

# Deep in the Heart of Texas

## University of Texas (Arlington) offers state of the art glass in the Lone Star State

By William Menzies, Jr.

Some folks (usually Texans) boast that everything is bigger in Texas. David Keens and the folks at the University of Texas at Arlington are doing their part to uphold that legend. What started as one man's dream has blossomed into the Lone Star State's only University funded artistic glassblowing program. Since breaking ground on a new 6500 square foot facility, the UTA team will boast one of the largest dedicated artistic glass programs in North America.

It all started in 1974 when a young David Keens was hired by the University of Texas (the largest university program in the U.S.) to teach metal and sculpture at their Arlington campus. Keens, then a recent graduate of University of Washington with a MFA, made the long journey to the Lone Star State.

In 1975, the UT system invested enormously in their arts program in Arlington. Along with a new building (which is the present day arts building), the faculty had funds to purchase new equipment. David and other faculty members were interested in the studio glass movement and decided to invest in some very basic equipment. They bought a furnace, glory hole and frontloader from the Alpine Co., and started melting glass.



As with most other great stories, this one had humble beginnings. The faculty taught themselves the rudiments of basic offhand. They worked with poor quality clear glass. It was very bubbly so they would throw in a little of this or a little of that to color the glass. David said "Basically, we melted globs of glass." Still teaching metal courses, Keens stayed fascinated with the glass.

By the early 80's, the first students got interested in glass as a medium of expression. The first classes were only 3 or 4 students deep and weren't very instructional. "The early years were more of a cooperative effort between student and instructor", says Keens.

Meanwhile, David was gaining quite a reputation as a world class sculptor. Galleries across the nation including the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian and the Contemporary Crafts





Museum in New York had shown his sculptures. David also had exhibitions in 10 foreign countries, including the National Museum of Art in Kyoto, Japan. As an expert in his field, Keens was invited to Summervale in the mid 80's to teach metal sculpture.

It so happened that the metal shop in Summervale was right across from the hot shop. In his downtime, David would visit the hotshop and watch the American maestros at work, including an opportunity to watch William Morris. Glass was more and more appealing to Keens as a sculptural medium.

In the late 80's metal began to lose its luster with David. For over 10 years, David had explored metal creatively. Challenges were harder and harder to find. It was then that David made the personal commitment to get the glass program going at UTA. With some funding from the University, the outside storage patio of the art department was transformed into the hotshop complete with two glory holes and two benches. David took some courses at Corning and the first artistic glassblowing classes were offered in 1992. Though David would like to claim a nobler purpose, he had been bitten by the glass bug and the only cure was a state of the art hot shop.

So, over the next ten years David set about the task at hand. Glass scraps were replaced by Spruce Pine Batch. Garden shears and dowel rods replaced by Moore shears and jacks. Keens and his students learned to build their own equipment and maintain it. The program expanded, to include a new coldworking facility. Kilns were brought in for slumping and fusing. They also included a six station flameworking

area, with torches ranging from a minor burner to a Carlisle CC. Student interest expanded exponentially, even today.

UTA offers two beginner level courses, an intermediate and one advanced course in blown work with classes also in slumping and fusing. There are opportunities in flameworking, kiln casting and cold-work as well as a neon class beginning next year. The program brings in guest artists such as Roger Parramore and Rene Culler each semester to further stimulate the process.

The program takes between 30 and 40 students per semester. "Most slots are taken within 3 or 4 days of registration," Keens says. "The program is outgrowing its present facilities." Currently, a student has the capability of declaring glass a major concentration towards a BFA. Plans are under way to establish a graduate program that would provide for a MFA in Glass. The University of Texas Arlington recognizes the uniqueness of their glass blowing program and is willing to support its continued growth.

**David Keens' team of skilled students: Kent Nevitt, Mark Alexander, Kevin McGehee, Bettye Holly, and Lewis Keener. The vessels featured range from 12"- 49" tall.**







Artist rendering of the new facility.

That supports comes in the way of 6500 square foot, state of the art, fully ventilated and climate controlled (it is in Texas) glassworking mecca. The hot shop alone will cover almost 4000 square feet. Upon hearing the news from the Board of Regents last year, David went to work. Most of the summer was spent laying out the floor plan and building equipment that was needed for the new facility. David along with Don Beck and some senior students spend most of the summer months cutting, grinding and welding new equipment.



Don Beck, technician for the art department and former graduate, is a master machinist with over 35 years under his belt. He built and raced formula cars in Dallas/ Ft. Worth area into the mid 70's. If that wasn't enough, Don is an artistic and commercial neon tube bender with over 25 years experience. His neon has been seen in a number of galleries as well as illuminating everything from skyscrapers and casinos to props used in commercials and motion pictures including (but not limited to) Bladerunner, Breakfast Club and Risky Business.

By the end of summer David, Don and the crew had built most of benches and glory holes for the new facility. This

included "Mongo", a mammoth glory hole, whose size and location remain secret until completion of the new building. All said and done, the student area will have three benches with individual glory holes. There will also be a two-bench, three glory hole area for faculty, advanced students and visiting artists. All of this will be supported by two clear furnaces of Spruce Pine Batch and a color pot furnace. That's not to mention complete cold working facilities with a separate sand carving room as well as kiln rooms for fusing, slumping and casting. A state of the art lampworking facility complete with front loading annealers and an area dedicated to neon work complete the plans. "Our ultimate goal is to provide students full access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week" says Keens.

The new building should be built and occupied by January of '04. With the new facility, the course offering will probably double (if not triple). No worries, students are eager to fill the new spots. Don will teach the first neon courses in the new building and David will be assisted by adjunct professor Kent Nevitt.

After seeing the excitement of this group and the contagious, determination of David Keens, this story has probably just begun. So, the next time your in the Ft. Worth Stockyards, head east on the Chisholm Trail (nowadays known as I-30) about 30 miles. Stop in to say Howdy to David, Don and the UTA team. You'll be glad you did.

