

LIQUID LIGHT

So Hot So Cool: Part Two

By Anca Colbert



*G*lassmaking traditions have flourished and evolved for centuries, from the semi-translucent beads made around 3500 BC in eastern Mesopotamia to the contemporary monumental scale glass works.



ART & ABOUT

In 2012 the Ojai Valley Museum organized an exhibition focused on Glass Art. This coincided with the 50th anniversary of the American Studio Glass Movement, started in Toledo, Ohio in 1962.

While honoring Ojai's connection with Edward Drummond Libbey (turn-of-the-century industrial glassware mogul, considered the founding father of Ojai) the show "American Glass Works" brought to light the work of a number of contemporary artists/sculptors working with glass throughout the Ojai Valley.

Why has glass art experienced such a phenomenal revival in the past fifty years? We continue to address the question, as such a clear emergence in the local and global consciousness of artists, galleries, museums and art lovers is not a sheer coincidence.

Having previously taken a brief overview of glass history and reviewed the importance of our museum's show, we continue our inquiry into the glass art activities in the valley and pursue our dialogue with two local artists: Susan Stinsmuehlen-Amend and Douglas Lochner. We also look at the work of Josh Simpson through the perspective of his Ojai art gallery representative, Khaled Al-Awar.

Susan Stinsmuehlen-Amend is an accomplished and well-established artist who, together with her artist husband Richard Amend, has been making Ojai her home since 1994. As a teacher she travels frequently outside the area for her classes; in 2012 at North Lands Creative Glass in Scotland. Recently she has been absorbed in creating site-specific installations: a large tile mural and sculpture/fountain as well as a glass wall for private collectors in Los Angeles.

Stinsmuehlen-Amend started as a painter, as so many other glass artists do. Serendipitously, she discovered glass in 1973 and became

a partner in a new glass studio in Austin, Texas. She had never seen anyone else working with it. It felt like "a miracle" that you could do so many things with the material because "it *reflects* light, it *refracts* light, your eye can go *inside* the glass, it can go *outside* the glass..." The potential of the new medium sparked her senses and imagination about the new world of possibilities opening up to her.

In 1980 she started teaching glass at the Pilchuck Glass School. Co-founded by Dale Chihuly, the undisputed grand master and international ambassador of glass, Pilchuck started in 1971 in Stanwood, Washington. An international center for art education in the newly rediscovered medium, it has since become the "mecca" of the modern glass art movement.

Stinsmuehlen-Amend recalls those early days working with the gaffers in the hot shop with a great deal of pleasure and animation: "It was crazy! These people looked like gods in front of the furnace working with hot glass; you must accept that at any moment your work can disappear, be destroyed or that you can be seriously injured. It is scary. The heart rate is way up and it goes on for hours. The heat is so immediate." The work seemed highly dangerous to a newcomer. She has learned to use her body in a certain way when working with glass to protect it, because "the whole process is fraught with risks..."

When asked, "How has your emotional relationship with glass evolved over the years?" She replied: "It still takes my breath away."

Douglas Lochner is an emerging multi-media sculptor. Lochner loves to solve complex, physical, spatial problems and bring them to a simple, elegant, visual resolution. He is also a technical master and innovator of his craft, maybe a consequence of his extensive experience



Photos by Cindy Pitou Burton

Susan Stinsmuehlen-Amend - Cut Glass Garden, 2012
Photographic glass decals and vitreous enamels, kiln-fired on both sides of two layers of 6mm glass, backed with mirror (three layers totals), steel frame - 9'h x 14.5'w x 1.75'd - Gitnick Commission, Los Angeles.



Stinsmuehlen-Amend working on layering glass for a recent commission featuring kiln-fired painting and photo transfers.

as a computer systems designer and developer. He fell in love with glass in the early 1990s. Literally obsessed with creating site-specific projects in glass (sometimes combined with metal or stone), he has completed various private and public commissions in the Ojai/Ventura area. "There is nothing else like the intricate dance of working with hot glass. The level of intimacy and control achievable is intoxicating."

Most recently, Lochner has been working on an ambitious project: a pair of 20-foot-tall multi-ton cantilevered glass wings, currently in production, for installation at the new Santa Barbara Airport this summer. A tribute to World War II veterans, the glass wings will be soaring into space, defying gravity and celebrating the human spirit in service to others.

Primavera Gallery owner Khaled Al-Awar has been a passionate champion of glass artists since the 1980s. A native of Lebanon (the land of the fabled Phoenicians who first developed glass-blowing techniques in antiquity) Khaled was ahead of the times in his awareness of the emerging medium and pioneered its appreciation in Ojai and beyond.

Al-Awar is eager to share his passion: "There is no art in this country which has enjoyed such a Renaissance like glass. In the beginning the Americans were imitating the Italians, then, once they discovered the property of glass, they surpassed their masters. The beauty of the American Glass Movement is that these artists have tried the impossible and pushed the frontiers of that medium."

One such artist, whom Primavera Gallery represents, is Josh Simpson. Famous for his revolutionary techniques with blown glass, the Mega Planets he creates emerge as mysterious worlds within worlds. He certainly is one to have broken the boundaries of the medium. From tiny to monumental sizes, his works hold a magical power and pull on the viewer. It's easy to be fascinated by what Khaled appropriately calls Josh Simpson's "magic show."

The liquid light emitted by an incandescent object eternally fascinates. The closeness to fire exhilarates. The power of fire touches on a primitive instinct in all of us, it makes us feel closer to the center of life, closer to the gods.

Glass blowers work as teams in the hot shop, covered in dust, their bodies glowing in sweat from the heat and closeness to the furnaces. Their sight conjures images of ancient myths: the Greek fire-god Hephaestus working at his forges with Athena, the goddess of the Arts at his side, immersed in the sacred mission of handling fire. There is a high degree of emotional intensity, a magical energy at play between fire, artist, glass and viewer. Poetic power: it's simple, fast, and strikes at the center. What is glass if not the transformation of a solid into a liquid and into a new solid? Pure alchemy. Fire is the catalyst in that process. It transforms all it touches in its path.

Art comes alive because of the dynamic interaction between the artist, the work and the viewer. With glass, however, because of its material properties, there is an added excitement: it derives from the sheer fact that the viewer must actively participate in the artwork coming to life by walking around it to see it. It's a process of initiation, in which the viewer plays a crucial role. We see and experience a transformation of the work by our very motion. And as we absorb and reflect the liquid light of solid matter, our perception of reality shifts.

No wonder the fascination for glass art and its mysterious power lives on! ☺

Douglas Lochner – "Frozen River, cast glass, 2009.

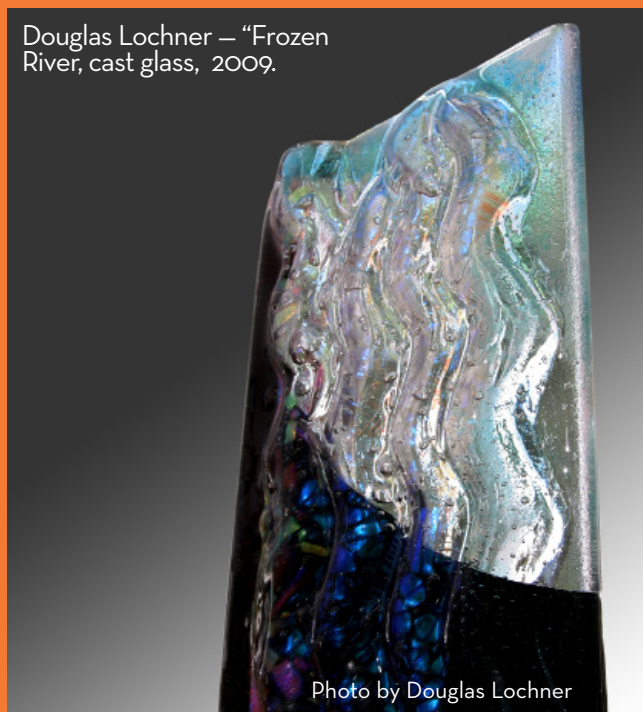


Photo by Douglas Lochner

"One can only wonder what kind of genius thought of blowing human breath down a metal tube, forming a bubble inside a molten blob of glass. And to think that this molten blob of glass is made only of silica or sand, the most common material in the world, that can be transformed from a solid to a liquid to a solid from just fire."

Dale Chihuly in "The Light of Jerusalem 2000"



Photo Courtesy Primavera Gallery

Bottom: "Mega Planets," blown glass, by Josh Simpson