. His detractors find it self-obsessed, even scandalous. Narcissus Quagliata is an artist, an artist who has met the requirements for success in the 1980s. Said Neil Hassel, a close friend of Narcissus for the past ten years, "Narcissus is a relentless perfectionist. He is an artist, pure and simple. He is not a stained glass craftsman who happens to produce art, he is an artist who happens to work in stained glass. He has a true Renaissance quality about him."

Internationally acclaimed artist, lecturer, poet, businessman, teacher, philosopher, watercolorist, and author—the variety of Narcissus's work is remarkable. His panels are infused with a wide range of emotions. Some of his works express love, beauty, and pleasure; others deal with sex, melancholy, and death. His major works include portraits, water motifs, and a series based on the characteristics of shattered glass.

Much of his work is created as commissions for private homes, for offices, and for public buildings. His portrait of Susuki-roshi is one of two stained glass panels in the contemporary art collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Currently Narcissus is constructing a large wall of stained glass for the entry-

way of a high-rise building in San Francisco, developing a line of modern stained glass lamps, and occasionally consulting on color for a major glass manufacturer.

Narcissus is an incessant worker. His studio occupies the entire fifth floor (about 3,000 square feet) of the old Hamm's Brewery Building in an industrial part of San Francisco. Some of the long tables where the panels are built are covered with cartoon patterns—each piece of paper neatly coded. Other tables hold unleaded cut glass fit together like parts of a puzzle. Some panels are taped or waxed on large easels in order to view the glass in natural light, before it is leaded or foiled. Two walls of clear glass offer sweeping views of San Francisco and provide the light needed to create the large panels Narcissus is known for. Along another wall are large watercolors that Narcissus has painted.

Most of the studio is devoted to work space and storage for tools and supplies. There is also a kitchen area, an office, a sleeping loft, and a light table for sorting color slides. Along one wall are shelves of books—volumes in English and Italian on history, psychology, women's rights, drawing, painting, sculpture, anatomy, and literature.

On the bulletin board in the kitchen is a sign: "Bureaucracy: the conversion of human energy into solid waste." The kitchen has a comfortable, lived-in look, with a large table in the center where lunch with his apprentices and visitors often ends with lively discussions, arguments, and laughter.

Like a good executive, he reserves the day for running his studio and taking care of business transactions. He does much of his creative work at night, and closes the studio on Fridays and for one entire week each month so he can work there alone and uninterrupted.

"Narcissus teaches his apprentices that they've got to work—all the time," explains Rachel Mesrahi, his partner and the manager of the studio's technical production. "You don't stop working because you are tired or because someone invites you to their house for dinner. You learn how to sacrifice. Narcissus works until two or

Photo by William Kane

Photo by William Kane

Above: *"The Glance." 1982. Collection of the artist. Executed by Sheryl Cotleur. 52 by 67½ inches.*
Facing Page: *"William Rush, A Portrait in Glass." 1983. Collection of William Rush, San Francisco, California. 74 by 55 inches.*

Photo by William Kane

"Melancholia." 1982. Collection of the artist. Executed by Kimiko Kogure. 55 by 56 inches.

three in the morning four or five nights a week. Then he gets up, comes to the studio and works all day there. How many people are willing to do that for their art work?"

Rachel grew up in New York, where she worked in the production department of a major New York advertising agency. She began stained glass as a hobby and enjoyed it so much she quit her job to seek adventure (and a place to learn more about glass) in San Francisco. Shortly after arriving, she interviewed with Narcissus.

"I first started working with Narcissus in 1974 as an apprentice. He was basically a beginning, struggling artist then—a painter who changed his medium," she explains. "He taught classes at the Art Institute to finance his art materials. Money was tight. We would buy lead six strands at a time. It's different now. We buy cases of lead and glass.

"I worked with him for several years as an apprentice and on a freelance basis. Finally we went our separate ways, and I worked on other projects including stained glass for the San Francisco Exploratorium with Rich Posner.

"Later I joined Narcissus again to work on *The Dancer's* panel. The project had taken him three years to design and cut. I put it together in three months. We saw that together we could produce an incredible amount of work. And he always credits my work. On our panels are two signatures—his and mine. Now I handle the technical production. We decided to go into partnership to share the responsibility.

"This frees him to make the contacts needed to sell the work," Rachel remarks. "Up to that point, he was doing everything. He was making glass, supporting the studio, supervising, buying all materials, teaching at the studio and the Art Institute, making client contacts, writing, and lecturing. And it was too much. The partnership has worked out. It's been financially profitable for both uf us."

Narcissus pursues his personal fine art and his commissions with rigor, planning, and hard work. "A few artists have very strong personalities and I think Narcissus falls into that category," says his secretary Andrew Korniej, a tall, thin, witty young man with several years experience working in major London art galleries.

"Narcissus is an entrepreneur," Andrew says. "He is not just concerned with the making of the glass. Many artists dissociate themselves from business, placing themselves in the all-encompassing care of a gallery that promotes them and handles their finances. Narcissus handles all that himself. He has galleries that show his work, but he made the contacts. He has a very strong business sense."

"Narcissus has always had this business ability," says his friend Neil Hassel. "It's natural simply because of the way he grew up in Rome. His father had a career as a politician as well as an architect. His mother was a Jungian psychoanalyst. She was American, born in New

York of Italian parents, and earned her degree from Barnard College before moving to Rome. His father became powerful and was very hard driving and pragmatic. His mother was tough, too, but she had sensibility and depth. It's like the two sides of what it takes to be an artist. Narcissus grew up in an environment in which art and politics and negotiating coexisted and intermingled. That's what he saw when he was a kid."

Roots Of Innovation

Narcissus was born in 1942 in Rome where he began his art training studying painting with Giorgio de Chirico and others. "He has a classical education," says Jack Weller who teaches Art and Consciousness at John F. Kennedy University in Orinda, California. Jack and Narcissus have been friends for the past 15 years. "Growing up, he read literature in Latin as well as Italian. He has read the Greek classics, Aristotle, and Plato. He loves to discuss questions of philosophy."

About 20 years ago Narcissus came to the United States and studied with Richard Diebenkorn and Elmer Bishoff at the San Francisco Art Institute where he received his Master's degree in painting in 1968. During his university days, he also studied meditation for seven years with Zen Master Shunru Suzuki-roshi whose teachings profoundly affected his life and work.

In 1970 Narcissus left San Francisco and spent four years among the redwoods of Mendocino County where he built his own house and studio in the wilderness. "I had lived most of my life in cities. I moved to the country because I wanted to live life on a more primitive, simple level—a very physical level," he explains. "The experience was very important to me. I learned to build shelter, to hunt, and survive with independence. I learned to be alone." During this time, he began to work seriously in stained glass.

"When I met Narcissus, we were out in the middle of the redwoods at the end of all these dirt roads. We were there for the same reason—to escape European culture," Neil Hassel recalls. "When you grow up in an old culture, it's suffocating. You want to escape from it and go somewhere totally fresh and virgin, unmarred in which you can make your own mark. That's what brought him to the woods for three or four years in order to gain creative space where nothing existed made by man.

"It gives you the confidence to start making your own mark. When you've gained your confidence and you've got power and trust in yourself, you can go back into these old cultures. Then you suddenly realize the density and depth they've given you," Neil explains.

In order to pursue his art work, Narcissus returned to San Francisco in 1974. He was thrust abruptly from the country quiet into a very alive urban lifestyle when he opened a large studio in Project One, a communal collection of artists, politicos, rock and rollers, photographers, and theater people. "I lived there for seven

Photo by William Kane

"Reflection Doors." 1981. Bloome residence, Los Angeles, California. Executed by Rachel Mesrahi. 7 by 6 feet.

years," he says. "It was a tremendously charged creative atmosphere and a rich experience." At Project One, he began writing a book on glass and started producing his first major art pieces and commissions. Gradually his work was exhibited and began to sell.

His book *Stained Glass: From Mind to Light* was published in 1976. "This book is an important contribution to the field," comments Rick Snyderman. "Narcissus was thorough. He did a great deal of research, immersing himself in the art process. So he gave as much to the field as he took from it. He wasn't really a follower of somebody else's ideas. He developed processes. He didn't copy them. That's one reason his work is important."

His work has been exhibited in museums and galleries across the country including the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York and the Renwick Gallery in the Smithsonian. A panel titled *Nightmare I* was part of a group show, "New Glass: A Worldwide Survey," sponsored by the Corning Museum. His work has been displayed in Japan, England, France, and Germany.

The panels many people find the most striking are his stained glass portraits of individuals who intrigue him. The life-sized (or larger) portraits in stained glass that Narcissus loves to create make traditional oil paintings seem rather staid. To create these portraits Narcissus uses photography as a starting point to capture fleeting moments in a person's life.

These unusual portraits began as abstract and symbolic pieces. Today the images are realistic depictions of individuals, accurate in the smallest details—a wrist watch, certain jewels, a hat, or telephone, even curls in the hair. He works to capture the more timeless essence of the person.

"I think it's interesting that Narcissus has evolved this way of expressing the contemporary portrait," Rick Snyderman says. "It's a continuation of a long tradition in the history of art and painting. Narcissus has a very clear sense of the history of art."

"I always look at Narcissus's work the way I would look at a book of art through time," agrees Kathie Bunnell. "I get a sense of what has been done, then I would see his as a fresh approach with all that knowledge in it. He has all that knowledge. He is a person who understands line. He can really draw. He is a real painter, too. He is one of the few people I know who works in glass and is also a very good artist in other media. For two-dimensional design, he's got the most mastery of anyone I know. There are many approaches to stained glass, and I think he would be the first to say 'Anything goes—do what you want, take from any source you want.' But he can say this very well with the knowledge that he can *really* draw and you can see it in his work."

"Because Narcissus has such an innate sense of how to use glass in a painterly fashion, his work is extraordinary. There is just no one else who does that kind of work," says Rich Posner whose art, combining social and political commentary in glass, has been termed

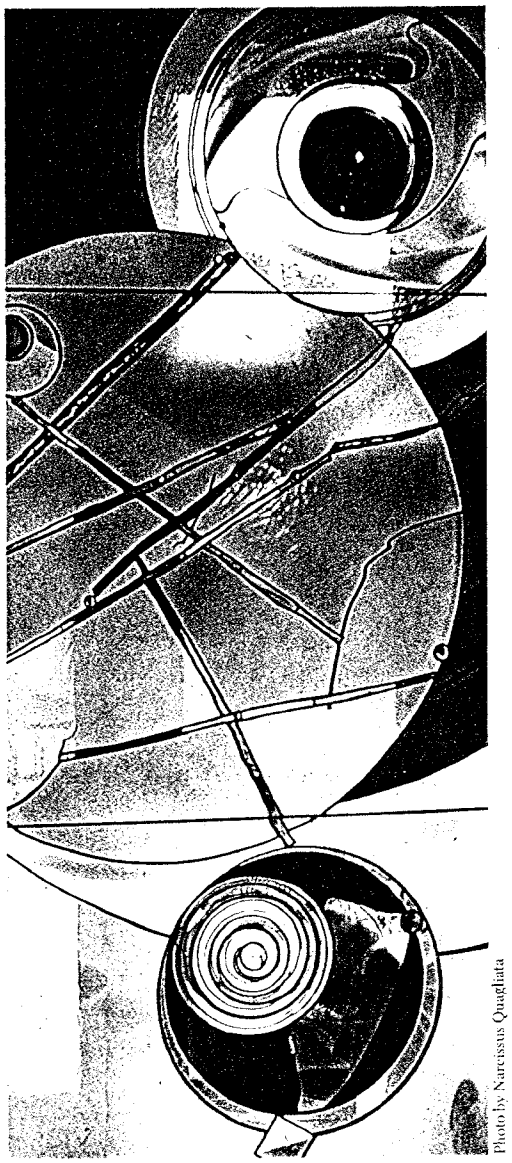

Photo by Narcissus Quagliata

"Untitled." 1980. Morgantini residence, Rome, Italy. Executed by Rachel Mesrahi and Sheryl Cotleur. 10 by 4 feet.

luminous journalism. "Like any good writer or artist, there is a strong sense of authorship . . . of I-ness in what he does. Like the rest of us, he has a multitude of sources he begs, borrows, and steals from. Whatever he does, he transforms it. He has developed a whole style of full-scale portraiture. It's only a matter of time before there is a major museum exhibit of it."

The Artist and Patrons

"Narcissus has a cross cultural plus," Rich points out. "In temperament he's very much an American. He's not bound by European traditions; he wants to use and discard traditions as they fit his needs. But he also comes from the Italian tradition of the court artist.

"There's a system he brought from Rome and reconstructed in San Francisco, going back to the popes and the Medicis. Some of his clients are new Medicis in that sense," Rich says. "Narcissus has generated and transported that sense of patronage to the United States and is finding his own clients, his own network to support his work here, in the same way Goya or Manet did . . . a better example would be Velazquez, the Spanish painter who did court paintings of nobility and royalty. Beyond being representations of the sitter, Velazquez portraits have a psychological content to them. That's what interested me about Narcissus's work. There are many layers to what he does."

"The European influence on Narcissus's work is indirect in the sense that he has a different feel of time from most Americans," comments Neil Hassel. "American sense of time is shorter. There is such a difference in being raised in Rome where centuries of history are layered on top of each other, visually and emotively. It becomes worthwhile spending four or five years on one piece. Because in the end, when you're dead (and you realize this when you're from an old culture), you're only remembered for a few pieces anyway.

"That's why Narcissus searches for very powerful archetypal states of being in the people and things he works with," Neil continues. "He won't do a portrait of somebody unless they interest him on this level. You can't say 'do a portrait of me.' If nothing comes out of it that he personally can relate to, he won't do it. He's only interested in spending time with people who fascinate him."

For example, Jack Weller recalls a man who lived outdoors near the studio in San Francisco. "The guy would collect papers and bottles for recycling. He ate out of dumpsters. He lived like a wolf. He wouldn't talk to people. You could call him a tramp or a bum. Narcissus watched that man for years, approached him, and did some sketches. He has completed three watercolors on the subject and now will make a large stained glass three panel screen entitled "Porca Miseria Series."

"Narcissus is not easily fazed," Neil Hassel says. "He presents people for what they are. He does not try

Photo by Kimiko Kogure

Narcissus with hand sculpture, 1982.

Photo by Lee Fatherree

to alter them. Take it or leave it. His portraits are good because he just goes to the core of people and presents it."

"Narcissus is probably just a little flamboyant for most people," says Susan Stinsmuehlen who serves on the Board of Directors for the Glass Art Society. "I say, who cares? He really was quite controversial coming out with some of the windows he has done on suicide, pain, and sexuality."

Rachel Mesrahi understands these reservations but sees changes in traditional approaches to stained glass as essential. "In the 1970s, a whole new influx of people with art backgrounds began demanding of glass what they would demand of painting. So it's a different attitude. In the studio, we question old values in terms of what you can do with the medium, then we come up with new approaches.

"What sets our studio apart from other studios is the attitude that we can do anything we want in design," she continues. "We developed a language that deals with lead lines, how to use glass, and reinforce windows. We kept incorporating techniques that became recognized as Narcissus's style. And that is what people come to us to learn as apprentices."

Photo by Roger Schreiber

"Untitled." 1981. Blown piece with nails.
Right: *Pilchuck, 1981. Narcissus working with William Morris.*

A Place to Learn

"Narcissus has always had an apprenticeship program. Now it's grown to nine apprentices," Rachel explains. "The program allows the studio to produce a lot of work. People exchange energy for experience and training in creative work. In a European apprenticeship, you learn from the master craftsman, and you exchange labor for information."

Narcissus conducts interviews to identify people seriously interested in careers in stained glass. Those accepted make a two-year commitment to work with him two days a week. In addition to learning techniques, apprentices are encouraged to create their own personal art work.

Photo by Roger Schreiber

Every [illegible] weeks on Monday night, we have a critique," says Dorothy Lenehan, who worked in stained glass for eight years in Montana before apprenticing with Narcissus. She has a long-term and sincere dedication to her art work. "We'll start at about 4 in the afternoon. Four or five people will bring in work and we'll be there 'til 9 that night. Narcissus will go on for hours talking, and everybody throws in ideas," she explains. "It's so much better than we can get somewhere else. The more students demand of his time, the more giving he is. The apprenticeship is a very good exchange. Very profitable on both sides."

"I first learned stained glass in 1979 when I took a class with Narcissus at the California College of Arts and Crafts," says Kimiko Kogure, a young artist. "In the first class Narcissus said, 'Look inside yourself and draw anything you feel that is you... deep inside of you.' I experimented and found I could express myself in glass in a way I couldn't in other art forms like glass blowing or photography.

"I apprenticed for two years with Narcissus and worked as his teaching assistant at Pilchuck Glass Center. Finally there was a point where he said, 'I don't have anything else to teach you.' That was my graduation."

Since that time Kimiko has developed her art—fragile, delicate studies in pastel elegance using slumped glass and mixed media. She's now working on a large environmental commission in the Bay Area. "Narcissus is a very philosophical person," Kimiko continues. "We don't really need to talk about stained glass. We can talk about our lives, ideas... or what kind of choices to make. He's available on that level. Not just how can I put this lead together or how can I cut glass; it's beyond that.

"In a philosophical way, I learned a lot from him. He told me we have to enjoy what we are doing in order to make something that appeals to other people. We always have to trust ourselves. Japanese philosophy, my background, is more to ignore yourself or to be polite and hide yourself. What Narcissus taught me was to have confidence. You have something good. Love yourself. Express the love and confidence in your work. That's what I learned from Narcissus.

"Also Narcissus taught that there isn't any one direction that you have to follow," Kimiko states. "He does beautiful commission work, he does personal art pieces. He does some functional work, like lamps. We can be flexible doing many different kinds of work. Not just one category. Sculpture pieces, functional pieces. Artists can make functional pieces and still be artistic."

Another apprentice, Jack Hall, has worked with Narcissus for the past year. "I first saw his work at Portcon. The fact that he had the ability to do *The Glance* drew me to him. You look at it and ask, 'That's glass?' His work has more sophistication and elegance than you usually see," Jack says.

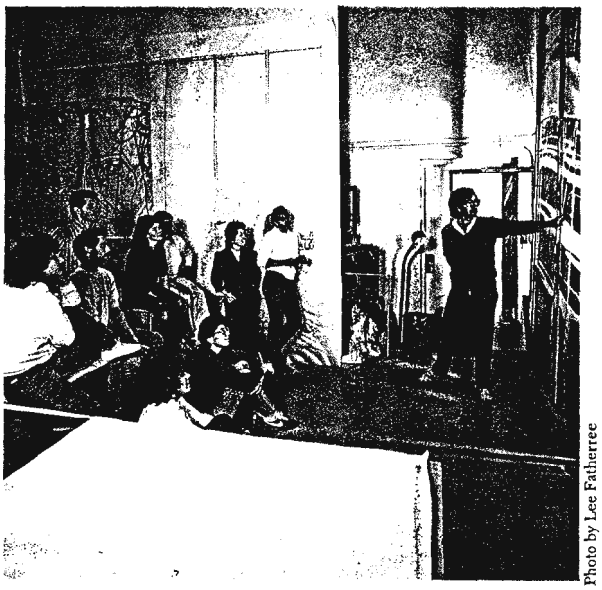

Photo by Lee Fatherree

Above: *Studio shot of Narcissus and students, 1983.*
Facing Page: *Rachel Mesrahi and Narcissus in his studio, 1983.*

Photo by Lee Fatherree

As he talks, Jack is working on a panel with a slow and careful precision derived from years of university science training, his background before he apprenticed. "Rachel has the patience of Job. She's wonderful and instructs us on techniques," he explains. "There's a lot of input from Narcissus about his designs and choices of certain glass and what he is trying to do with the piece. It's not like he designs the piece and the apprentices just knock it out. He instills in you a real feeling for the piece. You get a great deal of personal attention, not only during critiques but throughout the day."

Rick Snyderman visited Narcissus' studio recently. "It's unusual to see a studio as organized as his," he comments. "Narcissus is really sustaining a number of people in the pursuit of his own work. He is not an individual artist who has only himself to answer to. There's a staff of people who have to work as a team and there has to be a high degree of communication—and not just business communication. But a very high level of personal understanding. The ideas have to come across, not just the technical details. A sense of what should be happening has to come across because that's how the work gets completed. So it's a very highly charged, exciting and intensely personal creative environment."

Narcissus relaxes for a while in an attractive San Francisco townhouse where he lives with Patricia Hooper, a writer, and his son Orfeo. Interestingly, there are none of his stained glass windows in his home, just one of his lamps and a few blown pieces.

In addition to his San Francisco residence, he also maintains a home and studio in Italy, where he is working on watercolors and commissions. The pace of his travel and work seems relentless and demanding, psychologically and physically. He has earned many credits—an artist of international recognition, a successful businessman, an eloquent writer, an inspiring teacher. Yet, these labels do not truly define him or his work.

In conversation, Narcissus at one moment seems arrogant and self-centered, while in the next moment he may be generous, warm, irreverent (and fun)... an intriguing combination that makes him elusive. "A lot of people might say that he always shows a lot of confidence. But he is sensitive and has a vulnerable nature, too," says Kathie Bunnell. "I think everywhere he goes, Narcissus is profoundly touched by things. He's an amazingly intelligent person. It's a rather immeasurable thing to say, but I do feel he's very complex, a very sophisticated thinker... perhaps a genius."

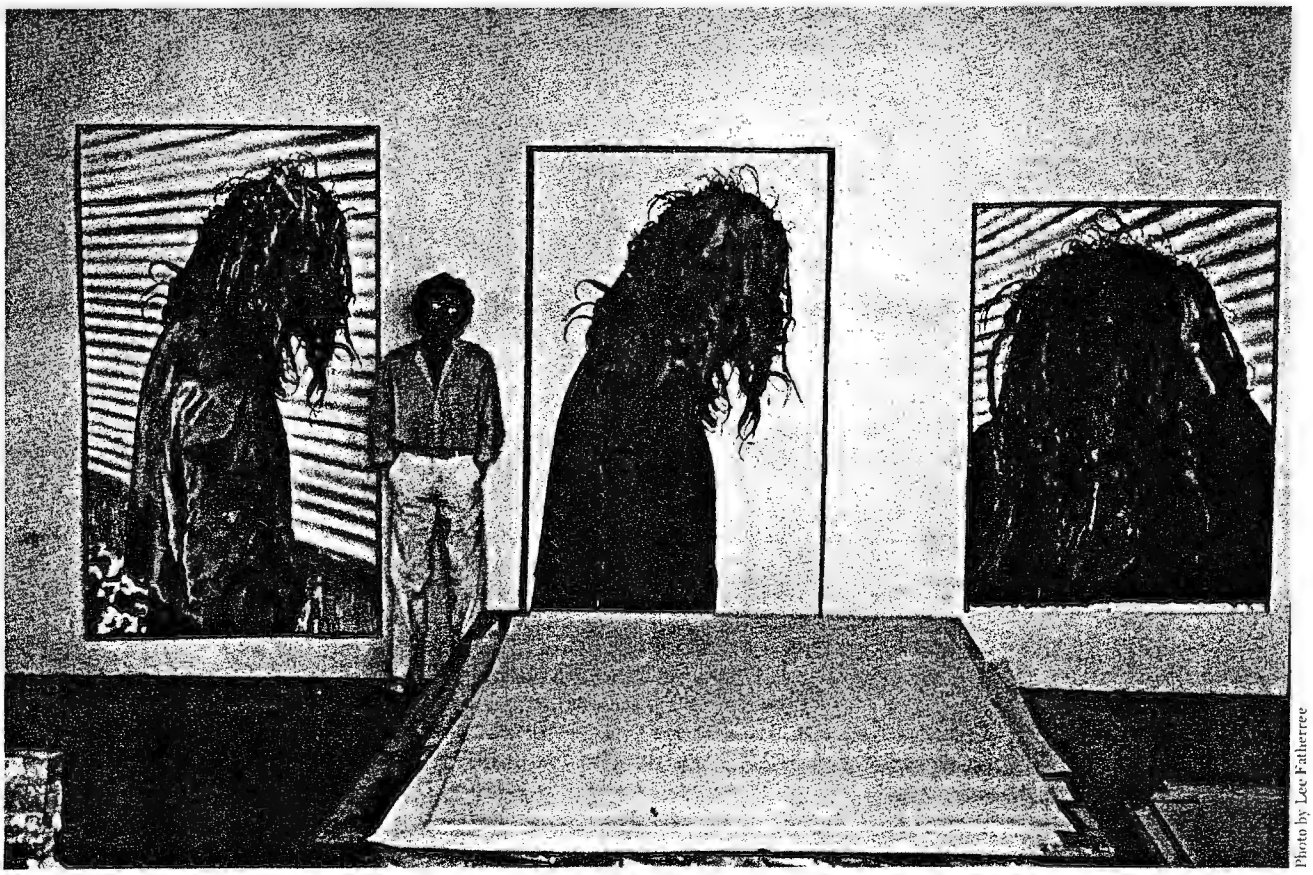

Photo by Lee Fatherree

Above: *Narcissus in his studio with the* Porca Miseria Series, *1982. Watercolor. Collection of the artist. 90 by 51 inches.*
Facing Page: *Students working in the studio, 1983.*

Interview With Narcissus Quagliata
by Dolores Blalock

Photo by Lee Fatherree

Narcissus on the balcony of his studio in San Francisco, 1983.

American Art Glass Quarterly: *What are your goals as an artist?*

Narcissus: For my work I have certain dreams. I see what I would like to do in the context of modern art. It's a difficult task I would like to achieve. I feel that the arts and crafts have been very separated especially in the past century. There's been such a distinction between fine art and crafts. I would like to see a reversal of that. Perhaps that's where my background really comes into play.

In Rome, I was brought up with a classical education. Italy is layered with centuries of fine art that is also a craft. And up to the last century, the line between what was craft and what was art was very blurred and the issue did not even exist. Rome is full of amazing fountains that are art pieces. But they were done in the spirit of commissioning crafts. Art and crafts were intermingled in a very meaningful way.

I feel that in our culture artists have become like existential philosophers dealing with issues of almost pure content, examining the meaning of art itself. They are doing interesting and amazing work, but the crafts people have gone their way doing decorative work, meeting the practical aesthetic needs of society. And this separation I found very absurd. Perhaps one of the major things that I would love to do with my life's work is show that you can be a philosopher—you can have existential concerns and still be very useful to society in a practical way.

I find that in our culture, artists have a society of their own and a language of their own. But there is no sense that this art is woven into everyday life—into buildings and environments. I really make an effort to stay very much in touch with society. I feel closer to the fabric of culture by participating in it.

On the other hand, I'm growing older. I've organized my practical studio and I have a fairly stable life. I'm enjoying the chance to make some major works that are purely fine art. I feel I have the maturity and the courage to make my own statement about what I deeply feel and believe in.

AAGQ: *What do you mean by major art pieces?*

Narcissus: Basically, I see these pieces as statements unto themselves that encompass all my feelings about being alive. Some will take me years to make; they are like different chapters of a novel—each has a subject. Some of them are on love, some are on misery, others are on beauty and time—the major feelings I think one is confronted with. I'm not doing these pieces for a client. I'm doing them for the development of my own consciousness.

Now I'm designing a huge three-piece stained glass window whose subject is a man who lives in the streets and alleys of the city—it is called the Porca Miseria series. It is a study of human misery and suffering. It is a statement about one aspect of the human condition. When I create a piece such as this one, I put all myself into it and I will not do another like it. They give my life a tremendous amount of meaning. I make these pieces for their own sake, just for the pure exploration of the feelings and ideas. And I let the pieces live their own lives. They will find a place. I was amazed when the portrait of Suzuki-roshi found its way into the collection of the Metropolitan Museum.

It seems that if you create a piece that is powerful, meaningful, expressive of something basic, it relates to everyone. That's what I consider to be a really successful piece—if it speaks of love or sex or pain or pleasure or misery, whatever the subject. I like to work the whole gamut, from the most tender and gentle feelings to the harshest and most painful. But I believe that once such a piece is done successfully it will have meaning to everybody.

AAGQ: *How would you compare stained glass and painting in terms of their impact on the viewer?*

Narcissus: If you took an image I did in watercolor and an image I did in stained glass, the one in stained glass will have more visual power. The only reason for this is that with glass you are dealing with direct light. The glass manipulates that light in a way that the viewer can perceive so intensely. When the piece is right, light coming through the glass has tremendous power.

So, much of why I choose glass as a medium is because I trust that when they are well lit their power can be truly unbelievable. It's the power of light. The combination of light itself and my ideas will create the force in these pieces.

AAGQ: *Why are so few people using glass to create fine art?*

Narcissus: In a way, the beauty of glass is an impediment to the growth of the art. People love glass almost too much—it is very seductive. A beginning painter could never do something beautiful because he wouldn't have the knowledge of how to use the paint nor the capacity to develop a depthful vision. But beginning stained glass artists give themselves the illusion that they are doing something beautiful because the glass itself is very beautiful. In reality they haven't done much. It's just a lot of pretty glass stuck together. Very few people really put any energy into quality design and quality ideas.

That's why glass is somewhat disrespected by the fine art establishment; it's so easy to do the obviously beautiful. But to put your self and your soul into glasswork is very difficult. Very few people have the discipline to work in stained glass. It takes strength to sustain the stress of not being seduced by its superficial beauty, but instead to do something meaningful.

AAGQ: *How has your training influenced your approach to glass?*

Narcissus: I believe that if you want to know how to do something, you've got to do it for years and years. I believe that I'm now beginning to understand what glass is about after ten years of working at it very hard.

What my background in Italy, all the art I was surrounded by there, and having studied with very accomplished living artists, has given me is a sense of standards that I must strive to achieve. It is hard to delude myself about my own accomplishments when all I have to do in Rome is take a walk and visit the Vatican Museum and the Sistine Chapel and take a look at what really great is like. Yet the Masters, whether they be modern, like Matisse or Picasso, or from the past, like Raphael or Piero della Francesca, establish a standard that I will always strive to achieve, whether I succeed or fail is another issue.

Most people in stained glass, for example, don't even try; they don't have that ambition. Most are fairly satisfied having a good studio that makes them a decent living. They just want to do stained glass. They enjoy the material. It's so beautiful. It's decorative, it's okay, it's nice. But that's not my goal. It's a very different goal I have. When I die I want to have had something to say that is truly my own... that is truly my vision of what can be done with glass and what I see as an artist.

AAGQ: *Your cultural background is unusual. How has this affected your work?*

Narcissus: Of course, my background has influenced my work. There's a part of me that loves California. I came when I was 20 and I really belong here in many respects. And a part of me loves the old world. I'm very Italian; I have property in Italy now and I'm very attached to a way of being, a way of feeling life that is very Mediterranean. Yet, there's a part of me that is contemporary American. So all these things are layered.

AAGQ: *How are you able to combine commissioned work with the creation of your fine art pieces?*

Narcissus: When I create for myself, rather than a client, I may do a design in a brief burst of energy or it may take me three years. I work on them until I am totally satisfied with the results. Each piece is very intense.

But I also like working on commission. I like doing pieces that are meaningful to other people. When I work on commissions, I use all my talent, know-how, and my ability to draw and choose glass. But I'm very conscious that the purpose of what I'm doing is to decorate and improve the quality of life in a given environment for the people who inhabit and use it. That is my task. I don't try to do more when I work on commission.

AAGQ: *What is innovative about your glasswork?*

Narcissus: I feel I have developed a language of leaded glass. In the past, leaded glass was used in a decorative manner or in an architectural manner. It was not used as a personal statement. I think I've done something unique in two ways. First, I have put things into windows that are very personal. I think what I have contributed to the world of glass is a willingness to bring my own personal life and observations into glass, which usually has been something one kept at a distance—decorative, pretty, or deeply religious, but never personal.

Also in the last ten years in the studio with the invaluable help of Rachel Mesrahi, Sheryl Cotleur, and others, we've developed techniques to follow my development in drawing. I decided to make the lead lines in my work a very important and expressive part. The line is almost like a brushed line. It must be very sensitive. We developed techniques in the past years to make an ever finer possibility of expression through difficult cuts and grinding and by making it all come together more like painting in glass. I want to continue that development.

AAGQ: *You are known for your portraits in glass. How did you develop this approach?*

Narcissus: When I got into stained glass, I noticed the characteristics of the glass itself as being important. I looked at it from the standpoint of applying paint. I was very much influenced by abstract expressionist painting, Jackson Pollack, and that whole school of just throwing the paint on the canvas, being very physical with the paint. When I studied at the Art Institute, I had some teachers who were painting in that manner. They weren't getting you to do images. They wanted you to take the paint and just put it on the canvas. Express yourself and be very direct.

So when I switched to glass, I took that same attitude in the beginning. I asked "what are the qualities of glass?" The qualities of glass it seemed to me were that it's very liquid, almost like water in one respect, and it's very brittle. It shatters. So I took these two qualities, and out of one I made my reflection

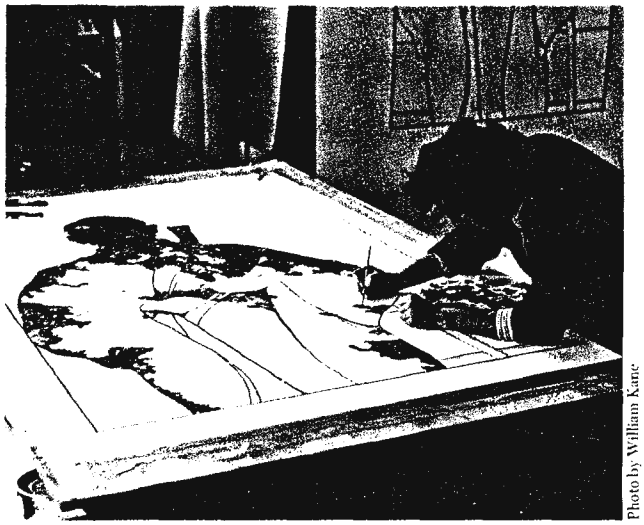

Photo by William Kane

Narcissus working on the watercolor of Suzuki Roshi, 1979.

series using water themes; from the second, I made a whole series that used the idea of the glass shattering. And this creates a tremendous amount of power and tension in the piece.

For example, *Stained Glass Suicide*, a self-portrait, had images of bullets riddling it. I believe I was the first person to work in a major way with the idea of the glass shattering. I took the material itself and said, "Look, this is the way it breaks." Well, the way it breaks should be a source for design. I designed the lines as if they had been impacted and cracked. The piece at the time was very shocking.

But after a certain point I wanted to get more descriptive and specific. I became more observant. A certain level of accuracy in conveying in portraits a particular person's feeling and self was important to me. So I've come to use photography as a valuable resource in the way I make my work. I investigate my environment and the people I want to work with. I put an enormous amount of energy into the quality of the photography I do. I spend a great deal of time with the person taking photographs sometimes over a period of several months. Then I select slides, project them on the wall and begin to draw from them. I don't copy them. I totally transform the image.

I'm interested in capturing something very transient in glass... a moment in a person's expression. That would be impossible to draw unless I had some photographic material I started from. That's why instead of posing people formally I work with the camera. I started using photography in relationship to the imagery about three years ago. There's not just a silhouette and symbolism that is my poetic association with them. I can show the actual style of clothing the people wear and significant details about their lives.

AAGQ: *What major changes have evolved in your work during the past decade?*

Narcissus: I do not need to be so direct with the symbolism. I can put the symbolism into the pieces by way of observation and description much more subtly. That's where the piece of Takako Sano, *The Glance*, for example, fits in. It's done mostly in white and clear glass. There's poetry and feeling in the piece. I can do it with subtlety, the line, the quality of the glass. And that's really where I think I've become a more mature artist.

I don't have to beat you over the head with it to make you feel it. I can rely on the sensitivity of the line. And I usually don't use very aggressive colors unless I need to say something that is aggressive. I usually tend to use more subdued colors. So in portraits, I have achieved a particular style, using photography, of portraying a single individual person psychologically and describing them accurately, not just symbolically.

The subjects of my pieces have become more sophisticated. In the past, for example, I did a directly sexual piece titled *The Opal Dance After The Earthquake* about Abigail, a former lover who was a stripper. *Stained Glass Suicide* was about emotional unrest, uncontrolled emotion. My more recent pieces, like *The Glance* or *Melancholia*, are about much more subtle emotions, much finer feelings. In the past, I used strong statements that were emotional, crude, and very effective because of that. What's happening now with my art work in my figure series is that I'm capable of getting much closer to a subject with more sophistication, more depth.

AAGQ: *What attracts you to water as a theme in your compositions?*

Narcissus: I find water a very magical substance. When I need to meditate, I try to go near water. I walk up a creek or on the beach. It's a very primal instinct, I think. My mind is always trying to think of a new way to represent water in stained glass. It's almost never-ending the way you can represent water. So it's one of my themes.

Glass and water are so related. When I have a chance, in a private residence particularly, I use water as a means of getting a decorative theme into a house. Water ripples and reflections in water are wonderfully decorative motifs. The glass is allowed a chance to do something very handsome because it's so much like water and adds a lightly meditative quality to an environment that I find people are unconsciously very attracted to.

One of the things I particularly like about the octagon window for the Malibu residence of Jerry and Jane Weintraub is that it is a point of arrival. It's like a perennial wave that frames a view of the ocean. The style is so completely, uniquely mine. It's very light and wispy. The piece is meant to be soothing and restful.

In contrast, I consider traditional stained glass to be heavy. It's like a cheesecake or plum cake, full of nuts and raisins. Rather than do something decorative and rich that comes from Victorian taste—much stained glass today is done in that spirit—I take instead the attitude of a painter. I look at the glass with a fresh eye to see what it can do.

You see, people don't realize that glass will do just about anything. So it's the responsibility of the artist to direct what it's going to do. The material does not naturally tend to be Art Nouveau or Victorian or extremely modern. The material is just the material. Light is light. What's needed is a fresh outlook in the way light and glass are used.

AAGQ: *How are your watercolors related to your work?*

Narcissus: My watercolors are my work; sometimes I think they are the essence of it. I used to paint in oils; but then when the fascination for glass swept me away, I experienced a real conflict within. I love painting, but the two materials just did not seem compatible. I didn't paint for years after I began working with glass, until I saw that watercolor and glass were compatible, even related, media. I view these watercolors as finished works of art unto themselves, connected in content to my glass but separate from the preparatory, colored cartoons that I make to illustrate windows to my clients before construction.

As my studio got larger and larger I felt that I had become more like the director of the orchestra than the player of a single instrument that I love very much. I then had so many people playing the instruments that I felt a loneliness at not being fully connected to all the aspects of the work: I used to cut the glass myself, put the lead on myself, and solder it myself. But as I got more commissions and taught people who, with practice, became even better at the technical tasks than myself, I felt a distance from my work. This got me into painting again, with watercolor. In my watercolors it is my hand that is doing the whole thing. Nobody can help me, and that keeps me on the edge. I don't ever want this hand to be afraid of drawing.

AAGQ: *Some of your recent work includes glass sculptures of hands. Is this a new direction?*

Narcissus: About three years ago, I taught stained glass at Pilchuck. I came in contact with other artists who worked with glass in a very different way—fused glass, blown glass, and so on. And I began to appreciate other ways of working in glass. My glass sculptures of hands are the result of being in that environment.

I realized I could fuse the glass and form it with wires. I just began to think of these hands as if they were alive with energy lines, nerve endings, veins. By fusing the glass first flat, suspending it in a kiln and reheating it, I could distort these hands to have very different effects. Some will be very painful and dramatic. Or pierce with nails—very aggressive. Some will be lyrical, very soft, with tender veins. I just do exactly what I please. If they turn out, that's fine. If they don't, I try again. There are direct, expressive pieces I love very much. They are not commissions. They don't take a long time. They happen intensely and quickly. It's like sketching is to painting. It's direct, immediate, very expressive. I do exactly what I please whether people like it or not. I don't have an obligation to please anybody. It fulfills my own desire to put out my ideas and I take chances.

I think it's very important in an artist's life to always keep a part of their life completely devoted to taking chances, no matter how much responsibility you get in making buildings, doing commissions, and so on. I never take for granted what I am going to do next and I cultivate that part of myself. I think it through then I do something. That's very important to me. I call it emotional courage, artistic courage... not to be determined by people's definition of you.

AAGQ: *How do you define success for yourself as an artist?*

Narcissus: To me success is the ability to be free to do what I want. It's having the courage to do what I want and make it work. When success is defined as having many works that have been bought for a lot of money and appreciation by others for what I've done, I have a rope around me that is so tight I can hardly breathe. But when I still have the capacity to surprise myself and everyone, it makes an explosive combination. Then I still feel free to look at the world like a child and say, "Hey, maybe I want to do this." And I come up with some crazy idea and make it work. People are buying my sculptures. It's absurd. I never thought of selling them when I did them. I just thought of the experience of how crazy it was to do these really strange things in the kiln. When somebody buys it, I'm absolutely astonished.

I remember the first time somebody bought one of my figures, I was astonished. A figure in glass? Who would want it? And what the hell would they do with it? At that time there was no such thing. Now I've done a lot of them and I've done some on commission. Now I take it almost for granted. But at that time, I remember the same feeling. When I did my first two figures, self-portraits, my motive for doing them was entirely to express my ideas at my own risk. And that is the quality that is perhaps the most important to me to keep always alive in that way... to have the courage to express myself at any cost at whatever risk.

It's ultimately such a pleasure to live by the fruits of my imagination as I have done for the last few years... to work with ideas, make them happen in the world and have that support me. That is success to me. The experience is tremendously exciting and a perpetual risk. This is the direction I want to continue in the future.