

October 17, 2004 Sunday metro Met Edition

Shaping an art-glass reputation; Studio, gallery build recognition

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Rising from the floor of the Flame Run art glass studio in downtown Louisville is as nice a basketball goal as you'll find on any driveway in Kentucky.

It stands like a piece of ironic art in the back half of the cavernous shop in the former Tractor Supply building at 828 E. Market St.

"We can play half-court basketball in our studio," boasts Flame Run artist and co-owner Brook White.

That's more than just a nod to the state's most popular form of cultural expression. It's a measure of the building's size. At 12,500 square feet, the glass-making hot shop and adjoining gallery and workrooms make Flame Run one of the largest art-glass facilities in the country.

It's in keeping with White's and partner Susie Slabaugh's ambitions for the studio and the city where it stands - to become a center of art-glass production in the American heartland, a slower-paced, easier-living alternative to New York and Seattle, where the form has developed and prospered.

It doesn't just mean making art to them. It means making a good living doing what they love, with a three-part formula as simple as the silica, soda ash and lime they melt together in the shop's furnaces to make glass.

"We have major entrepreneurial energy and vision," White said. "We have chosen art as our form, and glass, very specifically, as our art."

Flame Run has two furnaces, and there are plans for a third. That still leaves plenty of room for expansion. Renting shop space to other artists is a viable option, as is using it for large art installations, White said. "We have the space and knowledge to make that happen as the need arises."

Art and economics aren't always a good fit, but in the world of art glass, or studio glass, as it's also known, they seem to be more comfortable with each other.

Maybe it's because the process of turning dust into glass sculpture has such an industrial feel to it. The 2,000-degree furnaces and flaming gas torches, with the workers in bulky protective clothing hurrying and hefting the glowing masses of honey-thick glass, harken back to the works and foundries that forged the Industrial Revolution.

White and Slabaugh have made their livings creating and teaching glass art. They say they're comfortable talking about and working with the business end of the art business as well.

"I wanted to blow glass, but for us to do that, it's necessary to pay the bills," White said.

They've invested \$500,000 in Flame Run, which opened in July. Cash flow has been negative, White said, but "we are quickly catching up," and the facility has plenty of potential revenue channels beyond making and selling their own pieces.

There are gallery sales of other artists and production work - handmade pieces for gift shops or businesses looking for unique gifts for clients and executives - that can pay some of the bills. There are always paperweights, Christmas ornaments and "ornabowls," small, ornamental bowls that can be used for candy dishes and the like.

"We can crank out 20 or 30 in a day, and they sell for \$35," White said, though too much of that kind of work stifles creativity.

They also plan to use the studio to teach classes and workshops, or offer after-hours group outings. They want to promote the art form as well as profit from it. They've built a gallery above the hot shop where the furnaces are, so tours can watch them work.

Glass making itself is ancient, and artisans have long made decorative crystal. But the contemporary art-glass movement began in the 1960s, with the development of smaller furnaces that could fit in artists' studios.

Ceramics artists and others began experimenting with shapes and colors. The end product is usually colorful, often abstract, and because of the investment in equipment, utilities, training and labor, fairly expensive.

"Our average sale is somewhere between \$5,000 and \$10,000," said Marta Hewett, partner in the Tobin-Hewett Gallery in the Glassworks at 815 W. Market St. in Louisville. The highest price she ever got for a piece was \$60,000 when she had a gallery in Cincinnati, Hewett said. Since moving to Louisville and partnering with Diane Tobin three years ago, she has sold pieces for as much as \$46,000.

Gallery visitors often comment on the prices, Hewett said. "They say, 'I could buy a car for that.'" So she explains the long apprenticeship to master the techniques; the four, five or more people needed to make some larger pieces; the number of works that are spoiled or broken in the making.

The gallery usually gets half the sale price, but that's not as much as it seems either, Hewett said. There's insurance on all that high-priced glass, shipping costs, marketing and maintaining a Web site that accounts for about 30 percent of sales.

"Once we have sold a \$30,000 piece, we will typically net 10 to 12 percent, if we don't have to give a discount, which we often do for collectors," Hewett said.

Tobin called it "your typical small business," with \$700,000 to \$800,000 in annual sales producing "a very moderate salary" for the owners.

Hewett and Tobin also are eager for Louisville to develop a reputation as a studio-glass center that will draw quality artists to live and work in the area. They said the hiring of studio-glass teacher Che Rhodes for the fine-arts program at the University of Louisville is a step in that direction.

"I think over the next five years, and easily over the next 10 years, you're going to see a community of those artists," Hewett said.

Hewett suggested to a group of New York-area collectors that they make Louisville the destination for their annual trip to visit out-of-town galleries, artists and private collections. About 40 members of the Metropolitan Contemporary Glass Group were expected in town this weekend.

Tobin-Hewett Gallery is known among collectors at the national level, said Fred Sanders, vice president of the Metropolitan group, but Louisville isn't on the map yet.

"I don't think there's really a concentration of glass anywhere other than the two coasts - New York and Seattle," he said, but the group's visit to Louisville probably will encourage other collectors to follow.

A developed art-glass community could help Louisville tourism, Sanders said. "I think it's a draw; people are very interested in it. There's something about glass that's very attractive."

GRAPHIC: Photos by; Mary Ann Gerth, The Courier-Journal
Brook White heated glass in a furnace at Flame Run. The glass was being made into a vase. Brook White held a piece of glass while Susie Slabaugh blew into a pipe to shape it into a vase. They are co-owners of Flame Run art glass studio. A piece of blown glass by artist Stephen Rolfe was on display in the Tobin-Hewett Gallery in the Glassworks building downtown. The work was priced at \$25,000. By Mary Ann Gerth, The Courier-Journal; Brook White heated a vase he was making at Flame Run.