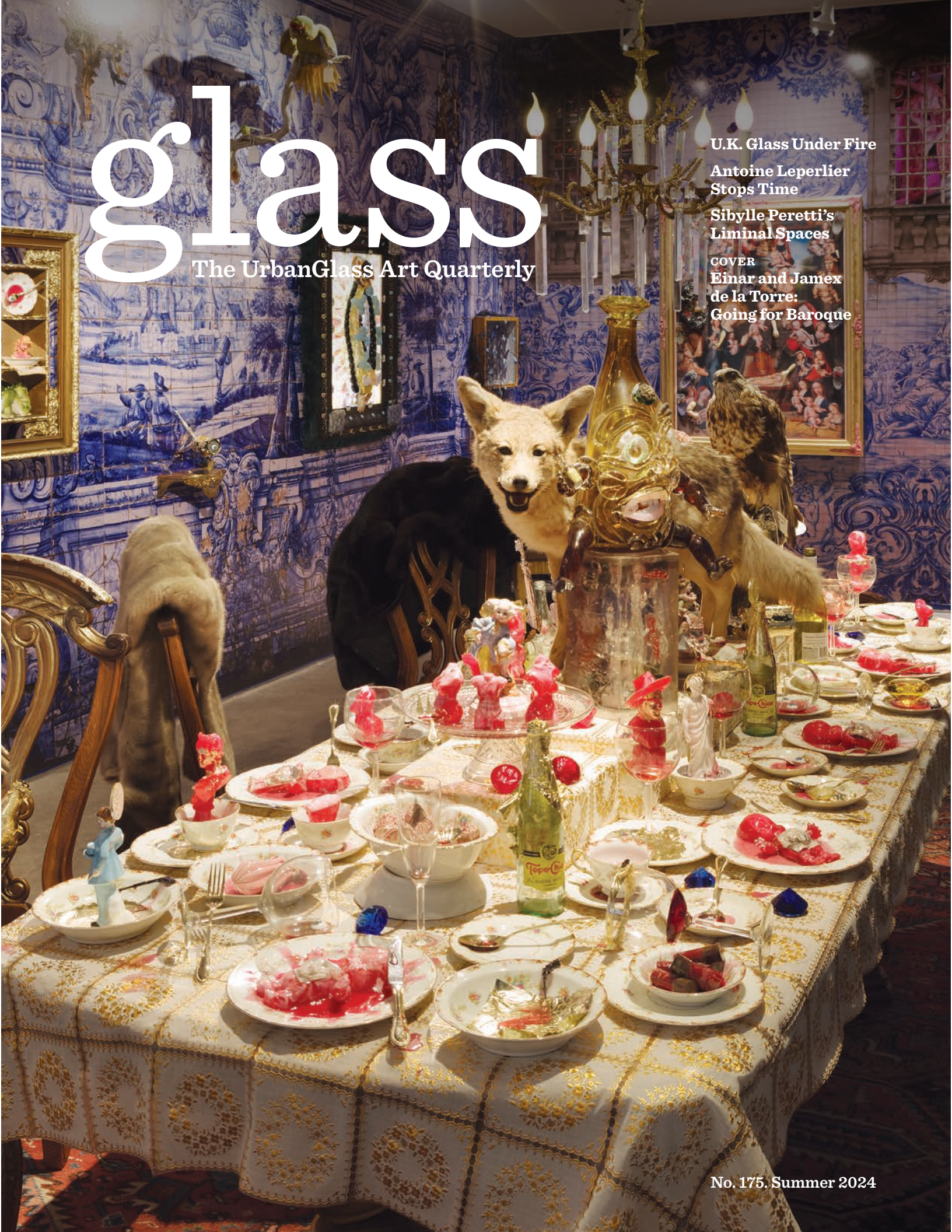




# glass

The UrbanGlass Art Quarterly

U.K. Glass Under Fire

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COVER

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Going for Baroque

No. 175. Summer 2024





*Espace d'un Instant XXXXVI* (Space of a Moment XXXXVI), 2020. Pâte de verre, lost wax casting, enamel inclusion, glass powder inclusion, triple firing. H 10 3/4, W 10 3/4, D 3 1/4 in.  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

# The Shape of Time

The grandson of the Art Nouveau pâte de verre master François-Émile Décorchement, **Antoine Leperlier** employs his ancestor's secret formulas and techniques in new ways to further his own quest to immortalize fleeting moments before they vanish into the past.

BY EMMA PARK

**The François Décorchement Glass Museum at Conches**, as it is officially known, is named for one of the giants of French pâte de verre. François-Émile Décorchement (1880-1971) lived and worked in this small town in Normandy of less than 5,000 people for almost his entire life, even as he became internationally famous for his streaked and marbled decorative glass vessels and sculptures. Décorchement's grandson on his daughter's side, Antoine Leperlier, has also spent most of his life in Conches-en-Ouche, and though he has pursued a very different approach to pâte de verre, his 40-year career as an artist has been based on some of the secret techniques and recipes he learned from his grandfather.

A retrospective exhibition of Leperlier's work is currently on view at the François Décorchement Glass Museum, and will remain there until December 1, 2024. Under director Eric Louet, the museum has established itself as a leading center for the study of contemporary as well as historical glass. Leperlier's exhibition will present 90 sculptures of kiln-cast pâte de verre, made using both traditional techniques and his own refinements. The exhibits on display range from his earliest "decorative" vases, which he made, like those of his grandfather, in a range of dense colors using lost wax casting, and run all the way to his most recent, experimental pieces.

As a teenager, Antoine, like his brother Étienne, was sent by their mother to help at his grandfather's studio at weekends and on holidays. Despite the familial relationship, Décorchement (1880-1971) refused to explicitly teach his grandson his skills or reveal the secrets of the techniques that he had developed. "It was very strange," says Leperlier. "He taught me nothing, but he showed me many things ... I saw everything, but it was never explained." Only once, in the kitchen after lunch, and at his wife's insistence, did Décorchement grudgingly and "very quickly" tell his grandson about the lost-wax technique. Leperlier went back up to his bedroom and tried to write it all down. "I made many mistakes," he remembers. Yet at the same time, he viewed this brief





*Chair et Os II (Flesh and Bone II)*, 2015. Pâte de verre, lost wax casting, enamel inclusion, porcelain inclusion, double firing. H 12 ¼, W 12, D 3 ½ in.  
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opening up by his grandfather as a form of “initiation.” Seven years after his grandfather’s death, Leperlier returned to the studio which Décorchement had founded in 1903, to sort through his papers and deepen his understanding of pâte de verre.

While Décorchement was a master craftsman and maker of decorative art and stained glass, Leperlier makes it clear that he is an artist who uses cast glass because it is the best medium and involves the most appropriate techniques for his artistic purposes. He distinguishes his approach from that of the American Studio Glass movement, which to him represents the “emancipation” of craft, especially in blown glass, rather than the use of the material as a means of artistic expression.

Initially, he studied philosophy and plastic arts at the Sorbonne. However, he rebelled against his teachers, the art establishment of the day, and their preference for minimalism and conceptual art, which he considered too “conforming.” He chose pâte de verre in order to express his artistic ideas in his own way: “It was the only place that I knew that was not their place.” The path he chose was a lonely one. “Even now, nobody knows what I do ... It’s not minimalist, it’s not design, it’s not pop art.” Rather, his work is in

a category of its own, engaged in a dialogue with art history and philosophy, but hovering on the periphery of the contemporary art world.

Leperlier shared his grandfather’s studio with his brother from 1980. In the next decade they experimented in pâte de verre together and participated in many of the same exhibitions, although they never collaborated on an artwork. In 1996, when their practices were moving farther apart, Antoine moved to a studio of his own, also in Conches, where he still works. The brothers’ shared studio once employed eight assistants; when Leperlier moved, this reduced to two and then one until Covid, since which he has been working alone.

Central to Leperlier’s practice is his treatment of glass as the representation of a “frozen” moment of ephemeral time, a memory of the irrevocable past. He uses its combination of molten fluidity and solid stability to develop a counterpoint between what is fixed and what is in flux, and between memorialised time and time as motion. “When you talk about the concept of time, you need a material to express something that is very difficult to express with marble or bronze,” he says. Because of its



*Espace d'un Instant XXX (Space of a Moment XXX)*, 2018. Pâte de verre, lost wax casting, enamel inclusion glass powder inclusion, double firing. H 13 ¼, W 12, D 3 ½ in.  
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RIGHT *Espace d'un Instant XXXIV (Space of a Moment XXXIV)*, 2018. Pâte de verre, lost wax casting, glass powder inclusion, triple firing. H 11 ½, W 10, D 3 ¼ in.  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

BELOW *Espace d'un Instant XXXI, hommage à Gustave Moreau (Space of a Moment XXXI, Homage to Gustave Moreau)*, 2019. Pâte de verre, lost wax casting, enamel inclusion, glass powder inclusion, triple firing. H 11 ½, W 11 ½, D 3 ¼ in.  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST



combination of transparency and solidity, glass is able to express four dimensions: not just space, but time as well. He derives the latter idea from Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass (Grand Verre)*, also known as *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923), a nine-foot-tall artwork consisting of two panels of glass decorated with geometric and mechanical shapes. Artistically, he is "more inspired by Marcel Duchamp than Décorchement."

Much of Leperlier's work—particularly his series of "Reliquaries," "Cast Shadows," and the "Still Life/Still Alive" collection, made in the 1990s, and the "Vanities," made in the 2000s—deals with the theme of death and transience in its relation to permanence—that is, with one aspect of his conception of time. One striking ensemble from his "River and Stele (FSLTEEULVEE)" series is *Vanity at Rest III/Fleuve et Stèle JPP* (2006), which contains two amber-tinted glass frames within which two opaque bronzed skulls seem to melt, as though made of liquefying flesh rather than rigid bone. "From the beginning, art is just a means to say to people, 'You exist and you die,'" he says. "Art is a means that all civilisations use to make people accept their condition, and the vanity of the mission of the human being." He gives the example of the earliest cave paintings: "They just say, 'We were here. And if you are here, your son will also be here.' It is about the transmission of hope and despair."

Also central to Leperlier's work is an allusive engagement with the history of art, especially European art. Dadaism may have killed off the academic art of the 19th century, he argues, but of course it did not kill art altogether; rather, it set it off in a new direction. In reaction to that direction, his own work seeks to "return back to the old imagination of art history," to rediscover

the "mind of humanity" which it embodies, and to "connect with the spirit of many things that have been thought before."

Closely connected with his engagement with art history is his very French preoccupation with the written word. Texts of varying lengths appear stamped across many of his sculptures. He recalls Rabelais' imagination of a land of embodied "frozen words," reflecting the novelty of the printed text in 16th-century France and its strange relationship with spoken language.

One striking example in which Leperlier interweaves text with allusions to art history is his *Fall of Monsieur Manet* (1994). A small-scale, table-sized sculpture, like most of his works, it consists of a blue slab over which crawl six tortoises with six blue cubes on their backs. These support a clear glass cuboid containing an internal negative relief of a bundle of asparagus, with the "positive" bundle resting on the very top. The work alludes to Édouard Manet's *Bundle of Asparagus* (1880), which for Leperlier represents the "end of the still life" because of the painter's choice to focus on the relationship between the artist and his materials rather than on the faithful reproduction of the subject. The glass bundle of asparagus in the *Fall of Monsieur Manet* symbolises the

moment in art history in which the still life ended.

The same sculpture bears the phrase "ET IN ARCADIA EGO" stamped across the cuboid in black letters. This alludes to a painting of the same name by the 17th-century French landscape painter Nicolas Poussin, which depicts shepherds and a shepherdess around a tomb, recalling the idyllic pastoral world of Virgil's *Eclogues*. This further evokes the memory of an artistic past to which art after Manet and Duchamp can never return. Through this combination of allusions to paintings and phrases from art history, Leperlier builds up layers of meaning, just as his sculptures are built of layers of glass.

The interplay between text and art history is further illustrated by *Self-evidence of the stone/Évidence de la pierre* (1991), a 15-inch-high sculpture in Catholic blue, gold, and porphyry, cast in the shape of a scaled-down Roman tomb, a "little reliquary to put ashes in." Inscribed around the base in blue letters on a gold ground is a phrase by the philosopher Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003), "*Ce qui se dérobe sans que rien ne soit caché*"—roughly, "That which is evasive while nothing is hidden." Inside the "tomb" is a cut glass "stone," which alludes to a much larger irregular solid of



*Flux et Fixe-XXV (Flux and Stasis-XXV)*, 2012. Pâte de verre, lost wax casting, enamel inclusion, double firing. H 9, W 9, D 9 in.  
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#### INTERVIEW

An interview with Eric Louet, director of the Conches Glass Museum, about the significance of the exhibition and its artist. (Interview conducted via email and translated from the French by Emma Park.)

**GLASS** *Why did you decide to put on this exhibition now?*

**ERIC LOUET** Although Antoine Leperlier comes originally from Conches, where he has his studio, our museum had never organised an exhibition of his work. In 2015 we organised an exhibition of Étienne Leperlier (1952-2014), his brother, but never of Antoine. I always said to Antoine that we were going to put on an exhibition of his work in the new museum because this would allow us to make a more important one. The new museum opened in 2022 [Glass #168, Fall 2022], and that is why we are holding this exhibition now.

**GLASS** *How would you describe Antoine Leperlier as an artist?*

**LOUET** The work of Antoine Leperlier is very unique because he is probably one of the artists who best articulate an artistic concept and technique. His concept is linked to the notion of time, and his technique is pâte de verre. He knows how to use his technique to express the concept of time. One other distinctive feature of Leperlier's work is his ability to produce works of art in glass which insert themselves into a history of Western art (17th-century painting, the vanitas, the still life) while at the same time his treatment of these themes is very contemporary. All in all, Antoine Leperlier has perfectly understood that pâte de verre and the techniques of modern casting are very well suited to speaking about the notion of passing time and to freezing a moment of time in glass.

**GLASS** *What is Leperlier's significance in the context of French glass art?*

**LOUET** In France, Antoine Leperlier is the best artist at using pâte de verre as an artistic medium. He makes it do everything he wants. His technique is very sophisticated.

**GLASS** *What is the Décorchement/Leperlier family's place in Conches?*

**LOUET** The Décorchement/Leperlier family occupies a very important place in the Conches Glass Museum. The museum displays varied collections of artistic glass from the end of the 19th century to our times in the areas of decorative arts, stained glass, and contemporary creation, but the field of pâte de verre has an important place at the heart of the collections' development. Thanks to the Décorchement/Leperlier family, the Conches Glass Museum is an important center for pâte de verre in France.

**GLASS** *Where do the pieces on display in the exhibition come from, and how many of them belong to your museum?*

**LOUET** The exhibition presents 90 works. One third of them come from a very important French collection of contemporary glass (the Michel Seybel Contemporary Art Collection); some of them come from the collection of Antoine Leperlier's studio; several other works come from collectors and galleries (Galerie Serge Lechaczynski, Galerie Capazza); and about ten others come from the Conches Glass Museum.

*Veduta Interna XXIII (Internal View XXIII), 2023. Pâte de verre, lost wax casting, glass powder inclusion, triple firing. H 15 3/4, W 12 3/4, D 2 3/4 in.*

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*Espace d'un Instant XXXII (Space of a Moment XXXII), 2019. Pâte de verre, lost wax casting, enamel inclusion, glass powder inclusion, triple firing. H 8 1/2, W 15 1/4, D 3 1/4 in.*

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a similar shape in Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514), an allegorical portrait of artistic creativity and malaise. The tomb's cool, intellectual aesthetic, with its intimations of an elusive meaning, embodies its creator's idea of "frozen time"—the product of silence and slow time, which makes us think of our own mortality.

After his initial turn to pâte de verre, Leperlier abandoned painting because it was too difficult to connect with his glass practice. However, in the last decade, he has returned to watercolors, at the same time experimenting with a freer and more colorful glassmaking process in two series: "Flesh and Bone" (2015) and "Space of a Moment/Veduta Interna" (2017-2023). Both paintings and sculptures, exhibited together, embody a similar spirit, he says. And with painting, unlike pâte de verre, at least "you don't have to wait three months to get one piece."

His technique for "Flesh and Bone" and "Space of a Moment" involves a simple box-shaped mold into which he casts clear glass. He then fires the glass for a second and third time, allowing him to insert colored glass powders or enamels as well as (in "Flesh and Bone") ceramic inclusions, whose interaction creates patterns inside the clear glass "box" during the firing process. He sees the chemical "consanguinity" of glass and ceramics as symbolic, reflecting the perennial counterpoint between the fixed and the fluid, the crystalline and the amorphous. The "Space of a Moment" compositions are the most chaotically colorful of all, reflecting the artist's renewed preoccupation with chance, or *hazard*.

An exhibition of Étienne Leperlier's work was held at Conches in 2015, the year after his death. "Shaping Form" will be Antoine's first solo exhibition there, at the age of 71—"the first or the last, I don't know," he says philosophically. For an artist so concerned with the relationship between past, present and eternity, a retrospective in his ancestral museum is the perfect tribute. ■

*"Antoine Leperlier: Shaping Time/Donner forme au temps" is on view at the Conches Glass Museum in Conches-en-Ouche, France, through December 1, 2024.*



Antoine Leperlier