

Glasscaster with Marcie Davis

Interview with Steve Sizelove

Below are excerpts from an interview featuring flameworking artist, Steve Sizelove, that took place at the International Flameworking Conference at Salem Community College in Carneys Point, New Jersey. Go to www.firelady.com, firelady.libsyn.com or iTunes to find Glasscaster a new podcast talk show on hot glass hosted by Marcie Davis.

Marcie Davis: Tell me about how you discovered flamework.

Steve Sizelove: I left the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design and moved out to Boulder, Colorado. My neighbors were in the beginning stages of learning to make pipes. I helped them out some getting oxygen, and as they got better at it, they gave me the opportunity to try it in return for the assistance that I gave them. I was pretty much hooked right away.

At the time I was working at Wild Oats in Boulder. I quit my job and lived on the couch outside of their trailer. We all worked on one National hand torch between three people in a little metal shed next to a trailer with about the smallest size oxygen bottles you could get. Because I was the dirty kid living on the couch, they gave me the morning shift, so I woke up and was all frosty in the mornings and would get out there and try to get a little bit of work done before they'd wake up and kick me off the torch. That only lasted for a few months, and then we started getting better and we ended up renting studio space and each bought our own torches.

How did you get from there to here?

I would not ever deny my roots as a pipe maker. I'm happy to say that I never really limited myself to making pipes, and I was never really a pipe crusader, but pipes gave me the opportunity to make glass and keep making glass and sell glass that was really bad. But looking back on it, what we were making then gave us the opportunity to keep doing it and refine our skills. I say "us" as a collective group, because so many people have experienced the same transition.

People who come in and cut their teeth in flameworking on pipe making get a great, solid set of technical skills to draw from.

Oh, definitely. I also feel like there is so much emphasis on technique that it's easy to forget about universal design elements. And it's definitely easy to forget about things that make work more appealing and more personal to a broader audience. Pipes definitely have a limited audience, but because there is so much focus on technique, people think less about communicating ideas. Or even being mindfully aware of the designs they're creating because so much is either geared toward production or geared toward showcasing techniques. I don't think that my work necessarily always has dramatic messages. I'd like to work toward that as I develop my voice in glass, but I'm in a stage now where design and composition are really important to me.



Where do you get your inspiration?

I enjoy designs that are very dynamic that have a lot of visual flow to them and visual tension. The limits of my work environment allow me to work in ways that make tall things, and that inherently has kind of a vertical visual flow and individual tension just in height. In looking back at some of the work, I've realized that that's been a theme that's been developing.

True inspiration for my work lately, if I look outside of what I'm doing and look at other things, I've been really amazed by Cindy Drozda's wood turning. Her turned wood creations are amazing for similar things that I'm interested in: visual tension, the transition of very skinny elements to very large and/or very bold elements. All of it tends to kind of fall into a Venetian aesthetic—things with flared, blown feet and avoglios and components like that.

One of the things that really attracts me to her work other than the form is the texture of the wood in it. I don't know that it's something I could really ever express in glass. It would almost be fake in glass, but seeing texture and visual texture in other materials gives me the desire to be a little bit more creative with my textures. I do some sandblasting to get things that defy that glassy look, but I've also lately been spooning powder onto the surfaces of pieces and sometimes just in selective spots to give it a texture that really defies that glassy look.

What kind of glass do you use and colors and palettes?

I like Simax because it's cheap and it seems to hold its heat pretty well. As for colors, all the companies have wonderful colors, and sometimes their wonderful colors aren't all that easy to work with.



I've definitely been into an earth tone thing lately, but a lot of that's the function of the powders. When working with the reducing powders, it's almost easier to let them go to their earthy tones and work with that. If it's something that the material wants to do, why fight it? It's good to understand how to control it, but if the material wants to behave a certain way, then if I can let the material behave the way it wants to and achieve an interesting effect, maybe I'm working smarter and not harder.

Do you find a way of self-expression in one form versus another?

Not necessarily in certain product. I just found myself really interested in the process of blowing and making vessels and creating hollow forms. It's really challenging for me to get the shapes that I want. I also think that that challenge and that interest can be a detriment to the evolution of my work, because it's easy to focus on technique or on specific aspects of a design without being aware of incorporating personal ideas into it.

I know that your work has taken a turn for the national level, but I hear you're involved in some projects at home.

Yeah, right now I'm on a show at the Richmond Art Museum. The two other artists are a painter and a metalsmith. I feel really fortunate to be involved with such quality work.

Was glass your first art?

I'm officially an art school dropout, and my love when I was in school was drawing. I went there with the idea of doing printmaking. Originally 2-D was a big focus for me and I hated my 3-D class, so it's ironic that now 3-D is what I'm focused on. Because I look at the profile of my work and the form when working with symmetry, though, in some ways you could think of a piece as 2-D. When you're looking at the profile, there is a two-dimensional quality to it.

Have you thought about what's upcoming in your future?

I'll be showing goblets this summer at the Schneiderman Works gallery for their annual goblet show. I'll be showing work at Kitrell-Riffkind, too, June through August.

Do you have any advice for artists who might not be as far along on their personal path, either in recognition or just in their own creativity?

Do the best work you possibly can and don't settle for anything less than that. Take pictures of everything. Be educated about the other work that's out there and be as honest and as objective as possible in regard to how your work fits in with the other work that's there. Get feedback from people who are in the know—academics especially and people who are going to give you advice about your work even outside of the frameworling realm.





“To see more of Steve’s artwork, please visit www.SteveSizelove.com”

Press is really important. By having images, the opportunity is greatly increased to have them published. If you don’t have quality images of your work, then nobody’s going to see it.

I do a lot of magazine articles and I can tell you that I choose to do features on people who I know have images. If you’ve got that, people will have a much better chance of publishing features about you. The only way to get exposure no matter how talented you are is to have good images of your work.

In terms of being able to build a body of work and sharing that with other people, you can only make so many pieces. Way less pieces than there are people in the world. Having a catalog greatly increases the amount of people who can see your work. Good or bad, take pictures of it. Don’t show people the bad stuff, but keep it so you have an idea of what you’ve made and the evolution of your own work. It’s an important learning process.

And learn how to use a digital camera and lighting.

Put your best foot forward with what you’ve got. I know so many people who have decent ideas and decent skills. If they were able to put their best foot forward and show people that, then they would have so much more of an opportunity. It’s one of the first steps in going from talking about transitioning your work into an art market to actually doing it.

I’ve learned a lot from Milon Townsend about the importance of the presentation. A lot of his marketing stuff is first-rate.

Milon and Robert Mickelsen, both. Robert was the first one who stressed the importance of photographs to me. And I’ve heard him repeat that stress in lectures and in presentations. I try to listen to people who I feel have been successful and whose work I admire, and they’re doing something right to get themselves to the point where they can keep making quality work.

One thing you can’t underestimate, I think, is the amount of time that it takes to market yourself properly. The amount of time it takes to process those photos and edit them and get them up and out and burned.

It’s time out of the shop that is really necessary. And that has to be calculated into the price of a piece or at least objectively examined when you look at how much work you can do. The amount of work that I do these days is drastically less than what I want it to be with the reality of having children and my family life. Also, all of the stuff that I’ve realized I had to do to get to the point where I’m sitting here talking with you, Marcie, and sharing my glass experience with other people. It’s hard work to make glass and it’s hard work to get all the pictures and everything else, but I’m humbled by the fact that other people enjoy my glass enough that I’m able to be appreciated for that artwork.

The point is that in order to get from obscurity to where you’re being interviewed and featured, it takes a lot of work and marketing. That marketing takes away from your time at the torch, so you’ve got to be pretty disciplined.

I think it takes somebody who’s really flexible—disciplined and flexible. I have less of the discipline but more of the flexibility. For each person, it’s different. So in talking about how to make a career out of making glass or allowing yourself the ability to explore glass through selling your glass—that path of creative experimenting—it’s different for everybody.

So find your path. We all look for it and when you do you’ll be happy. Is that the happily-ever-after kind of thing?

Yeah, it’s “glass ever after.” Glass is its own dynamic thing, and I think it’s got all the emotions wrapped up into it that the rest of life has.

