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Get "Blown Away"

At This Year's Fine Art Fair

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by Amy Kennard
Photography courtesy of the Peoria Art Guild and Southern Illinois University

The Peoria Art Guild showcases glass blowing with live demonstrations and unique artists.

The largest community event on the Peoria Riverfront will outdo itself yet again this year. In addition to exceptional works of art from nationally recognized artists; hands-on activities for kids and adults; and music, food and drinks, the Peoria Art Guild's 48th annual Fine Art Fair will offer an inside look into a unique art method via an unusual mode of transportation.

Visitors of all ages will have the opportunity to see firsthand how art is created from glass when a mobile glassblowing studio rolls into town on September 25th and 26th. Headquartered at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale (SIUC), this "oven on wheels" is the brainchild of Bill Boysen, a renowned glass artist who built the first glass studio at Penland School of Crafts in Penland, North Carolina. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1966, Boysen started the graduate glass program at SIUC later that same year.

Cortney Boyd, visiting assistant professor in glass at SIUC, explained how the mobile unit came to be. "Boysen had been traveling around the country and setting up small glass studios for demonstrations. As this was costly, he decided to build a glass studio that could travel anywhere. In 1969, he received a research grant to build the first mobile glass blowing studio, which he completed in 1970. Because he felt that in order to blow glass you needed a 'rich aunt' to support you, he affectionately named [it] 'Aunt Gladys.' The studio that will grace the Fine Art Fair is actually the second incarnation, 'Aunt Gladys 2.'"

Fire on Wheels

One can only imagine what is necessary to transport up to 60 pounds of molten glass, which has to be kept the consistency of honey, or at about 2100° Fahrenheit. "The studio is built inside a double-axle trailer, similar to a small horse trailer," Professor Boyd explains. "Since all of the equipment is inside of the trailer, we need a heavy-duty truck to haul it to our demonstration locations."

"The mobile studio runs off electricity and propane," she continues. "While the furnace is kept at 2100°, the *glory hole*, used to reheat pieces we are working on, runs at about 2200°. There are two annealers, or kilns that slowly cool the glass so it won't crack or break."

Hot Stuff

The mobile studio travels to four to six different sites throughout the year with a crew of three individuals: Professor Boyd and two SIUC students majoring in glass. They demonstrate the art of glass blowing, showing how blown glass starts with a bubble, then takes shape from there and can be formed into bowls, vases, cups and other sculpted items. They also demonstrate *hot sculpting*, which is sculpting something out of solid glass with no blowing involved.

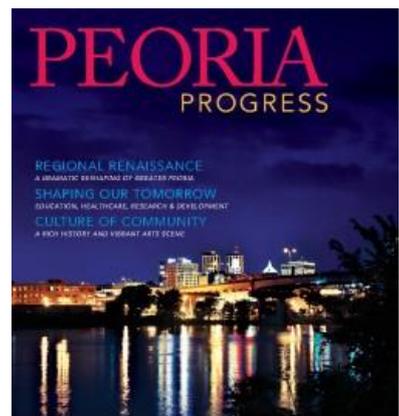
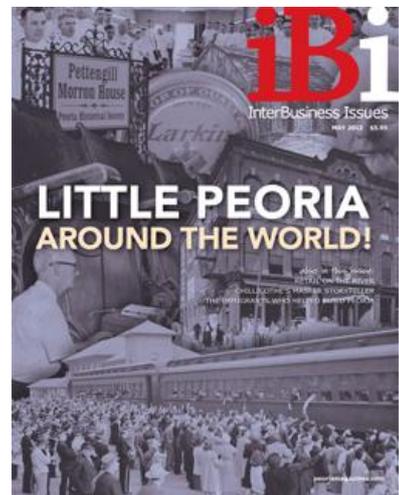
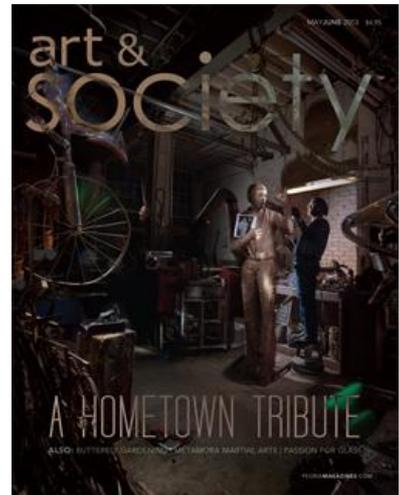
Professor Boyd and her crew have traveled to schools, museums, art and craft fairs, state fairs and the



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annual Glass Art Society conference. "Glass blowing is fascinating to watch, so we really enjoy demonstrating for the public and talking to them about the art itself," she says. "I hope that people will come away with at least enjoyment from watching the demonstration, and hopefully they will also have an appreciation and understanding of the process of working with hot glass."



Kim Armstrong, co-president of the Peoria Art Guild Board of Directors, agrees. "For years, art lovers have flocked to the Fine Art Fair to see unique art. This year, they'll get to see unique art being produced," she says.

Wearable Glass

Armstrong first saw the mobile glassblowing studio eight years ago in St. Louis. "I wanted to feature it at our Fine Art Fair, but wanted to be able to tie it into the poster. This was the year that they both came together."

Indeed, the poster artist for the Fine Art Fair is always widely anticipated. "Being selected as a poster artist is an honor because it means that artist's work is featured prominently," says Armstrong. "We have never had a jewelry artist or a glassblower as our featured artist."

This year, they have both.

Mary Smith, the 2010 Fine Art Fair feature poster artist, is a talented artisan who utilizes a unique method of glasswork called *lampworking* to create one-of-a-kind pieces of jewelry. "I've always preferred art jewelry over 'fine' jewelry," she explains. "I took a class in lampworking and burned and cussed myself through the whole thing. I finally realized that you have to respect the medium, and spent the next few years teaching myself and fine-tuning my skills."

Patience Yields Perfection

Lampworking differs from traditional glassblowing. Mary starts with a glass bead about the size of a popcorn kernel. She utilizes a surface mix torch instead of a blower's pipe to melt rods and tubes of clear and colored glass, molding and shaping them with tools and hand movements. Once in a molten state, she layers different colors of glass to arrive at what the final bead will look like.

"It takes about two days to make a batch of beads," she says, "and I usually make two to three times the amount I'll actually use in a piece. I'm not making widgets here, and I'll use as many as I need to until I feel my piece is the best it can be."

But wearing glass? Absolutely. "I test-drive everything that I make," she says. "I will not sell something that I can't wear myself first. All my pieces are functional, durable and completely wearable."

Armstrong can attest to the glass jewelry's comfort, and says the uniqueness of the art is one reason why Smith was selected as the poster artist. "When you see her work, you will be amazed by all the colors in her pieces. Each color is put together and composed by her. It's like wearing a beautifully constructed, multi-colored crayon."

"I was floored and speechless when Kim asked me to be this year's poster artist," Smith says. "I collect art fair posters and have never seen jewelry highlighted like this, so I was really honored."



Knowing When to Stop

Joe Becker is another glass artist at the Fine Art Fair who creates what he refers to as "sculpture vessels." He utilizes not only traditional glassblowing techniques, but incorporates grinding and polishing to create striking pieces that are almost sensual in form.

Becker blames his brother for inspiring him down the path that is now his life. "My brother blew glass, and I took any dinged-up glass and grinded and polished it so they could resell it, then we'd split the profits." That was back in the late 1980s. When Becker went to school to earn his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with an emphasis on glass blowing, metal working, sculpture and art history, he was interested in figuring out a way to incorporate the grinding and polishing with the glassblowing. "It then becomes a harmonious piece," he says.

Becker describes glassblowing as "a dance. You try to let the piece do what it wants, yet keep it from falling off the end of the pipe.

You use gravity and centrifugal force to twist and shape the glass." From there, he hits the grinding studio. "I start cutting on them, and I look at the pieces and they tell me what to do. They define themselves as I go along in the grinding and polishing." Part of the talent, he says, is knowing when to stop. "If you cut too far, you end up cutting the piece apart. After all these years, I have about a 90-percent success rate. That's pretty good."

Seeing How It's Done

Both artists are excited to have the mobile studio at this year's Fine Art Fair. "I've seen it, and it draws quite a crowd," says Smith. "Most people never get to see glassblowing done, and the people who are bringing the mobile studio here are very engaging in explaining what they're



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doing." She adds, "Some visitors to the Art Fair wonder why some of the art is priced the way it is. This gives them a chance to see how much work and skill and time goes into each individual piece that makes it so valuable."

Stacy Peterson, Art Guild special events coordinator, says the reason for the Fine Art Fair's success is in large part due to the community. "We have more than 800 artists from all genres who wanted to be a part of this event, and they could have chosen other locations over us. But they choose Peoria because we treat them well and the community supports them with strong sales. It's my goal to make the Art Fair like Disneyland, where everyone feels like a special guest, whether you're an artist, a visitor or a volunteer."

For more information or to volunteer, visit peoriafineartfair.com or call the Peoria Art Guild at (309) 637-2787. **a&s**

Peoria Fine Art Fair

September 25 & 26, 2010

10am - 5pm

ADMISSION: \$7/day or \$10/weekend. Guild members and children 12 and under are free.

SIUC mobile glassblowing studio demonstrations will take place near the Clock Tower at the foot of Main Street and Water between 10 am and 5 pm both days.

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