

Fire and Glass

Glass blower Barrie Bredemeier sculpts with elements of nature to propose the transience of life.

by Lynn Crandall

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The fire inside the furnace burns so hot its glowing light blinds. Barrie Bredemeier dips a metal rod into the heat and pulls out a molten ball of glass. Adeptly he works with the glass, blowing his breath into the glass bubble, manipulating it with gravity and hand tools, reheating in the smaller furnace, or "glory hole", and working his mastery again, making the glass form to his vision of a piece of sculpture. It's an exacting process that begins with a two-hour preheat warming the furnace to 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit, and involves planning, but offers Bredemeier an element of revelation.

"What's fascinating about blowing is it's fluid," he said. "You go in and dip into the furnace, maybe 20 times a day. It becomes very natural. But every time I go into the furnace it comes out different because there are a lot of subtleties to working with glass. It's a bit of a dance to make it work. I'll plan what I'm going to do for a day, but then I get involved in the process and some of the best things that come out are not necessarily planned."

Bredemeier has been blowing glass for 30 years. He can't remember a time when he didn't work with art.

A native of Massachusetts, he learned about making things from his physicist father. As an undergrad at

New York College of Ceramics at Alfred University, New York, Bredemeier focused on ceramics, but he found it natural to move from throwing ceramics to glassblowing.

"I was doing both for a while, but at some point, I pretty much put the clay aside," he said. "I realized this material, the glass, was a material that could keep me intrigued for a long time."

After graduating from Alfred University with a bachelor of fine arts degree, Bredemeier learned about glass production at a glass factory, where he worked with thousand-pound crucibles of glass in creating 17th century reproduction pieces. He then left the mountains and water of his home state to attend the University of Illinois, where he attained a master's of fine arts degree. For six years he worked as the head of the glass department for renowned artist Frank Gallo, owner of Editions in Cast Paper, Ltd., in Urbana. In 1989, he and his wife and fellow artist, Hyon Joo, built Glass Lake Studio in Urbana, where Bredemeier continues to work today. Not only does he create hand-made glass art sculpture, he also designs and builds his own equipment and tools.

"I like building the equipment myself because I know how it went together," he said. "There's also the aspect of just creating things with my hands, trying to give good work, be honest, and make a decent living. It's all part of having the studio."

Bredemeier's pieces reflect his appreciation for the natural world and acknowledgement of the transient nature of life. With their swirling variety

of colors, his landscape pieces catch the changing beauty of sunsets, panoramic skies, and delicate flowers, and the soothing turquoise of seas. Hinting at puffy shoulders and posed arms and legs, his Japanese Ikebana pieces stand like figures at attention. As the pieces reflect the light and capture the imagination, they are eloquent reminders to be open and to enjoy the moment from a new perspective.

"We all want control and we want to hold on tight to life, but we can't do that. It's not possible. Things are always changing," Bredemeier said. "My work is a way of communicating transience and different levels of perception and how we interact with our environment and between people in so many ways and on so many levels."

It is this thoughtful perspective that imbues Bredemeier's work with spirit, said Gallo, who is now retired from the University of Illinois.

"There are very few people who are of his caliber of expert craftsman," Gallo said. "He is exceptional. He is an exquisite artist. I think he brings something new to the idea of art and craft and really raises the bar. His pieces are beautiful. He is kind of a soulful person who brings a spiritual nature to his work."

Bredemeier's work has won numerous awards and has been exhibited in many prestigious shows. See his work at Techline Green Street Studio in Champaign, at Glass Lake Studio in Urbana, and online at www.soltec.net/glasslakestudio/. ■