

# STEVE TOBIN: THE GLASS GARDEN

by Richard Torchia

(From the catalog)

Steve Tobin's "The Glass Garden" fits ideally within the Levy Gallery's purview. Not only does it demonstrate the gallery's support of Philadelphia craftsmen, it underscores the use of the space as a laboratory for artistic experimentation.

Tobin is unique among glass artists; before reaching the age of 30, he had already produced several completely resolved bodies of work. After mastering the full range of techniques associated with art glass, he embarked on an adventurous path toward more innovative applications of the material, including architectural constructions and outdoor installations. Pieces such as *The River of Glass*, a forty-foot cascade of glass strands, and *Bottle Village*, an acre of fused perfume bottles, epitomize his interest in incorporating glass with its surroundings. "The Glass Garden" merges Tobin's skill as a maker of glass objects with his more conceptual concern for presentation and content. These arrangements of cocoonlike sculptural forms are ambitious in scale for the medium and represent a departure from any of Tobin's previous work. Each piece is specifically designed to be placed in two very different settings—the rolling hills of the Pennsylvania countryside near his studio, and the more urban, hard-edged interior of the Levy Gallery. The dual nature of these pieces is represented in the accompanying photographs that show each sculpture within its specific outdoor location. In addition to recontextualizing the cocoons, these photographs emphasize the polemics between nature and culture, shelter and exposure, confinement and release—dichotomies Tobin has consciously set up in each of the works.

"The Glass Garden" expresses the artist's interest in creating evocative impressions rather than literal images. While Tobin has labeled the slender spiraling forms "cocoons," the sculptures are redolent with a wide range of associations that include Greek vessels, sepulchers, the chambered nautilus, and the human figure.

For more than ten years, in glass studios in New York, Seattle, Venice, and Tokyo, Tobin has been developing the entire series, but only since last winter, with the creation of his own glass studio, in Coopersburg, Pennsylvania, has he been able to apply his innovative processes to the fabrication of these technically demanding sculptures. Tobin has investigated many unusual surface treatments, including a variety of unprecedented applications of metal foundry techniques. His novel approaches for prolonging the liquid state of large amounts of molten glass to extend working time, as well as developing new techniques for hoisting huge masses of molten glass within the studio, are not only particular to his own work but valuable to the evolution of large-scale work in glass. "The Glass Garden" is significant not only for its mysterious beauty and symbolic presence but for its departure from traditional conceptions about glass.