

Philip Baldwin and Monica Guggisberg

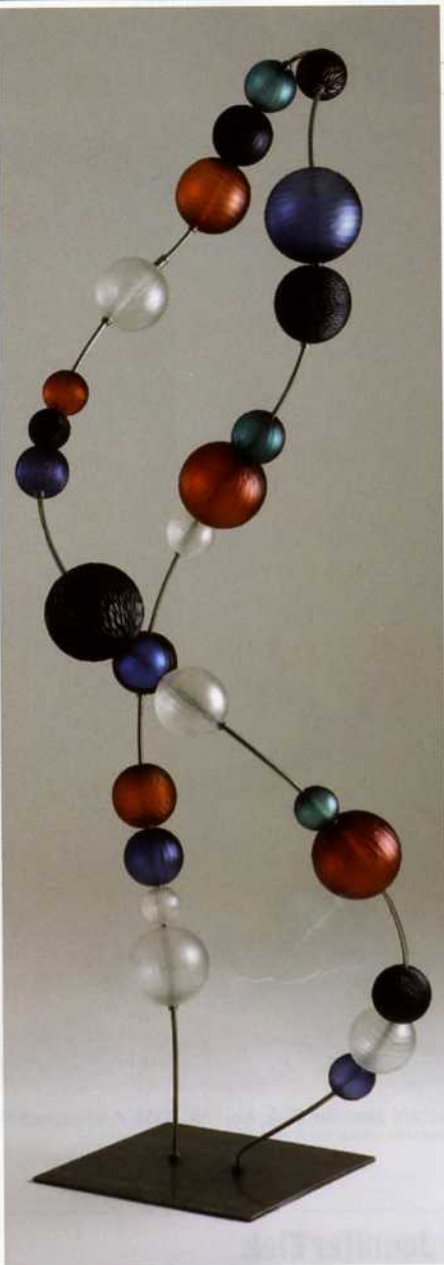
Circus of Spheres
Habatat Galleries
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Spheres delight the senses. They make me think of bubbles in a glass of champagne, tossing a ball to a child, pearls on a beloved's neck, or globes flying in the air. They're the perfect shape—insouciant, irrepressible, upbeat, vivacious, bulbous, optimistic, and well . . . round!

Philip Baldwin and Monica Guggisberg clearly feel much the same way, though perhaps with a bit more nuance. Their recent work juggles glass spheres with a mastery that manages to get to the form's curvy core. There are close to 120 glass spheres in the seven large sculptures in this exhibition—little ones and big ones, colored and mottled, smooth and incised, clustered together or isolated alone. It's a potpourri of spherism. Orbs for all seasons, orbs for all reasons—there is sphere upon sphere upon sphere!

How is one to approach such a celebration of the form? Let's start with the fabrication. Baldwin and Guggisberg's work for many years has been the consummate intersection of hot- and cold-working. These glass spheres are blown, often layered in color, and then cut and incised, usually making the spheres translucent. They are decorated with a seemingly infinite array of abstract patterns. The spheres are perfectly poised between their hot and cold natures, and the volume of air within them seems to push the surface outward as if to emphasize how the cold scraping has been etched into their very nature.



ABOVE Philip Baldwin and Monica Guggisberg, *The Rubberband*, 2004. Blown and cut glass. H 87, W 29, D 24 in. COURTESY HABATAT GALLERIES, CHICAGO

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But these would just be a jumble of pretty baubles if it were not for the armatures upon which they are strung. These slender metal rods, twisting and turning with elegant economy, are striking and powerful in and of themselves. They seem coiled, filled with tensile strength, and ready to release bursts of energy. Baldwin and Guggisberg pierce the spheres so they can suspend them on these metal coils much like precious beads in a necklace. Finely made little bolts hold each sphere securely in place. But the metal armature is never completely bejeweled by the spheres; Baldwin and Guggisberg use interruption and clustering to variegate the flow of spheres upon the metal, doling them out in controlled episodes of activity.

The palette of each piece is also carefully regulated, and often remains within a circumscribed tonal range. The design of each metal armature sets the tone for the individual sculptures. *The Amber Dancer* almost looks like a couple dancing as the two metal coils dovetail toward one another. A slight touch sends the elements gyrating and wobbling to and fro in rhythmic counterpoint. *The High Wire Act* resembles the long horizontal pole that hire wire daredevils use for balance. The work is bedecked with black, yellow, and dark blue glass spheres of various sizes. *The Archer* is a simple metal bow and single metal drawstring with glass spheres accreting upon it. But here again, the tension is in the bow, alive with only temporarily harnessed energy that seeks its release. This potential energy is in every piece.

Baldwin and Guggisberg make the most of this literal stress. *The Rubber Band* is particularly suggestive, seeming more like a Möbius strip, or a sinuous rendering of a chemical formula. It calls to mind some mutated DNA about to careen out of control and run amuck. But it doesn't. In every way this body of work is a balancing act. Both formally and conceptually, it is a dance of pressure and release with much broader implications. Akin to the impulses driving the late work of Vasily Kandinsky, Baldwin and Guggisberg see in the form of the sphere a playful gambit of cosmic import. Delivered with apparent whimsy is a metaphor for the vastly powerful forces that forever radiate around and within us.

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