

Flame Working Women of Floyd

The population of fourteen thousand souls in the Blue Ridge county of Floyd, Virginia is nothing if not diverse, and in no way more so than in the unique group of artisans and crafters who have come to live and work there. They create their art forms from their studios that may be in unpretentious barns and sheds or in the most elaborate of structures near their homes tucked into the forested folds of the rolling plateau. But from this diversity, more and more are united by their associations with the growing 'cultural incubator' and arts showcase called the Jacksonville Center in the county seat of Floyd, population 400.

The converted dairy barn offers opportunities for gallery display, working studios for startup artisans, retail sales showcasing members' hand-made items and a variety of educational opportunities. Serving as Floyd's Community Center for the Arts, The Jacksonville Center now also serves as Virginia's first residential crafts school. Organized in 1995 by a group of citizen volunteers, The Center has always had education at its heart whose mission is to stimulate economic development through tourism by showcasing those artistic, creative educational, and entertainment aspects of rural life which are unique to the region. With federal and state funding the Center's campus consists of three fully equipped studios: Glass-working, Pottery and Blacksmithing along with a 10 person residence for visiting students and instructors.

Among those who are contributing to the creative diversity at the Jacksonville Center are three women; an instructor, a tenant, and a studio manager who work independently but share the passion for the intimate and intricate working of glass over open flame. Each of these ladies has come to incorporate glass into their multimedia creations but arrived at that common interest only as the result of their varied work backgrounds in seemingly unrelated fields as diverse as plumbing, biology, chemistry and salt-tolerant plant nursery. But nothing was wasted in those far-flung endeavors. Every thing that touches us, changes us, and these three women bring to their glass working the many influences that have touched them, leading each in a very distinctive way to share the light and form that only flameworked glass can produce.

Glasswork is central to the varied media employed by artist Liz Mears, though her creations have also included linen, sheet copper, charred wood and horsehair. Using both glassblowing and flameworking, her creations include such unique objects as

standing and hanging 'books' created in collaboration with her daughter, a photographer; and 'bundles of twigs', inspired by the bare trees in the forest outside her window and the kindling she gathered to light her woodstove. Her work



also includes goblets, stoppered bottles and glass variations on the Jewish menorah, as well as a variety of 'other works' in which nature and person are often inseparable. Some of this remarkable work is available for viewing at her ElizabethMears.com and Windy Hill Glass Works websites. Liz is scheduled to teach "Glassblowing at the Benchtorch" July 24-28 at the Jacksonville Center.

Gayle Rolfe brings multiple professions and skills to her more recent interest in glasswork. A certified plumber and electrician in her earlier careers, she is no stranger to working with her hands. Later, as graphic designer and professional sign-maker for twelve years in her Floyd County shop, she brings both the eye and the digital means to translate those in-sights into patterns to guide her art work. Lately, her glass work has included museum quality replication of historical glass lighting sometimes reconstructed in archeological fashion from only a fragment of the original fixture. She relies heavily on her computer and drafting skills for this work, as well as in her more recent creations of half-tone photographs as glass etchings. She finds flameworking "both hypnotic and therapeutic" and a more spontaneous artistic opportunity than the exacting work of restoration. As studio manager at the Jacksonville Center, Gayle has not only been instrumental in the setting up of the glass working studio itself, but she also serves in oversight of studio operations: Maintaining Equipment, Supplies as well as acts as assistant to each instructor that teaches at the Center.

Linda Osborne is a tenant at the Floyd center. A visit to her space, called "Feel the Heat," will show that her passion is lampwork beads. Beads, she says, can become an art form, though her studio space offers "other Objects of Desire" as well. Linda's route to glass includes 24 years as a grower of native Florida grasses and wildflowers with a specialty in salt-tolerant plants and later as consultant in propagation and planting of salt-tolerant varieties, including mangrove and sea oats. Her earliest artistic interest includes jewelry, macramé and leatherwork, the latter of which continues to thrive, enhanced now by her soft glass bead-making creations she displays in her Jacksonville center space. Linda relocated to Floyd, after first being introduced to this rich and rural community in 2001 by good friends, and began her tenancy at the Center in 2005.

The Jacksonville Center for the Arts is located on Route 8 in Floyd, Va. The Center is open seven days a week during March through December. For more information, call 540-745-2784, or visit www.jacksonvillecenter.org.

