London Glassblowing's Peter Layton is on a mission to put glass on the art world map.

As he turns 80, Charlotte Abrahams asks him how close he has come to his holy grail.

Portrait by David Ellis

Peter Layton has spent the past 12 months celebrating 60 years at the helm of London Glassblowing, the gallery that he and his wife, glassmaker Susan, founded in 1959, which is widely acknowledged to be one of the best in Europe. He will spend some of this year observing his 80th birthday. Many people in his position would consider that this was an appropriate moment to start thinking about downshifting and reflecting on their legacy, but when I bring up the subject of legacy, Layton looks surprised. "I suppose I should have thought about that," he says eventually, "but I have been rather busy of late." I can see I am surprised. "I have known Layton as a professional for more than a decade and he is at full of energy now as he was on London Glassblowing's 60th birthday. He is still energetic; still has a pollo shirt and sports trousers, he doesn't look any older other."

We meet at the gallery, a 500sqm space on London's Berners Street, a vibrant area of south London bordering with City Hall (the Shard is just up the road) and winds down into the装备ed, wind-filled space. The exhibition space uncovers this most section, while the back is home to an open-hearth, working glass allowing study, where the furnace more 365 days a year. Upstairs is a large office with glass that reveals the underlying spirit of foundations. A quiet space on the left, and he sits next to a desk on which are a group of four beige-shaped pieces

Pete Layton at The London Glassblowing gallery in Berners Street, with one of the few glassieres to records, from £3,500 for a unique glass sphere from the Woodland series, from £400 glass spheres from the Labyrinth series, from £500, and past as kind of glass, £1,500.
The collaborations with major art institutions speak eloquently of the artists who provided the inspiration.

made from clear glass, each containing a viscous-looking vivid red globule surrounded by a network of lace-like tracery. These are part of the Burano series (from £5,800 for a pair, examples pictured above right and on previous pages). He puts one in my hands and I am taken aback by its weight – it is more than 7kg. The extraordinary beauty of these vessels is an interesting contrast with the fragility of the pattern, which was inspired both by the lacemaking tradition of the Venetian island of Burano and a desire to explore the influences of the glassmaking traditions of its neighbour Murano. (Layton has used the “flying glass” blowing technique, which originated on the celebrated glassmaking island, to create this lace-like effect.)

We move on to a line of five angular vessels that appear to have been splashed with paint. Blobs of yellow and squiggles of blue dance on a textural black and white background. Behind them is a cluster of tall, triangular vases decorated with gestural monochromes. Both of these series are part of a commission that Layton made for the Royal Academy of Arts in response to its recent Abstract Expressionism show. The paint-splashed ones are after Jackson Pollock (from £980, pictured top), the black and white lines (£2450) echoing Franz Kline. “I have been interested in that art movement for a long time,” Layton explains. “As a potter based in California during the mid-1960s, I felt I was part of the clay movement known as abstract expressionist ceramics, which was an offshoot of the abstract expressionist school of painting. Our heroes were Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock among others. The spontaneity of action painting – emphasising the importance of process, material and gesture – chimed exactly with my own work in clay and later with hot glass. Pollock, for example, was painting a moment in flux, and that’s what glassmaking is: a frozen moment of decision and discovery, recording controlled chance and drama. The splashes and dollops of a Pollock are just right for glass.”

Aesthetically suitable they may be, but achieving them is an extremely complex process – one that requires Layton and his team (there are eight resident glassblowing artists currently working at London Glassblowing) to build up the colours, layer by layer, before the blowing process can begin. For the multi-hued Pollock series, clear glass was rolled in powdered black to form a background and then given a coat of white to create texture. (The white powder reacts and breaks up when mixed with black.) The delicate lines were formed by rolling the black and white glass in very thin strands of coloured glass and granules, while the drip-like marks are the result of a process that Layton describes as “drib-dabbing”. This involves attaching a small point of hot, solid colour to the surface and quickly stretching it to a soft, curling linear scumble which, when heated, turns into a drip.

It is not the first time Layton has collaborated with major art institutions. In 2012 he produced the Arrival of Spring collection (stoneform, £3,600, pictured on previous pages) for the Royal Academy to mark David Hockney’s exhibition The Bigger Picture, and in 2015 he worked with the National Gallery on a series called Monet (dropper, £580, pictured on final page). These pieces speak eloquently of the artists who provided the inspiration – the Monet collection, for example, is full of the dappled sunlight and watery reflections of the artist’s garden at Giverny – but Layton is not attempting to replicate. “I do want to capture the spirit of each painter,” he says, “but I also want the medium to speak for itself.”

Layton has been fascinated by glass ever since his first encounter with glassblowing at a summer school when he was working as a ceramics lecturer at the University of Iowa in the mid-1960s. “What I loved best about being a potter was opening the kiln and finding out what had happened,” he explains. “Glass has that same sense of surprise and more: it’s alchemy. You take a mix of sand,
chalc and wood ash and transform it into a solid that touches all our lives every day – think of windows, light bulbs, communications, optics… The possibilities of glass are extraordinary – it can be fused, bent and moulded in a kiln; when it's cold, it can be etched, engraved and polished; forms and images can be suspended in it. It is an incredibly seductive medium. Layton returned to the UK from the US in 1968, determined not only to be a glassmaker but also to share his passion. There was little in the way of a contemporary art glass scene in Britain at that time: “Glass was functional and the making happened in big factories behind closed doors,” he says, so he was a largely self-taught pioneer. In 1969, he helped another glass protagonist, Sam Herman (former head of glass at the Royal College of Art), to build a furnace in Covent Garden where they established the Glasshouse Workshop, then, seven years later, he converted a townhouse works on the south bank of the Thames into a high-end glass workshop and gallery. London Glassblowing was born. It was run on a shoestring in those early days, subsidised by Layton’s teaching work and a large overdraft. He and the two or three glass artists who worked with him kept experimenting, producing pieces inspired by shell forms, pebbles and lichens in iridised colours so vibrant they shone. “We needed a type of glassware that looked good in any light,” Layton explains, “so we researched iridising and eventually created an amazing palette of colours.”

Creative determination combined with commercial nous has been the secret of Layton’s success. Those early iridised pieces were startlingly original from a technical perspective, but more importantly they sold, ensuring the gallery’s continued existence. That has mattered for two reasons. The first, of course, is that selling glass objects is how he pays the bills (which are considerable – he employs between 15 and 20 people and that furnace never goes out), but also because from the start he has been on a mission to raise the profile of glass as an art form and used the gallery as the main way of achieving his goal. (Layton has championed the medium in other ways too: in 1971, he set up a glass course at Hornsey School of Art, now part of Middlesex University, and in 1997 he initiated and co-founded the Contemporary Glass Society.) “Putting glass on the map has been a major preoccupation,” he says. “London Glassblowing has introduced thousands of people to glass. They come into the gallery every day and see it being blown – and for most of them it is a jaw-dropping experience.”

Eleven years ago, in a book published to mark the gallery’s 30th anniversary, Layton wrote that he looked
forward to a time when glass would be the equal of other art forms. A decade on, does he feel this has happened? "No, but we are making headway," he says. "I do see fine artists working in glass now and, although glass is still massively undervalued, prices have risen."

Times are certainly good for London Glassblowing – 2016 was the gallery’s best year yet with sales up by over 10 per cent on 2015, while its bestselling series, Paradiso (examples pictured on previous and opening pages, from £350), notched up £99,000 worth of sales. First launched in 2004, Layton has recently added two new iterations, Black Paradiso and an amber, pink and purple version, which is as yet unnamed. Staring into Black Paradiso’s iridescent depths, I find a streak of papal purple. The discovery is a joyful surprise and perfectly encapsulates the appeal of Layton’s work. Paradiso may be a tried-and-tested, crowd-pleasing, bill-paying line but it is exquisitely crafted by a man with such an instinctive sense of colour that, when we go for lunch, he orders a pea soup which almost palates against the blue of his shirt.

As we eat, Layton talks about a glass pyramid he made in 1988 for a conference in Nový Bor in the Czech Republic. "It was 5.5m high and constructed from hot-glass bars," he says. "I had no idea whether or not I could make glass do that, but it worked. It was one of the highlights of my career." The thoughtful silence that follows makes me wonder if he feels that the commercial constraints of managing a large gallery in London have meant compromising his creative urges. "Well, running this place is not like working alone in a garage," he says. "I am aware of the costs of the studio and the fact that I employ people. I’m not sure if it has held me back – we do what we do here better than most. However..." he continues after a pause, "I would still like to do a body of work that I feel takes the medium forward."

Layton has already started experimenting. "What I have in mind is to take the Georgia O’Keeffe-inspired series [from £260, created to coincide with the recent retrospective at Tate Modern] in a more fine-art direction," he says. "I am doing a lot of sketching on the blowing iron at the moment, so there may be good things to come." It is a tantalizing thought. +