

BFA Thesis Book
Crystal Palka





“Artists cannot help themselves; they are driven to create by their nature, but for that nature to truly thrive, we need to preserve the precious habitat in which that beauty can flourish.”

-William Morris

Artist Statement

The language of nature is one that often transcends words. My work uses imagery from the natural world as a way to transform my perceptions of life into sculptures that communicate these human experiences into the beauty of nature. In doing so, I exploit the similarities between our physical selves and plants, along with the dialect used to describe them.

Preservation of memory plays a large role in my studio work. I've always loved photography and having the ability to capture special moments. As I explored more about the capabilities of glass, there was a discovery that I could take these documented experiences and transform them into tangible objects.

My inspiration goes way back to my childhood where I spent my weekends roaming the countryside of upstate NY. These experiences taught me to find comfort in the outdoors, which is a trait I still carry with me today.

By combining the fragility of glass with the ephemeral qualities of nature, I create a visual language that allows me to symbolize the stages of my life. Using plants I associate with specific memories of people and/or places in addition to their universal meanings provides the viewer room to make connections with each piece.

My work is made mainly through the use of glass-blowing, flameworking, and cold worked surface details.

Thesis Problem Statement

Plants act as symbols and metaphors for human interactions.

Thesis Statement

My work primarily comments on the complexities of human relationships and emotions; veiled within nature-inspired imagery that reflects on memories important in my life. I explore the symbolic language around nature that metaphorically speaks about the human experience. Within this language are many words with double meanings. This allows topics like growth and roots to be used visually as parts of a plant, but also relate ideologically to a person's development and origin. By doing so, I'm able to speak about my personal experiences in a visual language that's more easily understood by my audience.

Human Nature

Human nature is defined as the general psychological characteristics, feelings, and behavioral traits of humankind, regarded as shared by all humans. However, the term itself is composed of two separate words, human and nature, with nature having two meanings. While it can refer to the basic or inherent features of something, nature also is the phenomena of the physical world collectively. This includes plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the Earth that aren't related to humans or human creations.

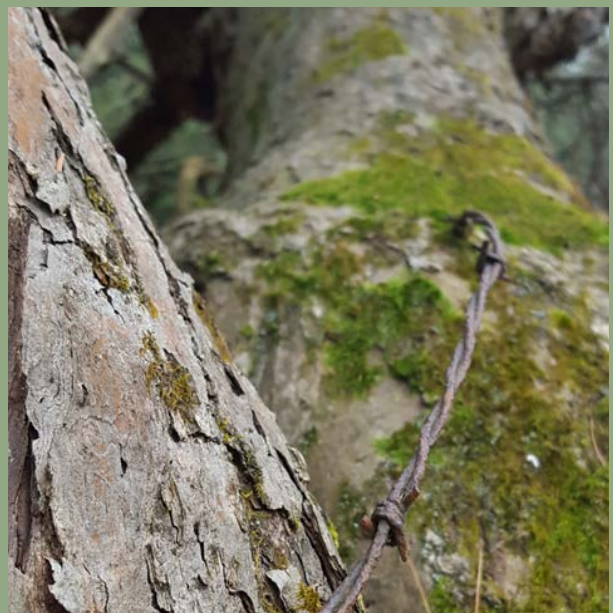
The personification of nature as self through imagery and text is used as a way to cross these boundaries and speak about the human experience as synonymous with that of plants. I believe that relationships between the two function very similarly and by using nature imagery, as opposed to the human body, I seek to relate to a larger audience about the stages of life we experience.

While most of my work is inspired by personal memories of nature, I'm also interested in the physical similarities between human beings and plant life. Comparisons between the two became popularized in the 1700s when Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus used imagery of husbands and wives occupying houses and beds to explain the number and location of the reproduction parts on flowers and plants. This was introduced in his book *Systema Naturae* (1735), which became the first widely adopted system of classification of living things. This system is known as the binomial nomenclature, where each species of plant and animal is given a genus name followed by a species name, with both names in Latin. This system is still in use today, though many changes have been made.

While Linnaeus used human relationships as an analogy to plant life, research scientist Dr. Monica Gagliano explains how plants can react to their

environment in ways similar to ourselves and animals. In a 'TedTalk she gave in 2022, she shared how her pioneering work has demonstrated that plants emit their own 'voices' and have the ability to detect and respond to the sounds of their environment. She also introduces her latest research project which is a global initiative called Resonant Earth: Planetary Regeneration thru Sonic Midwifery. She states that it has been proven that our own premature babies have an increased likeliness of survival when they hear their mother's voice often, so why not use the maternal soundscape of all species across all environments? Her goal is to be able to develop tools and 'incubators' that use sound to heal and regenerate the Earth.

This evidence that plants can react to their environments similarly to humans is something I find fascinating. Thinking about the possibility of sound being used as healing reminds me of the role that art plays for me. While making art objects is a job, it's also something that brings me a lot of joy. Within each process there are repetitive steps that provide me with a sense of meditation and in the end there's the gratifying feeling of having a finished piece.



Remembrance

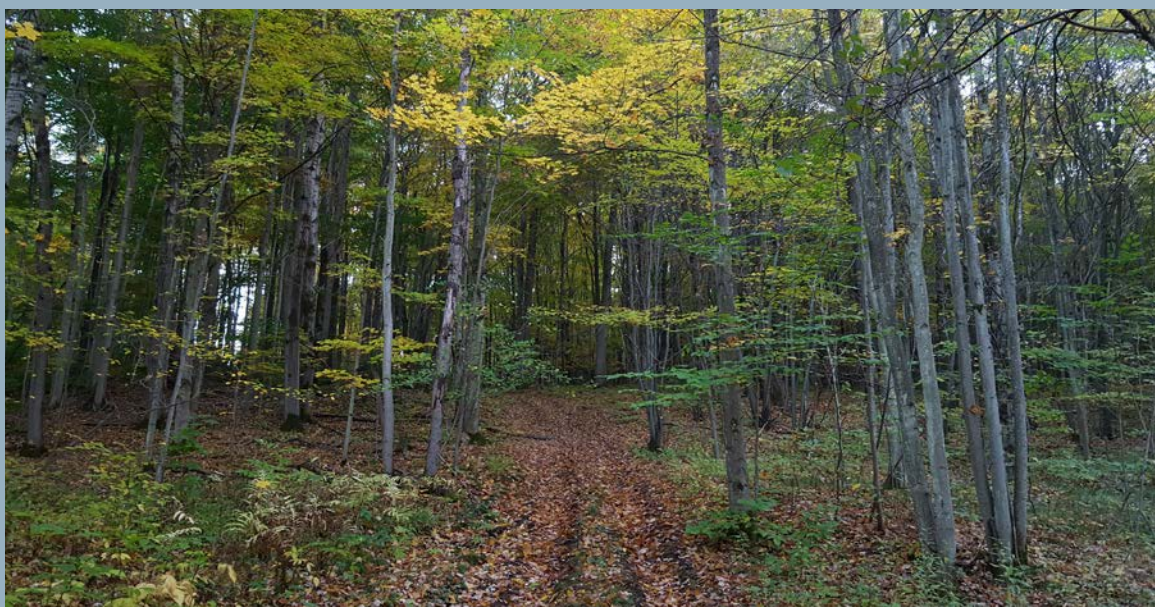
My passion for craft and design is highly influenced by the people who helped raise me. Though many of my family members passed away before I was born, my parents made sure to tell me about the things they had made and how they did it. My grandma used to do a lot of sewing and sell things at local craft fairs. She had a lot of supplies from over the years that she had never used and I would dig through the boxes to find my favorite fabrics to try to make something like she would.

One of my favorite memories with my mom is when she dug out one of her mom's old sewing machines and taught me how to thread it and change the bobbin. I made potholders, pillows, and even clothes for my dolls. Many of the fabrics were beautiful vintage floral patterns, which I believe is where my love for flowers began.

Among other relatives' possessions, I would find pottery with beautiful lace edges, depression glass, carved wood lamps, and even a large collection of antique salt and pepper shakers. I remember I would go to my dad and ask who they were and how I was related to them. Through these objects and stories, I was able to develop a connection with family members I will never know. My work is made with this in mind. I hope that my objects will live on long after me and spread my love for the beauty of nature and the memories I have with it.

Glass artist Jen Violette has been a large inspiration to me since I first started working with the material. The sculptures she creates are her way of documenting and preserving the gardens surrounding her home studio in Vermont. I feel a connection with her work because the way she depicts the landscapes and natural elements within it reminds me of my parents' country home where I spent many weekends and summers of my formative years.

In my mind, I would make notes of every apple tree, where the best spots to pick berries were, and every bump to drive over slowly on the ATVs. These times I spent outdoors were very comforting and helped to form the foundation of my studio practice.



Time

Many pieces of mine are inspired by these memories of my parent's country home. *Forget Me Not* and *Mint Condition* both came about when I had the idea that I wanted to build a 'memory garden' to commemorate a few of the plants that grew in my favorite places. I altered the textures of the surfaces to signify different states of memory and how 'clearly' they can be remembered.

Mint Condition is heavily chipped, even on the front facet, as a play on words. The word mint can refer to several things, including mint plants and something of pristine condition. With this idea, I flameworked a mint plant, known as being cool and refreshing, and assembled it in a clear orb of glass which I cut open to make a clear window to the inside that is then obstructed by small chips to the surface. This is a representation of how over time the visuals of certain memories have become fractured and less clear in my mind.



Mint Condition, 2022, Encased flameworked glass



Forget Me Not, 2022, Encased flameworked glass

Forget Me Not is similar to Mint Condition, however, its front facet is left perfectly polished and unaltered. This denotes remembering something from one specific point of view. Personally, the forest and trees of what was once my home have now blurred with all the other various landscapes I've encountered over the years, but I will always be able to envision the forget-me-nots in bloom all along the creek during one particular spring season. There was such a profound feeling of serenity and beauty that has lasted with me all this time that I wanted to reflect in this work.

Furthermore, the imagery with these orbs takes me back in time to a version of myself that doesn't exist outside of photographs and stories. I like to imagine myself as another plant within these environments, and because these events happened many years ago the environment is simpler. This contrasts work reflective of more recent interactions within my life.

You are my sunshine is two glass buttercups that are stitched together where they overlap inside of a shadow box frame. This piece is symbolic of finding young love and the joy of a budding relationship. The buttercup flower stands for happiness, youth, and purity. There was a certain time of year when the fields of my country home would be painted yellow with buttercups as far as the eye could see, and that amazement and overwhelming sense of excitement is what I find comparable to the small things like holding hands, late night phone calls, and the first kiss. When someone looks you in the eyes and it makes you feel like you are their sunshine, and they are yours.

The Stages of Life

The fundamental aspects of both plant and animal lives parallel one another. Sharing the stages of birth, coming of age, reproduction, and death. These unifying elements of life are events that we often have celebrations for, many times involving floral arrangements as decorations.

Due to where I am in my life, the topics of coming of age and death are most prevalent in my work. Many of these pieces explore my perception of my childhood and growing older from my current mindset, and how I want my artwork to be remembered after it leaves my hands. Being in my early 20s and about to graduate college presents me with many different opportunities on where I want to direct my future.

Premonition of a Bud is a work that draws the viewer's eye inward with carved lines on the surface that reveal the face of a flower within. The idea is reminiscent of a magic eight ball, a toy children often ask questions to in order to be given an 'answer' as to what outcomes may happen to certain situations. When thinking about what a magic eight ball might tell me about what things I will experience, I compare myself to a budding flower. The exterior is exposed to the weather,

leaving it cut open and blue, but inside of that bud is the potential to one day be a flower in bloom. I chose a daisy because of its symbolism. I was thinking about how our past self influences our future self, the bud becoming the flower, which directly relates to the meaning of innocence and new beginnings associated with the daisy.



Premonition of a Bud, 2023, Encased flameworked glass

Technical Statement

When I took my first glass class I was enamored with the fluidity of the material and the duality in which it can be worked. Working with both hot and cold glass allows for organic curves and movement, as well as more controlled, geometric forms and crisp edges. This is appealing because while nature as a whole is very freeform, it contains many patterns and symmetrical shapes when looking at it as a whole.

-Flameworking-

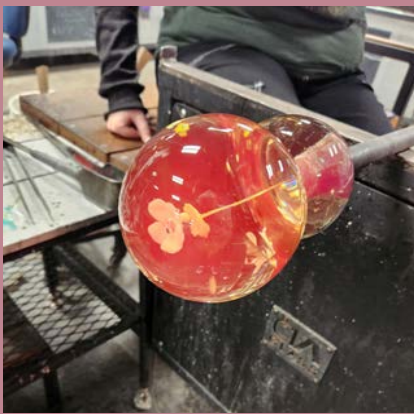
These traits are beneficial to my delicate floral and plant based work. An example of this is when making flameworked flowers. I begin by taking a rod of glass color that I heat up until it forms a molten ball on the end. With this, I pick up crushed glass color called frit and melt it to create sporadic splotches of color. Then, I use crimps to flatten the ball into a disk shape that will be tweezed out into a long length from which I can pull petals.

This method of color application is very organic and allows the forces of heat and gravity to melt and blend the colors together. Yet, the technique in which the tools are used makes intentional marks that decide the shape, length and curvature of the petal.



-Hot sculpting-

In the hot shop I tend to do a lot of sculptural work that includes flameworked components. Pieces like Forget Me Not start by gathering clear glass and using newspaper to force it off the rod into a long cylinder. Then I work in layers by carefully pressing the stem in, gathering more glass, adding a leaf, gathering, adding petals, and so on. This enables me to create a 3-dimensional plant that has a space of clear around it that I add effects to once the glass is cooled.



Another method of incorporating flameworked glass into clear glass is using a graphite mold. After pre-heating the mold and flameworked glass, I have an assistant pour clear glass straight from the furnace into the graphite. Then, I carefully place the flower on top of that glass while my assistant gathers more clear glass and pours it over top of the flameworked glass, sandwiching it inside. The glass is allowed to cool slightly so it holds its shape when removed from the mold and placed in the annealer.





Death Bloom, 2023, Cast glass, Flameworked glass, Metal wire



Death Bloom, 2023, Cast glass, Flameworked glass, Metal wire
(Detail)



Immersive Isolation, 2023, Encased frameworked glass



*Collection of Portraits, 2023, Fused glass, Flameworked glass,
Foliage, Frames*



I Hope You remember Me Like This, 2023, Encased flameworked glass



I Hope You remember Me Like This, 2023, Encased frameworked glass
(Detail)



Permanence, 2023, Blown glass, Faux Flowers



Permanence (Installation), 2023, Blown glass, Faux Flowers, Flowers



Pick It Apart (You Have To), 2023, Hot sculpted glass, Flameworked glass, Mirror



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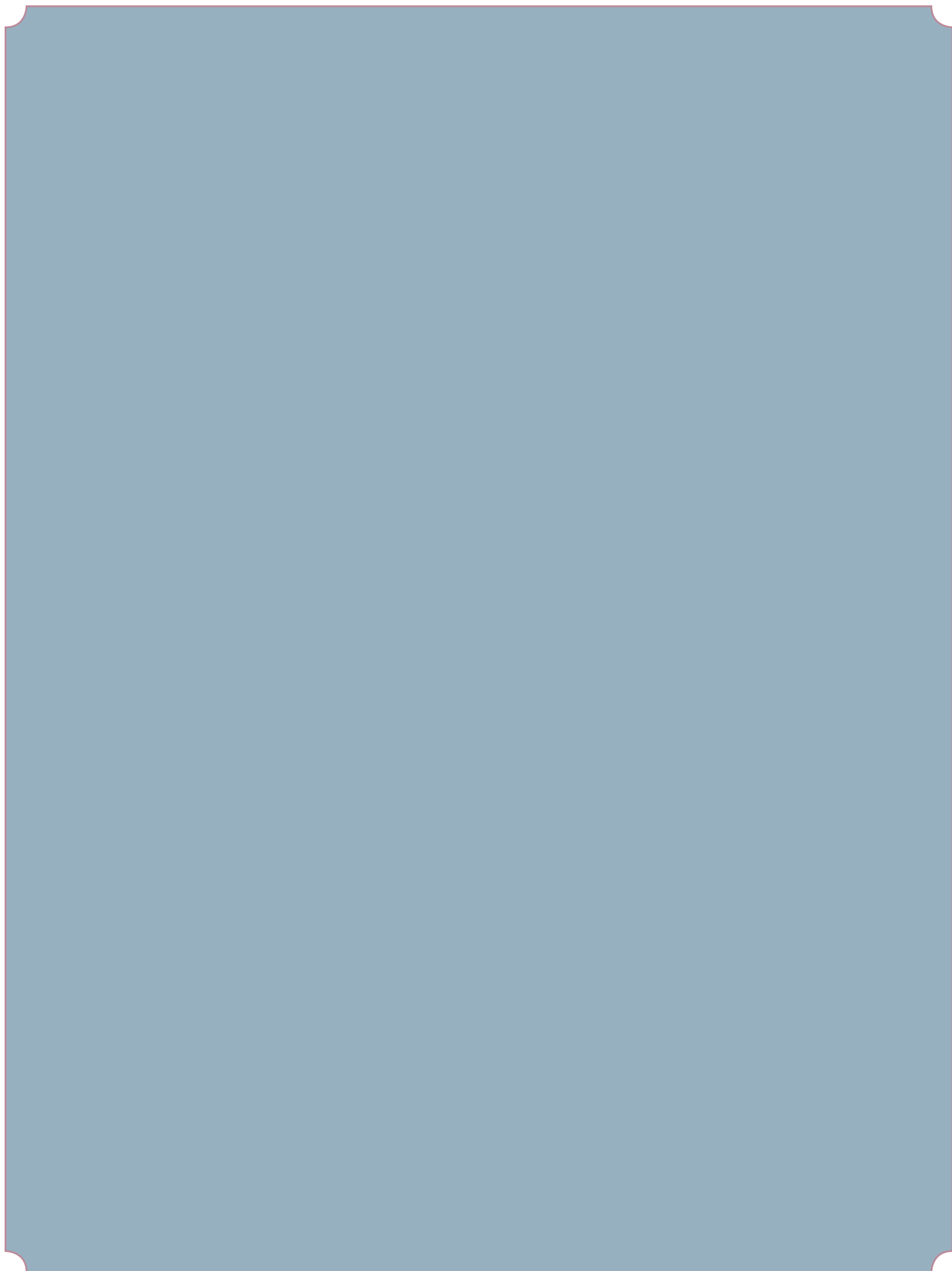
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Stankard, Paul, and Andrew Page. Beauty beyond Nature: The Glass Art of Paul Stankard. Robert M. Minkoff Foundation, Ltd., 2011.

Oldknow, Tina, and Cristine Russell. Voices of Contemporary Glass: The Heineman Collection. Corning Museum of Glass in Association with Hudson Hills Press, New York, 2009.

Zilber, Emily. Crafted: Objects in Flux. Museum of Fine Arts, 2015.

Diffenbaugh, Vanessa. The Language of Flowers / Vanessa Diffenbaugh. Macmillan, 2011.



EDUCATION

Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH

May 2023

Bachelor of Fine Arts in Glass

GPA at Graduation: 3.8

Gund Family Scholarship (Awarded Based on Merit)

EXPERIENCE

BJs Wholesale Club, Buffalo, NY + Cleveland, OH

Bakery Clerk/Cake Decorator

June 2021 - May 2022

Interact with customers to receive and deliver orders in a timely manner

Utilize and reload equipment to efficiently produce items for orders and to stock shelves

Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH

Metals Studio Technical Assistant

September 2020 - May 2021

Maintaining studio cleanliness by organizing workstations and making minor repairs to tools to create a safe and productive environment

Teaching Assistant, CIA Pre-College Program

July 10 - July 23, 2022

Assist with instructing high school students on the basics of glassblowing

Utilize creative thinking and my glassworking knowledge to help the students make ideas they design

Holiday Sale Vendor

December 2022 and 2021

Designed and created a large number of glass products including jewelry, vases, cups, and ornaments

Conversed with people as they looked at products to help promote our work and encourage sales

Studio Assistant, Cleveland, OH

October 2021 - December 2022

For glass artist Michael Mikula

Polish pieces on pumice and cerium wheels

Inspect the glass for any flaws such as scratches, chips, or cracks

Wash and dry pieces to prepare them for shows

GALLERY SHOWS

Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH

Values of Craft, Cleveland Institute of Art

February 2022

Co-curated and participated in a junior craft student exhibition with 5 glass pieces

76th Student Independent Exhibition, Cleveland Institute of Art

February

2022

Participated in a juried student-led exhibition with a blown glass piece about self-growth

77th Student Independent Exhibition, Cleveland Institute of Art

February

2023

Participated in a juried student-led exhibition with a flameworked and hot-sculpted glass piece

Risk + Discovery, Cleveland Institute of Art

April 2023

A glass exhibition highlighting 50 years of innovation at CIA

LEADERSHIP

Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH

Glass Guild Vice President

November 2021 - May 2023

Assisted in producing over-glass items to sell and raise money for educational trips. Raised over 12k towards trips to the Corning Museum of Glass and the Glass Art Society conference in Tacoma, WA in 2022. Funded a trip to Murano, Italy in 2023.

Attended Student Leadership Council meetings to share the Glass Guilds agenda with other clubs

PUBLICATIONS

April 20, 2023

Fifty years of creativity in studio art glass explored in Cleveland Institute of Art exhibition, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Steven Litt

COMMISSIONS

Faculty and Staff Bake-Off Trophy

March 2023

I was commissioned to design and create a cupcake-inspired trophy for the bake-off winner

The cupcake was solid glass that was sandblasted and adhered to a wooden base that I fabricated

SKILLS

Manual Skills: Knowledge of hot shop, solid flameworking, and coldworking equipment (furnaces, reheating chambers, kilns, flameworking torches, lapidary wheel, belt sander, etc.)

Knowledge in metal working (soldering, filing, cutting, hammering, and annealing)

Digital Skills: Adobe Illustrator, Rhinoceros 7



Ben and I in Seattle, WA for the 2022 GAS Conference on the Space Needle



(Left to Right) Liz Clarke, Ian Rapp, Annie O'Brien, Crystal Palka, Sarah Kemp, Ben Johnson, Sylvia Altman

Thank you,

To my professors Ben Johnson, Zac Gorell, and Kathy Buszkiewicz for continuously encouraging me to keep making and to learn from my failures. I am endlessly grateful to have had your support throughout my college experience and to take your teachings with me as I pursue future endeavors.

And to all of my friends who have been with me through this all, I can't say thank you enough for helping become the person I am today. I couldn't have done this without you.