

November-December 2010

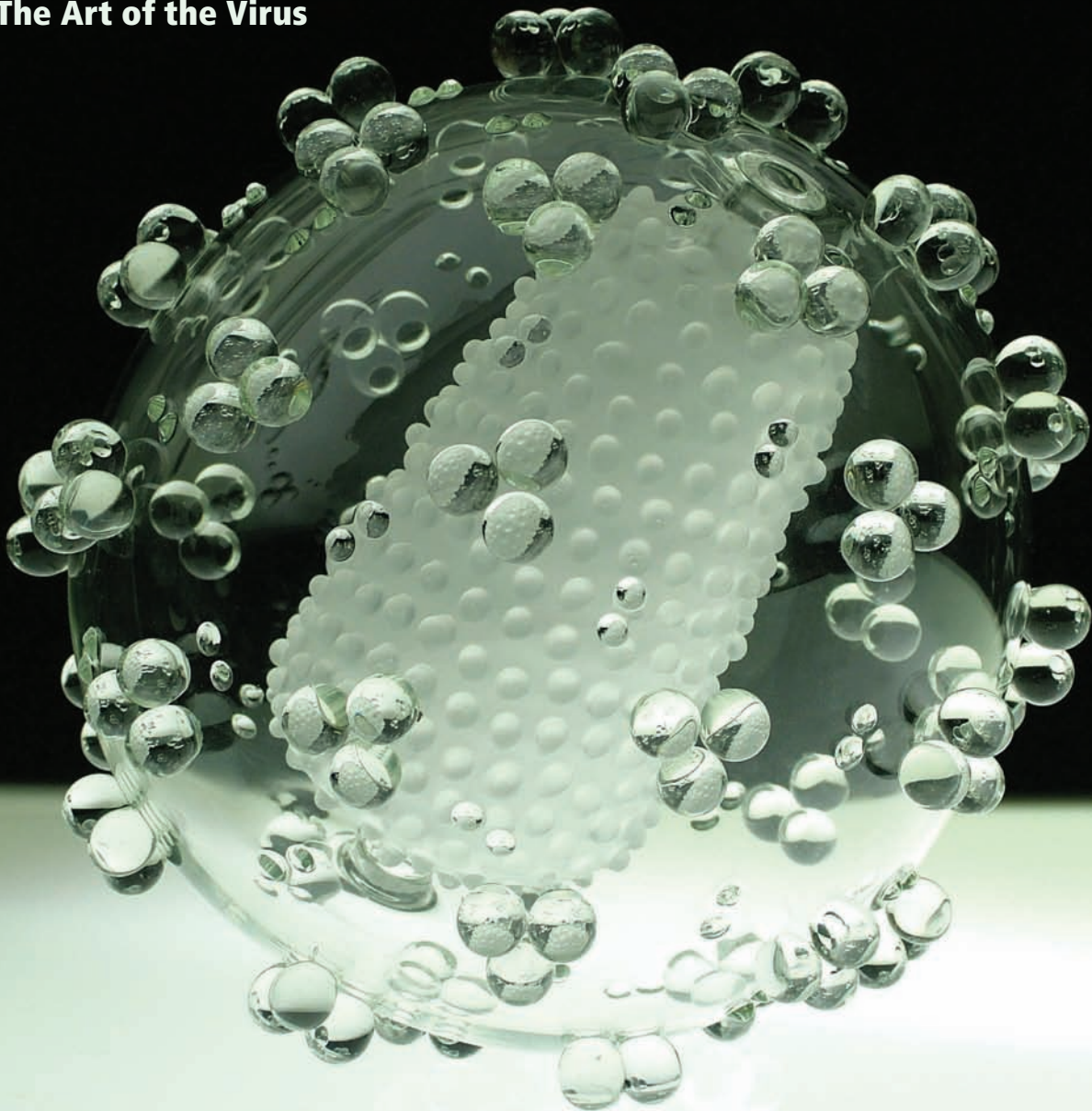
# IAVIReport

The Publication on AIDS Vaccine Research

WWW.IAVIREPORT.ORG | VOLUME 14, NUMBER 6

## **IMMUNOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR FUTURE VACCINES**

**PLUS: Washington, D.C.'s Epidemic  
The Art of the Virus**





Photograph by Thes

# The Art of the Virus

Luke Jerram turns viruses into sculpture. Why would anyone do this?



LUKE JERRAM IS AN ARTIST based in Bristol, UK, who creates glass sculptures of pathogens, including the viruses HIV, coronavirus, smallpox, and swine flu as part of a project he calls “glass microbiology.” In 2009, the Mori Museum in Tokyo exhibited his swine flu sculpture in a show called *Medicine and Art*, along with works by Damien Hirst, Andy Warhol, Marc Quinn, and Leonardo da Vinci. Earlier this year, the Heller gallery in New York City showed some of Jerram’s glass virus sculptures, including HIV. Some of the HIV sculptures can be seen now at the Wellcome Collection in London, the Bristol City Museum, and the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, NY. For more about Jerram’s work, see [www.lukejerram.com](http://www.lukejerram.com).

**What gave you the idea to make glass sculptures of viruses?**

I am red-green color blind, and I am interested in how we see and perceive the world and in exploring the edges of perception. I am interested in looking at things that we can't see with our own eyes. When looking through telescopes and microscopes, you start to realize that there is a discrepancy in what you see and the imagery that you see presented through the media and the press. Viruses in the press are often artificially colored using Photoshop and things like that so the public believe that the viruses are these brightly colored things, whereas actually they are transparent and three-dimensional, so that's why I made them transparent and 3-D.

**What color do most people think viruses have?**

Oh, just reds and yellows, and pinks and purples. Interestingly, an electron microscopic image will be black and white, but then those images sometimes go to organizations like the Science Photo Library in London, where they actually Photoshop them to give them a greater emotional content. Sometimes they are very pretty; sometimes they are decorated like poisonous fungi. Then they sell those images to journalists. Journalists phone up and say, 'I need some healthy looking bacteria,' and they'd say, 'Oh yeah, you need the green and white ones.' When journalists want some dangerous looking bacteria, they would say, 'You need the purple and yellow ones.' It's just very confusing for the public because the public doesn't know whether it's Photoshopped and colored for scientific reasons or for aesthetic reasons, to add emotional content, and you don't know who created them. It's just complicated and confusing, I think.

**Why did you choose viruses, and HIV in particular?**

Well, viruses are right at the edge of what you can see with an electron microscope. If you look at images of viruses through an electron microscope they are incredibly blurry and out of focus. So when I am speaking with virologists about what the viruses look like, we have to sort of jump between what we see through an electron microscope and what we can understand through models and through looking at diagrams. The sculptures are a combination of electron microscopic imagery and diagrams of viruses.

I have done a number of viruses and I do ones that generally people are aware of and care about.

**Would you say the sculptures are beautiful?**

Yeah, it's interesting. The objects are very beautiful, but when you realize what they are then they are slightly repellent, so that creates an interesting tension.

**How do people respond to them?**

They are generally amazed. People suffering from HIV send me stories thanking me for making the sculpture. They are unable to visualize it and now they are able to see the devil, the likely cause of their own death.

**How do you make the sculptures and how long does it take to create one?**

It takes a number of months. I collect all visualizations of the same virus and then I meet with a virology expert and do some drawings and we talk about what it would actually look like and about different ways to represent different components. Then I send drawings to my glass team and we do prototypes and test those out. I am often coming up with designs that physically won't withstand forces of gravity, so you are dealing with the limitations of glass blowing. Sometimes designs are just too fragile to be made and shipped and transported, so there are lots of complications, but it's a lot of fun.

**Are there any issues when you ship sculptures named after viruses?**

Yeah, I have to code them. I can't say this is an HIV sample or SARS. I have to give them a code name so that they can go through customs. I had a friend who took a sample on the airplane and we couldn't say, 'You know, I am just carrying my smallpox sample through the airport.' It just wouldn't go down very well.

**What do you name them?**

I couldn't say that. I could get in trouble.

**What are you going to do next?**

I have been invited to do a residency at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington. We may end up making a huge virus sculpture there.

*Interview by Andreas von Bubnoff*