

Story & Photos by Anca Colbert



## Glass blowing sizzles in the Ojai Valley **SO HOT SO COOL!**

*There has been a renewed passion for glass in America in recent years. This ancient, magical craft has been re-discovered by contemporary artists, taught in new art school programs around the country, shown in galleries, museums and public spaces.*

## OQ ART & ABOUT

It has infused new energy into collectors who feel the thrill of adventure in discovering and experiencing glass no longer in its traditional role in architecture, decoration and jewelry, but as a contemporary cutting-edge, cool art form.

Glass is translucent, opaque. It is solid, yet it retains the liquid flow of its making as it changes with light and motion. The substance itself has physical qualities like no other, and artists are pushing the boundaries of the visible by using these gifts from the material in ways unimaginable until now.

Glass carries a palpable “energy charge.” It radiates the fire from which it is born. Glass may well be, as Dale Chihuly emphatically stated “the most magical of all materials.”

Chihuly is the most internationally acclaimed American glass artist. He was the co-founder and is the current artistic director of the Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington, and a mentor to prominent Ojai glass artist Susan Amend.

Chihuly’s style is flamboyant and seductive. His visual language is rich and organic; his creations inhabit both tiny and monumental spaces. He combines the inherent fluidity of glass with bold, brilliant colors and shapes which astonish our perception of the possible.

The existence of glassmaking has been documented for millennia. Archeological findings trace glassmaking back to around 3,500 B.C., with semi-translucent beads found in eastern Mesopotamia.

As for that magical technique known as glassblowing, the Phoenicians invented it sometime around 50 B.C., on the eastern borders of the Roman Empire, somewhere along the coast of what is now mostly Lebanon, part of Israel, and in the neighboring province of Cyprus. These great sailors and traders spread their discovery around the Mediterranean to Egypt, Greece and later to Rome. During the Renaissance, glassmaking developed in Italy (notably in Venice and Murano), France (Ecole de Nancy), Austria and Bohemia.

A revival in techniques and production occurred around 1900 spurred by the great masters of Art Nouveau (Lalique, Gallé,

Tiffany, et al).

Glass artists are working and playing with fire. Their work is physical; it is dangerous; it is emotionally exciting; it is spiritually uplifting. It is essentially infused with a core passion for the material properties of glass, the mysterious way it captures, holds and transmits light, and the artist’s intimacy with fire and its alchemical powers.

Earlier this year the Ojai Valley Museum organized an original exhibition: “American Glass Works.” Curated by the museum’s insightful Director Michele Pracy and supported by the Museum’s Exhibitions Committee, it was an ambitious and illuminating exhibition. The show coincided with the 50th anniversary of the American Studio Art Glass Movement, born at the Toledo Art Museum in 1962, a time and place which is now considered the pivotal point in the renaissance of glass as art in America.

Our city’s art museum did a splendid job of paying homage to Edward Drummond Libbey, the turn-of-the-century industrial glassware mogul who is also considered the founding father of Ojai. They juxtaposed their extensive, vintage Libbey Glass Collection with contemporary glass works by seven artists from Ojai and Ventura: Brian Berman, Teal Rowe, Susan Stinsmuehlen-Amend, Doug Lochner, Robert Eyberg, Helle Scharling-Todd, and Michael Zelcer.

The show’s educational aspect informed visitors about the varied techniques used by glass artists (cut, beveled, stamped, molded, cast, fused, blown, leaded, solid core, and painted glass), and focused on a cluster of artists working in the Ojai Valley. The show sparked an ongoing dialogue between people with different experiences and strengths who now seem to rely on each other for technical support and collegial collaboration. And that’s a good thing, since we all know how isolated an artist’s existence can be.

Here we take a closer look at Brian Berman and Susan Stinsmuehlen-Amend. Both artists live and work in Ojai.

Brian Berman is a stone, metal, and glass sculptor.

A native New Yorker and California transplant, Brian moved to Bainbridge



Above: Chandelier detail at Benaroya Hall, Seattle, by Dale Chihuly/photo by Anca Colbert.

Opposite: photo by Marion McCristall, [www.marionmccristall.com](http://www.marionmccristall.com).

*“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 ... For me it’s the most mysterious and magical of all the inventions or materials that mankind has invented or discovered.”*

Dale Chihuly in “*The Light of Jerusalem 2000*” (Portland Press)

Island, near Seattle in the early '90s. There he began his sculpting career. Brian has been teaching and exhibiting his works around the United States and in Europe. In the summer of 2011 he and his wife Lisa moved to Ojai.

Brian Berman started as a figurative stone sculptor then moved on to simpler geometric shapes as he evolved and found minimalism was open to more partnership with the viewer. He also started working with glass because he felt the need for more light to come through his sculptures and wanted to explore the inner dimension which glass affords.

Brian is a quiet man. He speaks slowly and

softly about what matters most to him as an artist and as a peace activist. He and his wife met in Germany during a Jewish German Reconciliation Project in 2002.

"I feel that these are dark times and we need to bring more Light into our world."

He likes working in series, very small editions of fairly large cast glass pieces named "Omega," "Genesis," "Manna," or "Gateway." Through a distillation of sacred geometry principles his works carry a strong, soulful energy.

Brian explains how the casting process itself presents many challenges, mostly of a technical nature, and because of the many steps involved which require time and

patience. Glassblowing is fast and immediate, yet casting sometimes requires months of delayed satisfaction. "It is so indirect and slow, hard to keep the fire alive in all the different steps." Glass is an expensive material, and very time-consuming — it can require months to complete a sculpture.

Most glass artists can fire small pieces at their studio, in small kilns. Larger works require larger furnaces and kilns, such as the ones run at Pilchuck. To keep the glass molten you have to run the furnace 24/7. The process of the physical handling is fraught with danger and usually handled by a team; the firing program is carried out at temperatures ranging between 1292° and 1742° Fahrenheit, and the cooling of the castings is laborious. Once his large models are finished, Brian works in the Czech Republic ("best casters in the world") and uses the same atelier where Stanislav Libensky and Jaroslava Brychtova created their monumental and mysteriously radiant glass sculptures.

What about the alchemy of the process? Brian connects deeply with the primitive aspects of working with fire. When asked if the transformation of material is coupled with a transformation of emotion for him, Brian carefully ponders his answer: "It starts with wanting to express an emotion ... The emotion moves into the finished piece and it becomes gold. The alchemy of making art."

One must touch these pieces, walk around them and sense their powerful, yet gentle invitation to a higher realm.

Susan Stinsmuehlen-Amend started working as a painter before discovering glass in Austin, Texas in the early 1970s. She has been in love with glass for 40 years as an artist and as a teacher. Now a Californian for 24 years, this accomplished artist has been designing leaded and etched glass for commercial and residential commissions.

Stinsmuehlen-Amend has been the recipient of prestigious awards, too numerous to list. Of particular note is her longstanding association with the Pilchuck Glass School; she has taught there on a regular basis since 1980 and has recently been appointed to their board, a distinct and well-deserved honor.

*In our next issue we will focus on some of Susan's recent projects and adventures with glass.*



Top left; "Pro Rata Lyricism" — 1988 Leaded Glass Screen 92" h x 96" w, hand blown roundels, etched glass, lead overlays, metals, ash frame. Top right; Susan Stinsmuehlen-Amend, right, with the gaffers at Pilchuck Glass School in 2011. Bottom; A kiln lights up as glass meets fire.



*"The realm of art is not about immortality, it is about metamorphosis."*  
André Malraux "Antimémoires"

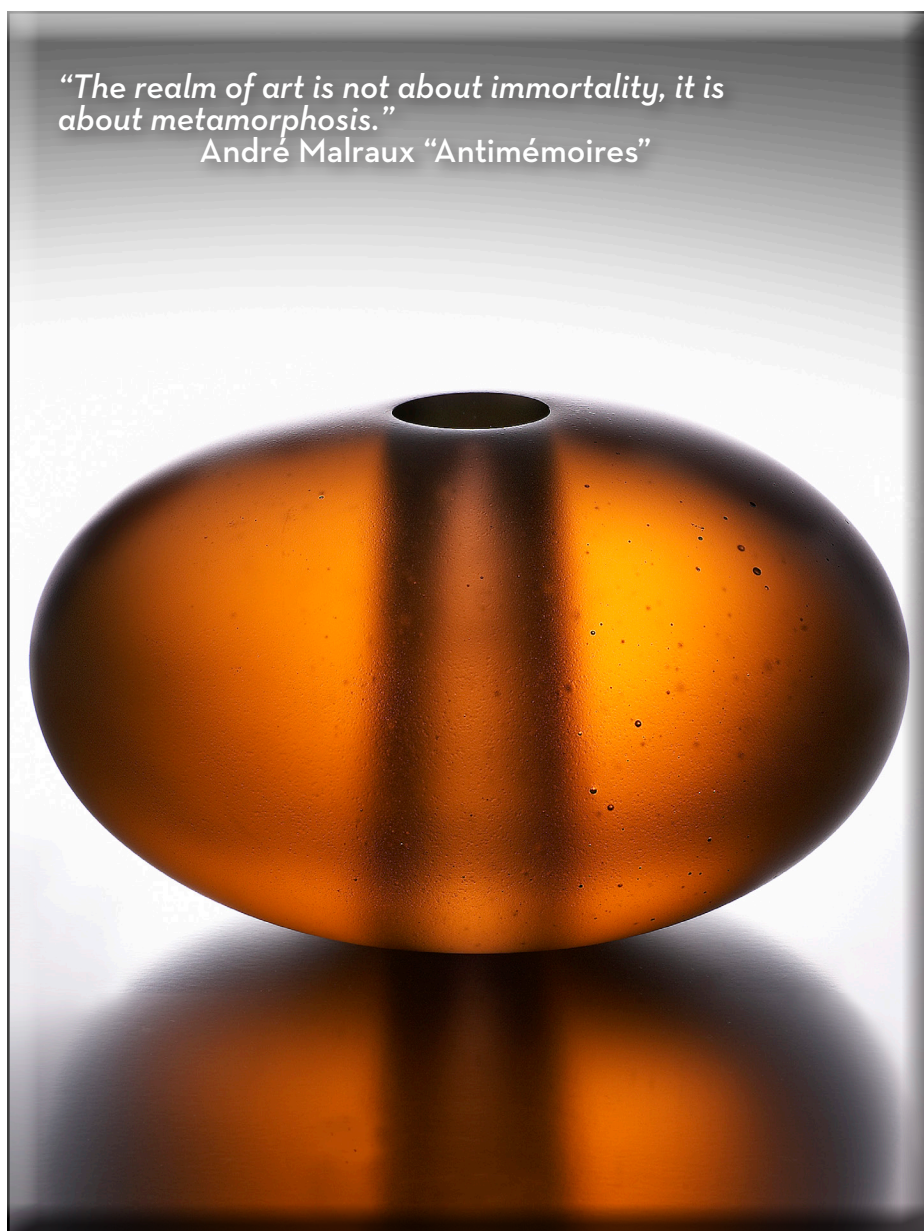


Photo by Brian Berman of his work, "Manna III," 2010, Kiln Cast Czech Glass, 7" x 13" x 13."