

## Fiery lessons: Flame Run's owner follows his mentor

**Brook White** is celebrating his alma mater with an exhibition

*Andrew Adler*



From blasts of 2,000-degree heat enveloping globs of molten glass, **Brook White** creates art out of the fires of his furnace and his imagination.

As the owner and operator of **Flame Run**, an expansive studio and gallery located along East Market Street, White has spent the second half of his life in the service of nature's fragility.

He is a consummate multi-tasker: One moment, he is running a business; the next, he is exploring the boundaries of glass art.

Recently, **White**, 40, has been preparing for the more than 1,000 visitors expected to attend the 40th annual conference of the **Glass Art Society** to be held Thursday through Saturday in Louisville.

To mark the occasion, Flame Run is hosting an exhibition of 22 artists who once studied at **Centre College in Danville, Ky.**, under renowned glass master Stephen Rolfe Powell.

"I think we were definitely a good, but slightly dysfunctional family," White recalled, explaining that "with Steve, the biggest education I got was how to be an artist. He had an amazing work ethic, was a lot of fun and very athletic. We believed in what we were doing, and we took it personally."

Under Powell, White learned the pragmatic elements of operating a shop. "It was the stuff you could never get in a classroom -- how to talk to a gallery owner, how to ship a work."

Powell, White said, was the best sort of impatient artist. "He had a philosophy of: 'You never know how long you're going to live, and you have a certain amount of pieces you're going to be able to create in your lifetime.'"

That guiding imperative has helped define White's own creative momentum. He described the reaction of visitors to Flame Run, who marvel at the abundance of pieces present. "'What are you going to do with all this glass?' people ask."

White's answer? "I feel I have to keep creating work to meet my potential."

White was only 19, an undergraduate government major at Centre, when he fell into what would become his life's passion.

"I happened to take a random glassblowing class with a random professor," White remembers. While he had what he calls a creative side -- playing the drums while growing up in Owensboro, Ky. -- he wasn't exactly surrounded by esoterica.

"We had a little set of pictures, the kind you used to get at J.C. Penney's, that you bought as a package and put above the couch," he said. After experiencing the odd combination of overpowering heat and a professor who asked all of his students to call him by his first name, White thought he'd landed on another planet.

"I said, 'This is kind of crazy,'" but his first-name-basis professor settled him down. "He said, 'Don't drop the class, come back' -- and I've been coming back for 20 years."

The fiery furnace, and what came out of it, soon hooked him and his colleagues. "We were all kind of pyromaniacs, and still are," White said. Indeed, a fascination with all things flammable is one hallmark of a devoted glassblower. So is a willingness to confront all that heat head-on.

"Being a glassblower is not a good profession if you don't like to sweat," he said. "I've had so many people who say, 'I've always wanted to blow glass.' They want to fool around for a couple of hours and make a paperweight."

Still, paperweights, Christmas ornaments and corporate gifts are the economic foundation of Flame Run's business. Once the new year rolls around, however, the simple stuff gives way to White's truer desires.

"I love color," he said, "so I always try to incorporate as much energy through the color I use in specific pieces."

His work centers on "vessels," containers that express emotional power through "endless possibilities."

"Someone else might say, 'Oh yeah, that's a vase,' but there are seductive curves and slight differences between pieces. That's why there are so many different names for vessels: vases, urns, jugs -- the names go on and on. For me, that is an endless supply of inspiration."

And now, with so many pieces behind him and so many yet to come, White is as hungry to achieve as he was more than 20 years ago at Centre.

"For me, it was magical first time," he said, "and it's still magical when you have a good day in the studio and things are clicking."