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Glass artist Brook White puts the torch to one of his projects at Flame Run.

Fire Power

Establishing more than a foothold in the national art-glass market could earn economic and cultural dividends for Louisville. But is the city up to the task? By Christopher Hall

Glass is a remarkably dynamic medium for art. As a sculptural form, it is fluid and mobile, and the depths of its possibilities have yet to be fully plumbed. As an architectural art form, it has far outstripped the limitations of stained glass and is in the midst, some say, of a new golden era.

Could a little of that gold bring a gleam to Louisville?


When Glassworks opened its doors to widespread fanfare in 2001, some in the community hailed it as the first step in making Louisville a national center for glass art. Now, as Glassworks nears its fifth anniversary, it's a good time to look at the state of glass in Louisville — where it stands and where it might go. Put another way, has Louisville taken that second, or even third, step toward becoming a mecca of sorts for glass art? And if not, will it soon?

Some relatively recent positive developments — the opening of a second large glass studio in downtown Louisville and the upcoming opening of another by the University of Louisville — show that the art form is on the move here, literally, despite the recent announcement that Louisville's only high-end glass gallery,

the Tobin-Hewett Gallery, which opened in Glassworks in 2001, is about to close its doors. Artists are moving to Louisville, or in some cases back to Louisville, to pursue careers in glass; there are several art or production studios in the area for them to practice their craft; and the university has thrown its hat into the glass ring. But few seem ready to label this city as a capital of the craft.

Glassworks co-founder Kenneth vonRoenn says he's not ready to call Louisville "the next Seattle, or the next Murano (Italy)." But, he says, "It's moving in that direction. Whether or not it ever gets there, we'll just have to wait and see." The city needs more studios and more artists. "We've started a good foundation, but there's a long, long way to go before we really are a national glass center," says vonRoenn.

Making Louisville a national center for glass wasn't necessarily vonRoenn's original idea anyway — he wanted a place to expand his business, Architectural Glass Art — and Glassworks grew out of that. "It wasn't a grand scheme, and it wasn't some big vision," he says now. "But once we got started and saw what the possi-



Flame Run's Devyn Baron flanked by two of her artworks.

BRIGHT FLAME

Flame Run, 828 E. Market St., combines a fine-art gallery and a 7,000-square-foot glass hot shop, where artists produce a dizzying array of both fine-art pieces and production work. "Our first priority is being a productive glass studio, for us to create works of art and blow glass," says Brook White, who co-owns Flame Run with his wife, Susie Slabaugh White. "That's what our passion is, working with glass."

Being productive means doing fine art, but it also means production work, and lots of it — Christmas ornaments, decorative glass and other items.

It's a hot art form, literally. On one early-spring morning, four artists were positioned in front of the shop's 2,100-degree furnace, keeping glass in a molten state, or at the 1,800-degree reheating chambers (also known as "glory holes"). Two of them, Amy Pender and McKinley Moore, were assisting Rod Hart, a glass artist who moved here from the Philadelphia area, as he finished up a set of wholesale production pieces on order for a gallery.

The fourth, Devyn Baron, was crafting an order of 20 sets of glass finials for curtain rods to fill an order commissioned by Flame Run. Baron also displays her original creations at the gallery space in Flame Run — graceful blown glass vessels with intriguing ornamentations, including anemone-like tendrils on the lips of some vessels and daisies on the exteriors of others. Her tasks sum up neatly the dichotomy inherent in a working hot shop — the need to balance the commercial with the creative, the fine art with financial necessities.

Baron first was exposed to hot glass while she was still an art student at Manual High School. She followed up by studying at the Cleveland Institute of Art. "I took my first elective class (in glassblowing) and knew right then that ceramics just wasn't going to do it," she says.

She graduated in 2002, just after Glassworks opened, and was glad she'd be able to come home to pursue her dreams, something she hadn't thought possible before. "When I was in school, I had no intention of coming home" because there were few opportunities, she says. "Considering what's happened in the short amount of time since then, it's pretty incredible."

Hart rents studio space from Flame Run, as several other self-employed glass artists do, and Baron and Pender are Flame Run employees. He moved here when his girlfriend took a job at Actors Theatre of Louisville and began working out of Glassworks, but was forced out when the University of Louisville moved in with its new program in the art form, he says.

Flame Run totals about 13,000 square feet, and its hot shop is among the biggest in the nation, White says. Only about two-thirds of the available hot shop space is currently in use, with much of the rest devoted to storage — ladders, tanks of acetylene for torches and even a basketball goal litter the space.

Since the overhead on glass is so high — think LG&E bills for a 2,000-degree furnace that runs for days at a time — Hart says he's thrilled to have Flame Run's space to rent, rather than managing his own hot shop.

Moore, a native of Inez, Ky., who returned to his home state after a stint working in Chicago, said Louisville's glass art scene is bustling in comparison. Pender points out that what may seem like a recent mass exodus from Glassworks should be interpreted as less about leaving there and more about artists finding more room of their own, which is what this city needs anyway.

"It's not so much that everyone's leaving; everybody's just starting to need some space," she says. "To make it as a glass center, you can't have just one studio."

— CH



Paul Hugues blows while White forms.

bilities could be, that's when things really got started."

The building at Market Street and Roy Wilkins Boulevard became much more than a factory for vonRoenn's company. It became a public space dedicated to the creation, exhibition and sale of art glass, and it offered tours to visitors interested in the medium. It also incorporated several different forms of glass art — glass blowing, architectural glass, hot glass — in one space.

A group of glass artists from around the state, most with ties to Louisville, moved into the Glassworks studios with the idea of forming a kind of cooperative — living, working and displaying their art all under one roof. Now, in a bit of a twist, much of the growth of the craft here seems to be the direct result of a sort of exodus from Glassworks itself.

Approximately two years ago Brook White, one of the artists to move back to Louisville to set up shop in Glassworks, and certain other colleagues jumped ship, in no small part because they felt constrained artistically by being at Glassworks. White credits Glassworks with getting the ball

A GLASSWORKS IN PROGRESS

Architectural Glass Art Inc.'s studio space is spread out over two floors of the eight-story Glassworks building, filling up almost 14,000 square feet of space in the West Market Street structure. AGA usually has scores of large projects in the works — there were 73 in some stage of production in mid-April, with about 10 under construction — and while the number of employees fluctuates with the number of projects, there usually are about 25, split between administration and production.

Formerly known as Louisville Art Glass, AGA has been in business in the River City since 1875, and the Penna family, into which Kenneth vonRoenn married, has operated it since 1896. The company does several million dollars of work a year, according to vice-president Page von Wheeler (vonRoenn's daughter), and while some still associate it with stained glass, the company does much more. The immense art glass installation in the Jewish Hospital complex on Breckenridge Lane and the large-scale piece in recently renovated Churchill Downs are the most visible of the company's local pieces, but AGA has also created tour de force pieces installed around the country. One of them crowns a skyscraper in Charlotte, N.C., with glass fins engineered to withstand hurricane-force winds. (VonRoenn says that piece, on the Wachovia Bank building, is "the world's largest glass sculpture.")

Architectural glass, vonRoenn says, is in the midst of its most significant period — equal to or greater than the stained glass masterpieces of the Gothic period, in his mind. Technological advances in the tensile strength and thermal efficiency of glass make it possible for the material to be used in new architectural settings and for new functions. "The importance of it is, now glass can work with architecture in a broader context than Gothic stained glass ever could," says vonRoenn. "It is no longer limited to certain building types or stylistic limitations. . . . It's moved way beyond just churches."

In addition to the AGA offices, Glassworks has, since its opening five years ago, housed the Tobin-Hewett Gallery, a contemporary art glass retail shop. But Tobin-Hewett recently announced that it would close its doors on May 31. After it originally opened as the Marta Hewett Gallery, the business was joined in 2003 by Diane Tobin. She's leaving to take a position at Spalding University, while Hewett is moving her business back to Cincinnati.

The Glassworks Gallery, which has always been the "lower-end" shop in this facility, at least price-wise, will expand, von Wheeler says, to fill some of the void left by Tobin-Hewett's closing. It will begin featuring more emerging artists and sell more pieces ranging from about \$800 to \$3,000 (a range of \$3,000 to \$50,000 was common at Tobin-Hewett, she says).

As for what's going to go in the gallery's empty spot, von Wheeler says that decision has yet to be made. It may be another glass gallery, she says, but it could also wind up being a restaurant or something else. Louisville glass artist and St. Xavier High School graduate Casey Hyland moved his operation into the Glassworks studios about two years ago and remains there, von Wheeler says. Glassworks also will be recruiting new glass artists to come to Louisville at the Glass Art Society conference in June in St. Louis, von Wheeler says.

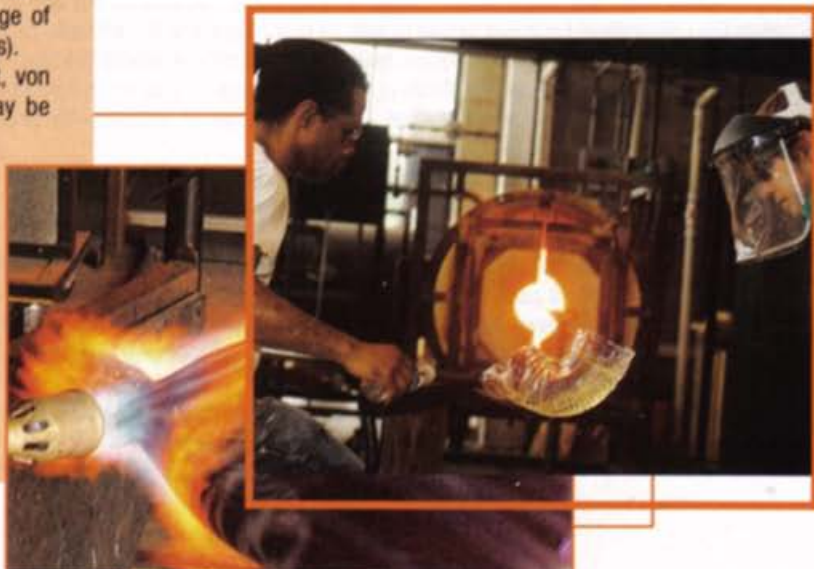
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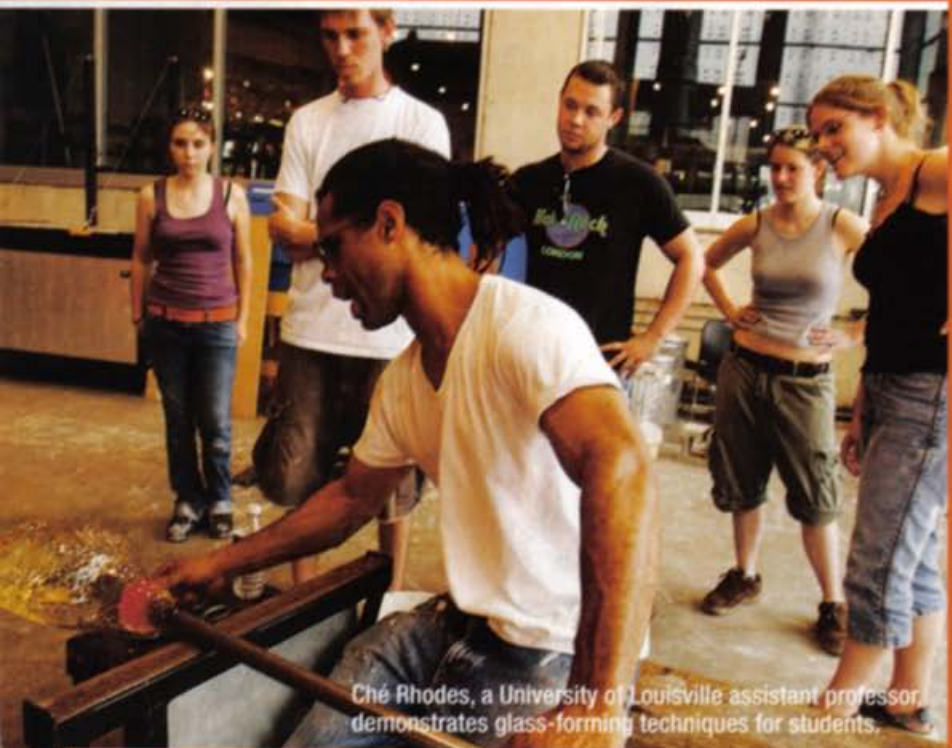


Artist Jonathan Swanz twirls a viscous glass blob at Glassworks.

rolling in Louisville, but he and his wife — and fellow glass artist — Susie Slabaugh White decided to open Flame Run on East Market Street to provide a studio for artists run by artists. Flame Run offers studio space for nearly a dozen glass artists and brings in visiting artists from around the world to both work and exhibit their wares (see story on page 29).

More recently, the University of Louisville's glass art program has announced that it, too, will be leaving Glassworks for its own planned studio facility downtown at First and Main. U of L has made an impressive commitment to blown glass and glass art,





Ché Rhodes, a University of Louisville assistant professor, demonstrates glass-forming techniques for students.

GLASS CLASS

"From a practical point of view, we want to be able to offer a comprehensive program in glass," says Ché Rhodes, the assistant professor brought in by the University of Louisville to head up its fledgling glass program. Rhodes says he wants to expose students to the medium and allow them the freedom — and the opportunities — to explore it.

The academic setting is different than a regular studio, he says, giving students more flexibility to experiment without as much concern over the financial aspects of glassblowing. Long range, Rhodes sees the program feeding into the already existing pool of glass artists in the area. "What I'd like to see happen is to sort of begin to create a community of glassmakers in Louisville," he says.

Starting the glass program here has held its frustrations, says Rhodes, a Cincinnati native who moved here from a position at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. For one, the program is in a bit of a holding pattern, doing some teaching while it waits for its own space. "The challenges (so far) have just been working within the parameters that we've been presented," he says. "The difference will be that once we have our own facility, those parameters will be widened or unlimited."

The university's glass program will be moving into the new Cressman Center, at First and Main streets, in the fall, Rhodes says, with approximately 30 students. It will also offer sculpture classes in other media. Rhodes hopes the proximity of students working in different media will help cross-pollinate ideas and broaden approaches with glass. Glass is just now being "discovered" as a fine-art form, he says, and he'd like to see its small, somewhat insular community break out of its present boundaries.

One of his students, Emily White, is just beginning to experiment with the possibilities. "I was always fascinated with glass, because of its 'super-fluid quality' — it's a solid and a liquid — and its transparency with light," says White, an art student taking her second glassblowing class this spring. The Ballard High School graduate may pursue glass as a career and recently completed a project for critique — mountain-shaped vessels with dirt and moss inside that she describes as a conceptual piece about mountaintop removal mining.

"I really enjoy it," she says. "It's fast-paced, it's exciting, and it's teamwork."

— CH

hiring Ché Rhodes as an assistant professor to head up its program (see above story). Like Brook White, Rhodes is a Centre College graduate and former student of

Centre professor and world-renowned glass artist Stephen Rolfe Powell. He was brought in to build a program essentially from the ground up, and the university has made a



Glassworks' Swanz deftly handles his tools of the trade.

substantive commitment to the process, with the Cressman Center for Visual Arts scheduled to open in the fall after a massive, approximately \$2 million renovation project. The 12,000-square foot center will be housed in leased space at the Louisville Metro PARC (Parking Authority of River City) building at First and Main streets and will focus on three-dimensional art in glass as well as wood and metal.

In addition to those moves, Lori Beck, one of Rhodes' former students, is working to find financing for an ambitious — and eco-friendly — glass and metal shop and landfill reclamation project in Southern Indiana.

The most important thing for the continued development of Louisville into a center

for glass art, Rhodes, vonRoenn and White all agree, is that the education of and support from the community must continue to grow. After that, the one common thread that runs through nearly every discussion of the future of glass in the region is the involvement of the University of Louisville. "We've really come a long way in a short period of time," says Page von Wheeler, vonRoenn's daughter and vice-president of Architectural Glass Art. "I think that's just going to continue to grow and I think the university program is essential to that."

"Once Ché starts graduating these students, I think we're going to see glass take off pretty quickly in this community," she adds. "It will attract the artists themselves to Louisville to get their education." Many, she hopes, will stay here and work after they finish their schooling.

Meanwhile, Glassworks will start recruiting another wave of artists to work and show at that facility. "The more studios we have in the community, the greater strength we have as a whole," says von Wheeler. "It won't happen with one studio and one gallery."



Mark Payton fires up a curlicue artwork.

