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Mirrors That Are Designed to Dazzle

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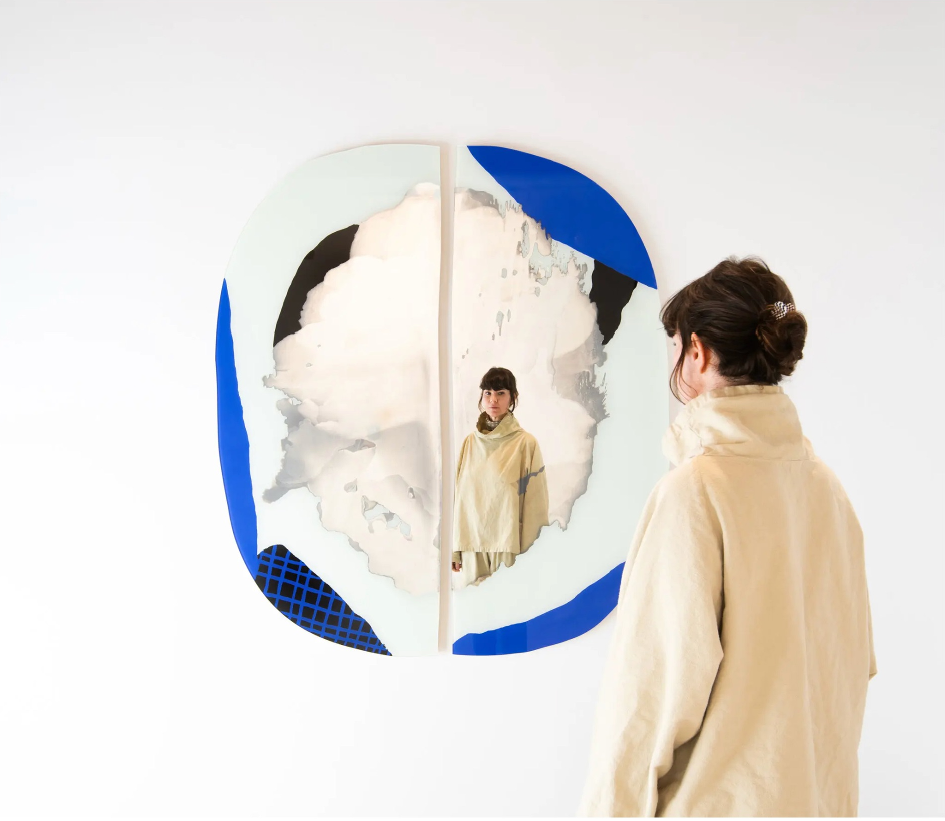

Mirror No. 29 with touches of Yves Klein blue, from the Rhode Island designers Ben and Aja Blanc.

By Stephen Wallis

March 6, 2025, 5:00 a.m. ET

This article is part of our Design special section about the reverence for handmade objects.

Part of human nature, it seems, is a Narcissus-like desire to gaze at shimmering surfaces that return our reflection and perhaps, as some cultures have believed, offer a glimpse of our true inner selves or even of spiritual realms beyond.

Satisfying that impulse began thousands of years ago, from China to Anatolia to Mesoamerica, with hand-held mirrors made of polished bronze, copper or shiny stones such as obsidian and hematite. The Romans figured out how to make mirrors with glass, but it was not until early 16th-century artisans on the Venetian island of Murano refined a process of coating clear glass with mercury and tin that mirrors as we know them were born.

In the 1800s, highly toxic mercury was largely replaced with silver solutions; in the 20th century, aluminum emerged as a less-expensive alternative. More recently, so-called perfect mirrors have been engineered for a clarity that Louis XIV could never have dreamed of as he checked his powdered wig in the magnificent Hall of Mirrors at Versailles.

But as new technologies have given us ever more flawless mirrors, some artisans are embracing old-world craftsmanship to push mirror making in strikingly creative directions. Though this work is more about artistry than function, the mirrors do what mirrors do — brighten and expand the apparent size of rooms while adding visual panache.

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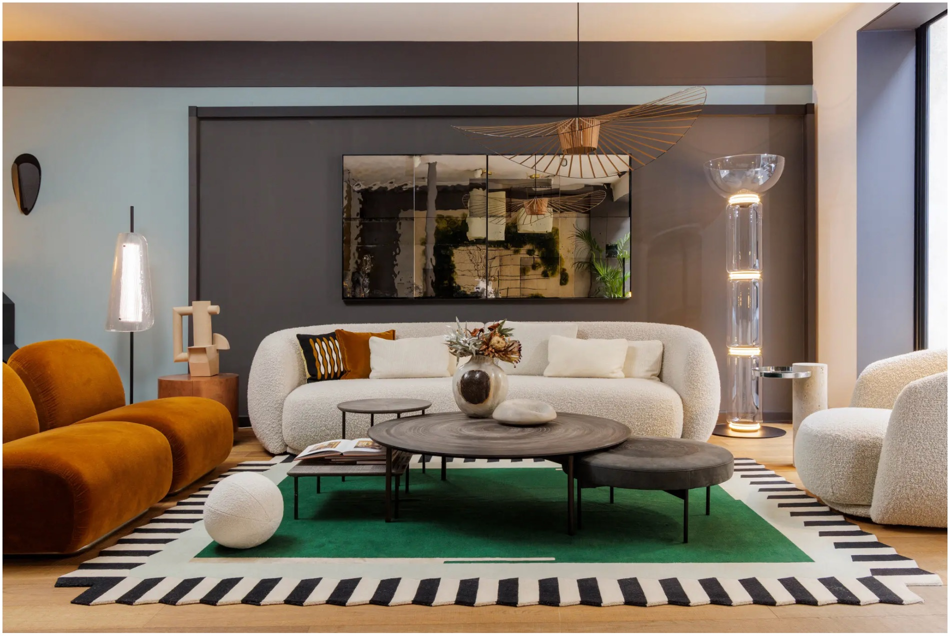
The Alchemist



Each mirror produced by Kiko López is unique, and most reveal shifts in coloration, patina and reflectivity.

Some three decades ago, Kiko López began his first experiments with making mirrors, spraying silver nitrate solutions mixed with sugar and acid on sheets of glass. That may sound straightforward but, Mr. López noted, “there’s so much that can go wrong” — factors like temperature, barometric pressure, the shelf life of ingredients and the quality of the water. “I’m talking about one part per million of something that’s not pure,” he said in a recent in a video call.

Mr. López, 63, who was born in Puerto Rico and grew up in Miami, trained in architecture and industrial design. Long based in the village of Bonnieux in the South of France, he lives and works in the 19th-century buildings of a former silkworm farm, where he turns out his shimmering creations.

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Many of his compositions are inspired by abstract painters such as Ellsworth Kelly and Yun Hyong-keun. Sean Scully’s influence can be seen in mosaics of rectilinear mirrored tiles, while Mr. López’s Oracle mirrors are like wonky Anish Kapoor wall sculptures, their bumpy, off-kilter oval forms casting captivatingly distorted reflections.

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Each work is unique and most reveal exquisite shifts in coloration, patina and reflectivity. These effects require multiple rounds of adding and often partly removing layers of silver, which can be sprayed or applied in foil sheets in the manner of traditional reverse-gilded glass. Mr. López prefers to use a slightly wavy glass from a German company that makes windows for historical restoration projects because, he says, it creates subtle distortions and a sense of movement.

He sometimes introduces coffee grounds, a patina-producing compound known as liver of sulfur and even ground-up mercury shaved off antique mirrors. The mercury is “completely toxic,” he acknowledged, but it produces intricate crystalline patterns when it interacts with silver.

“There’s a magic about it,” Mr. López said of his process. “When it all works out, the result, with its own imperfections, can be spectacularly beautiful.”

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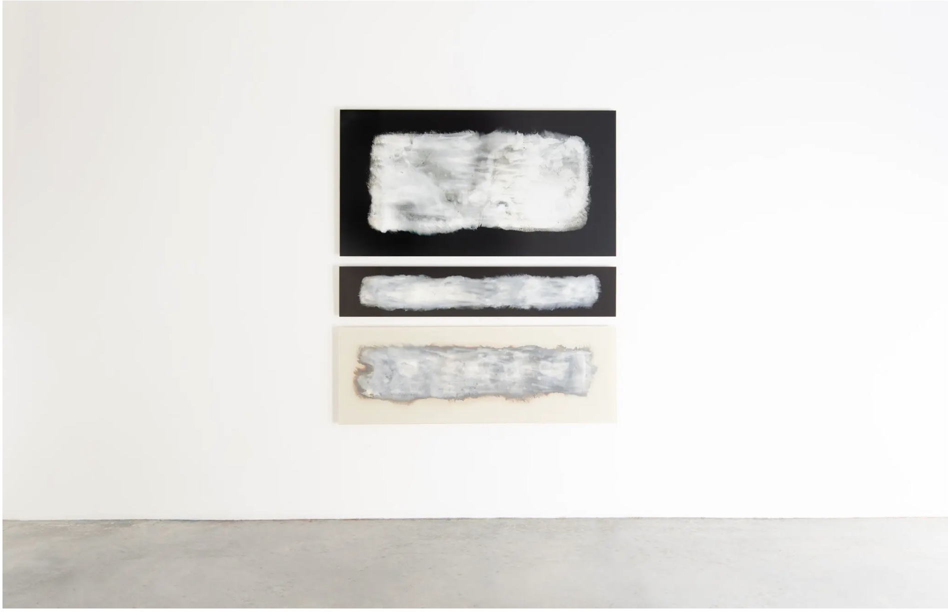

The After Rothko No. 2 mirror by Ben and Aja Blanc. Over the past six years, they have created poured mirrors using complex layers of metallics and pigments with diverse painterly effects.

Ben and Aja Blanc did not set out to be mirror makers when they opened their studio in 2015. Based in Providence, R.I., where they met as undergraduates at Rhode Island School of Design, the married partners produce a variety of furnishings and lighting, but mirrors have always been a creative sweet spot.

For some of their earliest pieces, they cut plain reflective glass into crisp geometric shapes embellished with mane-like fringes of horsehair and other fibers. That contrast of materials, Mr. Blanc, 46, said in a video interview, was about, “How do you have a modern minimalist formal language but add a level of warmth and livability?”

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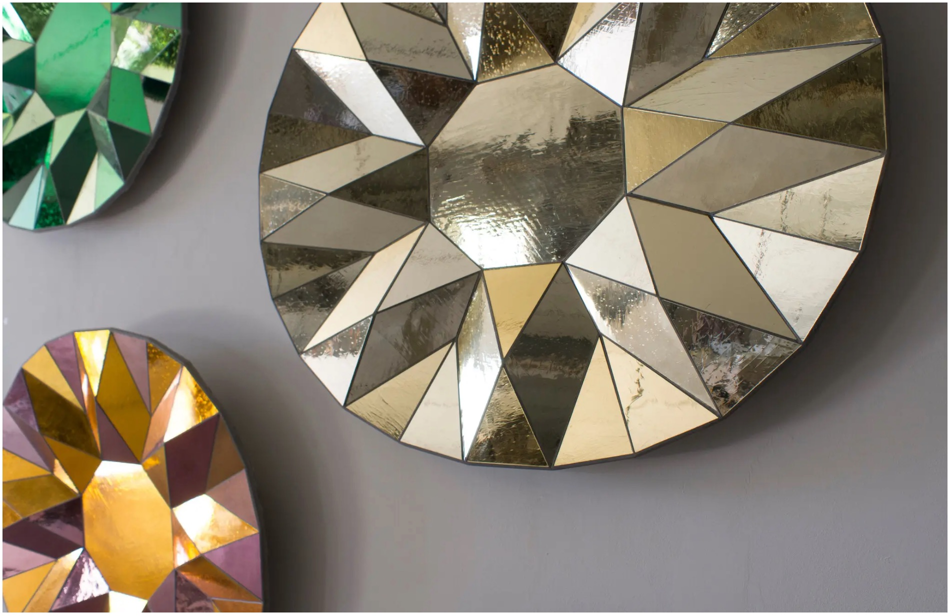
Other works break up mirrored planes with areas of clear glass. At first, the couple achieved this by removing the reflective material from the surface, but it was difficult, exacting work. Eventually, they applied their own silvering to the areas where they wanted reflections and left the rest of the glass transparent.

That technique sent the Blancs in a whole new direction. Over the past six years, they have created poured mirrors using ever more complex layers of metallics and pigments with diverse painterly effects, including hand-applied, latticelike grids. They have learned to embrace unpredictability. “It’s the push between what we can control and what we can’t,” Ms. Blanc, 44, said.

Among their many designs are mirrors that incorporate Yves Klein blue and others that mimic the luminous floating fields of color painted by Mark Rothko, the Abstract Expressionist.

“When you stand in front of our mirrors, you’re aware of the art and yourself all at one time in a really interesting way,” Mr. Blanc said. “That has been the goal for us all along.”

The Deconstructivist



Sam Orlando Miller is perhaps best known for his Stella Nuova works, which feature kaleidoscopic starbursts of angled and colored shards. Helen Miller/Gallery FUMI

Growing up in London, Sam Orlando Miller spent a lot of time in his father's silver workshop. "The thing I took away was the emphasis on skill and the value of that and how there was no cheating," he recounted in a video interview. "Also, just not being intimidated by expensive materials. It gave me a fearlessness, really."

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As a young artist, Mr. Miller, 58, mostly made metal sculptures — "I was very inspired by David Smith and Anthony Caro," he said. To help pay the bills, he also undertook custom pieces, "fitting out restaurants and all sorts of nonsense," as he put it. Before long, that work became all consuming.

About 25 years ago, he and his wife, Helen Miller, a photographer, moved to the Marche region in Italy. When a design magazine commissioned photos from Ms. Miller for an article about the old farmhouse where they lived, the images looked dark and gloomy, Mr. Miller said. He decided to "knock something out to lighten the tone a bit."

The result was the first of his many mirrors featuring facet-like pieces of colored glass set into a handcrafted metal framework. Probably best known are his Stella Nuova works, which feature kaleidoscopic starbursts of angled and colored shards. Most of his mirrors protrude from the wall in relief, though he also relies on the material's illusionistic qualities to create a deceptive sense of dimension.

Using handblown mirrored glass, Mr. Miller applies chemicals to the surface to create various effects. He cuts the glass himself, following detailed drawings he makes for each design. His recent Rosa Luna mirrors are composed of three stacked ovals, slightly askew, each a different color and richly patinated to create mottled, distorted reflections.

"The whole thing with the geometry in my pieces is about trying to break up the surface," he said. "I want to make mirrors that you can get lost in."

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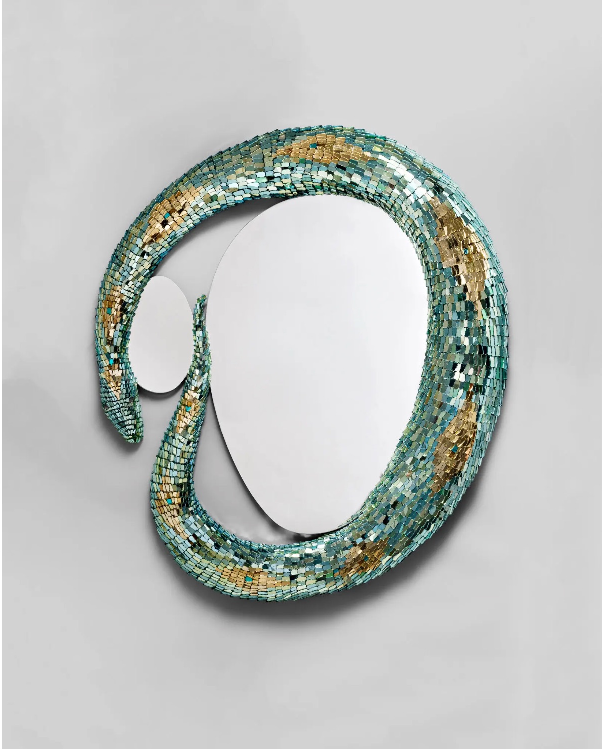
The Fantasist



A snake mirror by Nathalie Ziegler. Her nature-inspired designs include birds, snakes and radiant suns, as well as more abstract crystalline and foliate forms.

In her former life as a dancer with the Paris Opera Ballet, Nathalie Ziegler, 54, came home from performances with her eyes exhausted by the intense stage lights. She got in the habit of lighting her home with nothing but candles, which she placed inside photophores, enclosures that she assembled herself with mosaic-like bits of colored glass.

“All my friends were crazy for them,” Ms. Ziegler said in a video call. “That was the beginning of my love of working with glass.”

After retiring from dancing in the late ’90s, she began making jewel-like fixtures, mirrors, vessels and candelabra in baroque profusions of glass pieces, eventually concentrating on mirrored glass. Her nature-inspired designs, which begin with hand sketches that can be found all around her Paris studio, include birds, snakes and radiant suns, as well as more abstract crystalline and foliate forms.

All her work is rooted in traditional French craftsmanship. She often uses blown glass made by Verrerie de Saint-Just, a company created in 1826. “I can’t use a normal glass now,” Ms. Ziegler said. “Because of the light, because of the texture in the blown glass. If I use the rose, it’s like a sunset. You have everything in it.”

At her studio, she hand cuts mirrored glass into “thousands and thousands of pieces,” she said. Each fragment is placed into a brass framework, secured with silicone. It is a laborious process that can lead to workdays lasting 14 or 16 hours.

Ms. Ziegler estimated that she spent a month on a large snake mirror featured in her 2023 show at Twenty First Gallery in New York. The design involves a serpent skimming across ripples of water toward a cluster of coral and octopus legs, and what she described as “carnivorous flowers.”

Each of her mirrors is really an imaginary window or door, she said. “It’s not to see yourself; it’s to see out of yourself.”

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