

IN THE MAKE

Studio visits with West Coast artists



Andy Paiko

GLASS ARTIST, PORTLAND / OREGON

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The Portland segment of our WESTERN EDGE trip will always elicit overly sentimental gushing memories for me. I simply fell in love with that town. For years I had heard about Portland's beauty, but also its gloomy, rainy weather. I suppose because the idea of spending a holiday in incessant rain sounded miserable, I just never made it up there. But when we arrived my mind was blown— spring had certainly sprung! The sun came out every single day that we were there, the days were long and warm with balmy nights, food and drink seemed to be absolutely delicious everywhere we went, and the lush exuberance and color of people's gardens...well, it all had me reeling from sensory overload. There were many moments when I thought to myself, Why isn't EVERYONE moving to Portland?

"I gotta tell you, seasonal affective disorder is a real thing around here." That's what Andy said to me when I went on and on to him about the glories of Portland. I often think about that moment and how quickly my staunch adoration for that city seemed to wilt into naïveté. Though I felt so unworldly for having fallen in love with Portland at first glance, Andy's statement brought me back to earth and asked me to temper my reverence with some good ol' fashioned truths. I appreciated Andy's realness.

In general, I found Andy to be a straight-talker with an easy relaxed confidence. He never once tried to over-explain his work or process, and instead discussed his struggles and successes with the same even, matter-of-fact acceptance. We met with Andy at his coldshop, which is where the grinding and polishing of his pieces happens, along with all the fitting and other post-production work, photography, and packing and shipping. His space was shadowy and cool even though it was warm outside, with lots of wood, brick, and concrete. We talked about his commissions and how a fair amount of the diversity in his work is the result of not being able to say no to people— that when potential clients/collaborators come to him with ideas, he sees it as an opportunity to veer and bend the direction of his the work. Though he acknowledged that there is a risk of spreading one's energies a little bit too thin, he sees each new project as a chance to learn and practice a new technique, saying "The more we can widen the field of exploration the better." Andy's glass works reference and reiterate many forms we are familiar with— jars, hourglasses, chandeliers, frames... but he manages to infuse them, whether they are functional or not, with novelty, innovation, and I suppose in part due to his material, with a notable fragility.



How would you describe the content of your work? What mediums do you work with?

At the moment I am telling people who ask what I do that I make "glassware." Which is not really very accurate. "Glassblower" sounds a little silly, and too many people equate the term with the paraphernalia trade. If I am feeling a little more confident and the person I am talking to looks like they can handle it, I say that I am a "glass artist" or rarely, a "glass sculptor," though the latter always feels odd. The classifications are not important to me, as I make all sorts of objects simultaneously, some "ware," some "sculpture." It depends on the day and the client and the commission.

The hot-glassblowing (or glass-sculpting) process is an additive one, where forms of glass are pushed into space organically by a cumulative history of layering and motion. My object-making process has developed to extend this layering, whereby many separate, individual glass parts are fused cold, away from the furnace to form a collage of sorts. This allows for a degree of detail and complexity difficult to achieve on the end of a blowpipe.



Much of your work plays with functionality and form, can you tell us more about how you integrate both into your work?

I consider my goal as a craftsman and artist to examine the role of glass in relation to its function. Must a vessel be used in order to be functional? Does a functionless sculpture have a real purpose outside of aesthetic contemplation? If so, does its creator have to take responsibility for making something that is otherwise useless?

These questions have led me away from abstraction towards a symbolic way of dealing with the form/function relationship. Each piece could be metaphorical; it could comment on the difficulty of decision making in everyday life the relationship of society with nature or language, or the way the mind grasps experience through dreams. But further, I want to make things that try to both communicate AND imitate purpose.

Though I enjoy looking at and playing with the forms created by combining abstract shapes of glass, I usually find my overwhelming tendency toward free-association getting the better of me. I have a difficult time just letting a thing BE. I always end up making it BE LIKE something else. There's an unavoidable sense of literal-ness there. Reading Robert Irwin's biography *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, by Lawrence Weschler helped me recognize this tendency as a potential handicap. I'm working with it.



You seem to work on a diverse range of projects, how do you choose what to get involved in?

A lot of the diversity grows out of a difficulty I have in telling people “no.” When potential clients/collaborators come to me with projects and ideas for work, I look at it as an opportunity to diverge and divest a little control over the direction the work is going. Each new project brings the chance to learn and practice a new skill or technique, to put another tool in the toolbox. There is a small risk of spreading one’s energies a little bit too thin, I suppose, but the more we can widen the field of exploration the better, in my opinion. As long as each project spends enough time in complete focus before the next one begins it’s OK. It offers the opportunity to make connections and communicate with a range of people in different occupations, as well.

Most recently I shared a studio space with a blacksmith/furniture-maker, for example, and I enjoyed exploring new possibilities with forged and laser-cut steel and reclaimed wood. I am currently moving into a new space with my friend photographer Andrew Stanbridge. That should shuffle things up a bit as well, practice-wise. I am looking forward to it.

Besides your art practice, are you involved in any other kind of work

I have a three-year-old daughter...



What are you presently inspired by— are there particular things you are reading, listening to or looking at to fuel your work?

Well, I mentioned my daughter- she’s pretty inspiring on a lot of deeply personal levels, as children tend to be. She also tends to soak up a lot of the time it takes to search out and find new things to be inspired by! There isn’t as much time for walking in the woods alone or reading as there once was (playground design can be pretty inspiring, for example. Things hit you from different directions).

That aside, I mentioned the Irwin book earlier, which I found to be an unexpectedly compelling explanation and overview of abstract and conceptually minimalist art. It was a perspective utterly inaccessible to me before I read it, whereby the literal “frame” that we put around the picture or art object- its context- is incrementally eliminated in favor of pure tactile experience. It got me really interested in Irwin’s work, as well as that of James Turrell and a few others of that field, even though nothing I do in my practice seems to relate to it in any way! That type of thinking will find an outlet somewhere I suppose...



What does having a physical space to make art in mean for your process, and how do you make your space work for you?

I actually work in three different spaces. I rent time at a public hotshop where I actually form the glass. This is convenient since I am no longer interested in the massive amount of effort required in the day-to-day maintenance of furnace equipment, etc. This way, I can simply sweep up when I am finished and turn out the lights and go to my coldshop. This is the studio I share with Andrew, where all of the grinding and polishing equipment is and all the fitting and post-production work, photography, and packing/shipping happens. I keep my inventory there. The third place is home, where I have the computer for email and the library and the collections.

It works for me to compartmentalize the wide range of activities involved in making a living this way. If it's all in one place it is very difficult to focus on any one thing for very long.



Is there something you are currently working on, or are excited about starting that you can tell us about?

It's a LOT of work moving my coldshop and all of the equipment, machines, and inventory. We are working with a very large space and trying to get everything situated and functional again. It's stressful and taking too long, but also very exciting.

Beyond that, I have a short stack of private commissions to chip away at, mostly re-making custom pieces that clients have ordered from me from my website, which I am (very) slowly trying to completely re-format.

Words of wisdom?... a motto, favorite quote?

Personal mantras change and evolve for me... One that pops up from time to time (and right now) is from Duchamp: "There is no solution because there is no problem."

