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THE NEXT ACT | LIFE STORIES

THE GLASSMAKER

Vittorio Costantini, 73

Maestro of Venice

THE VENETIAN GLASS MASTER'S WORK HAS BEEN EXHIBITED IN MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES AROUND THE WORLD. BUT HIS INSPIRATION BOTH IN ART AND LIFE COMES FROM SIMPLE PLEASURES CLOSE TO HOME.



Every morning, I tend to my vegetable garden before heading to my glassmaking workshop in Venice. If I do this, I arrive content. If I don't, inspiration does not come. It may sound funny but I need this contact with soil to make works of art in glass.

My realistic interpretations of the natural world – rockfish, eels, butterflies, cicadas, hummingbirds, beetles and much more – have been exhibited in Venice's Palazzo Grassi contemporary art museum and prestigious galleries around the world.

But I have little time for glamorous places. I work quietly in my cramped studio tucked away in an alley of the seldom-visited Cannaregio quarter. It's a world apart from the bustle of Murano island, Venice's glass-making centre, and the crowds of Saint Mark's Square. My art springs from a lifetime of solitary contemplation in nature, close to home. I spend hours in my garden, lost to the world, studying insects, flowers, birds and butterflies. And it springs from memories of when I was ten and my fisherman father took me out on his boat in the middle of the night. That's when I learned to observe nature – and see

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what nobody else can see. When I was growing up I was closed in on myself. I didn't speak. I had problems. Now I speak, but have retained the need to spend time alone in my private universe. Cultivating this space has allowed me to continue creating late in life. Even today, in my 70s, I am always looking towards what the future holds. Having just completed an exhibition of new work, called "MicroCosmo," I'm already thinking about projects for next year.

What form will they take? Who knows. In Venice we say "drio" – that's our word for doing what feels right when the time comes. All I know is that if I'm not creating art, I feel lost. Three months ago, I was in crisis. I had lost inspiration. Then I was invited to make installations – a bed of eels and a spiderweb –

outside Venice's La Fenice opera house. My motivation returned. So it seems I always need some task to accomplish.

Yet it must be something that inspires me, nothing that is routine. When I work on a piece – and I'm not happy with it – I stop. And when I'm happy with it, I stop as well. That has been a source of desire to remain at work as long as I am able. Once you've done something to your satisfaction, move to the next thing.

That is why – when asked how long it takes to create one piece – I say sixty years of experience. Sometimes I finish a piece in one hour, but I have had to study all of

my life to create a thing of beauty in that hour. I am self-taught. I learned glassmaking through trial and error. Sixty years of experience at being open to making mistakes allows me to continue learning today. By now it's in my nature to view experimentation as simply my way of life.

Upon waking, I tell my wife Graziella – "Today I must tackle this problem I have been unable to crack, because now I may have found the solution!" I rise from my bed filled with such enthusiasm for the day to come. My garden keeps me healthy in mind and body. Apart from work – which absorbs me so much I stop hearing things – I am content just eating vegetables from my garden. My work is born of these simple pleasures in nature. It doesn't take much to make me happy.

This is the latest in a series of profiles of individuals who are redefining later life that will appear in FT Weekend Magazine and at www.nextact.ft.com.

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