

THE Degenerate FLAME OFF 2009

Functional Art Glass from the Underground

by Mer

In January of this year, my wife and I came into Cornerstone Glass to pick up some materials for the shop. Over a brief conversation with Justin Sheppard, the facility's owner, we began to toss about the idea of hosting an event for the large community of artists making functional glass smokeware in our area. We had no idea of the amount of support and excitement that a pipe makers' flame-off would eventually garner. Once word started to get out about our plans, the interest snowballed into hype and the event took on a life of its own.



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Photography by Chris Carlson

Coming Together Again

While there are so many of us here in Eugene, it's rare to find more than a dozen pipers in one place. After the federal government had made its stance against the pipe making industry in 2003, our community was forced underground. Working in small shops throughout the town we began to lose touch with what other pipe makers were doing. While times were tough, we were forced to grow and adapt to the new environment. As with so many of life's trials, this one ultimately served to strengthen us all. We began to see the end of glassblowers reproducing the established lines of large production houses. The result was a blossoming in creativity as we were forced to innovate our own styles.

As the political climate began to shift to a more moderate stance, artists started to peek outside of their little circles. With the growing popularity of online forums such as The Melting Pot (www.talkglass.com), which were accepting and supportive of the pipe making world, connections were able to be made that built our community back up and allowed us to share the magic that we had been cautiously and quietly working on.

An Incredible Event

So the stage was set. Cornerstone Glass can host up to twenty-five glassblowers at a time. The facility was perfect. The team of glassblowers there had been working together for a long time and ran the shop like a well-oiled machine. Justin and Ashley had the skill set to handle not only a storefront and studio, but the infrastructure to host an event of this scale, and I had established relationships with a broad base of artists and industry leaders. The timing was finally right and all of the pieces were in place to host an event that could serve as a coming out party for our repressed community.

The result of our efforts was overwhelming. The event was incredibly successful and the community was lifted up. I've rarely been a part of such a positive experience. The love of this community for each other and the glass we make is astounding. I can hardly wait until next year's Degenerate Flame-Off. Hope to see you there.

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The Degenerate Flame Off 2009

by Adam Villarreal

May 29–31, 2009, saw competitors from all over the country gathered in Eugene, Oregon, at the Cornerstone Glass Studios to participate in a unique event, the First Annual Degenerate Flame Off (DFO). For the very first time in Eugene, glass artists would publicly compete and be judged . . . on pipes. It is fitting that the city of Eugene host the Degenerate Flame Off, since the city is not only home to the prestigious Eugene Glass School but also a hotbed of talented artists in many fields. Some of the most cutting-edge borosilicate pipe art in the world is coming out of this small patch of the Northwest.

Day One

Inside the main building, the pace of activity accelerated as worktables were made ready and kilns were put into place. Abe Flieshman, Darby Holm, Dellene Peralta, Marcel Braun, and Salt were kind enough to come down and demo for the event.

By 12:30 p.m. the courtyard was filling up in earnest, and by 2:00 p.m. the demos had begun. Marcel Braun was up first, prepping steel blowtubes, soft glass style, by wrapping rods of 10 mm borosilicate on the ends with his GTT hand torch. It was awesome to see the way soft glass technique can be tweaked for boro. As a nine-inch piece of 44 mm rod was thrust into the glory hole, Marcel explained that he would be demoing the crackle ball technique. It has been said that this is a soft glass only technique. That is why it was chosen for the demo—to illustrate that in glass, limits are perceived, not concrete.

To get an idea of the heat involved, the Draco uses as much oxygen as a GTT Delta on full blast. A gather of Peacock was marvered into lace, and cobalt frit was added to the outside for the second layer. Everyone was really sweating by then as the smell of kiln brick and the roar of the glory hole filled the courtyard.

Once the gather was shaped into a ball, it was plunged into a waiting bucket of cold water. With a sputtering hiss, steam shot from the bucket. The energy built as the piece neared completion. I was lucky enough to be selected to be one of the door monkeys. I moved closer to pick up the door opener and really began to appreciate how much these guys love glass. Even to the side of the door, the heat is brutal.

A punty was prepared and the piece was transferred. The neck was formed with deftly wielded jacks, and with a sharp tap the piece came free of the blow tube. The crowd was really into it at that point. One more heat in the glory hole, and the lip of the vessel opened up like a flower. Marcel swung the bowl through an arc turning at the precise speed to flare as desired. Then he called for both doors to be opened for the piece to fit for the final heat, and you could feel the eyes of the crowd burning with apprehension. All that was left was to tap the bowl free of the punty. As the jacks were brought up, the crowd went silent. Out of the corner of my eye I could even see some people holding their breath. With a sharp tap on the punty, the piece came free. The crowd released its pent-up energy in a roar of applause.

Inside, Abe Flieshman and Adam Mayhe were demonstrating Northstar’s crucible dip tubing technique. A tube of 26 mm clear



that was about 3 feet long was preheated and the end was dipped into the crucible through a hole cut into the kiln lid. At a toasty 2345°F you could smell the Kevlar scorching on Abe’s gloves. What got pulled back out is simply magic. The encasement in color was achieved in seconds. This is certainly a new frontier in prep. Adam held one end of the 26 mm and began to ascend the ladder they had ready for the demo. Once Adam was in position, Abe took long-handled shears and began to coax the tube into its final length as Adam blew from the top. Abe clipped off the extra material at the end, and a finished tube of Amber Purple prep was pulled and ready. You could see the glassblowers in the crowd by the way certain people’s eyes lit up. Previously a prep of this size would take about an hour to produce. The artistic possibilities of this technique are remarkable.

Dellene Peralta was first up to receive one of the dips. She took her freshly made colored tube and got to work, blowing out a long, hollow form. As she began to sculpt, a woman’s body slowly came into view. After the body had been formed, the head, which has been blown separately, was added. Dellene cleverly flowed the seam line together by adding dots around the neck. The final appearance was that of beads on a necklace. She took her time and gently eased out the fine details of the face and hair using only a knife and tweezers.

As she was putting the final details on the face, I got a good view of the expression—a subtle smile framed by a classical Greek hairstyle. The bowl was a Grecian urn water vessel with a down stem seamed into the hip. Dellene finished off the piece by adding arms, using Amber Purple rod prep that was made earlier. As she set the piece on the kiln, the group around her cheered.

Matt DuBois used his dip prep to make a hollow, structural Buddha figure. He started by blowing a large bubble about eight inches across and began to sculpt the form using a long, slender butcher’s knife. Using broad strokes, he laid the foundation of the belly. Matt demonstrated a superb knowledge of glass as he added each wrinkle and crease into the robe of the figure. In practically no time the shoulders and frame of the Buddha were readily apparent. He then heated the bottom to ragging hot and flattened the base as he blew to give a seated posture. After transferring the blow tube to the bottom of the figure, he garaged the body and started forming the head.

As Matt worked, I looked over to the next table and saw that Darby Holm was there as well and was getting in on the action. He brought a rasta colored stick-stack prep that he had made the previous day. After grabbing an Amber Purple tube from Abe, Matt started working on a multisection, German montage–style, handworked bong. Salt decided to step up as well, took a prep from Abe, and formed an abstract sculpture in his signature style. He used a whole array of different sculpting tools—everything from knives to assorted kitchen utensils. A face with a haunted expression emerged from the front of the sculpture. As a finishing touch, Salt added a large glob of solid Amber Purple and sculpted a wing.

It was a real treat to be able to watch these artists from the top of their fields have fun and demo for us. Curious onlookers and attentive glassblowers gathered round each demo, watching and learning. For some who work from home or in isolated shop environments, this event was a bonanza of new information and a chance to grow as an artist.

Outside, Saeed from Eugene Glass School manned the bar serving up meatball subs and cold beers. As the afternoon faded into evening and the heat subsided, merriment ensued. The DJs on stage cranked up the music, and the beer flowed freely. This was a great opportunity to see old friends and make new ones. The atmosphere was so positive that the spirit of fraternity that comes with glassblowing was really driven home. Marcel put on one more glory hole demo to finish off the evening, which looked all the more impressive in the dark. I was excited to see what tomorrow would bring.

Day Two

People started to arrive at nine o’clock and continued to build in numbers. Thankfully the heat seemed as if it would be less intense than the day before. The PA system crackled to life around noon, informing everyone that the competition would begin shortly. William Menzies had flown in all the way from Texas just to MC for the event.

The artists took their places—tools ready, hands poised. The Cornerstone people with the help of numerous volunteers had literally transformed the shop. Tentative glances were shot at the breaker boxes. I was told that there had never been this many kilns going at once in the building. Wil Menzies’ voice boomed over the speakers calling out the sponsors, then announced, “We have an eight-hour time limit. Light ’em up!”

The unmistakable hiss of torches filled the air as the competition got underway. Some rushed to begin while others took a more leisurely approach. Ace took the time to discuss the pros and cons of production work with me by her station as she gathered materials.

Hamm’s sturdy frame bobbed and weaved with abundant energy behind the torch, getting right to work on huge, white preps. Alex K presented a traditional style, stacking up wig-wag reversal balls. I saw Salt walking to his station with an armload of various knives and asked him what he would be working on. With a wry grin he told me that he was getting ready to kill the monster. Dosh held rapt attention on his piece, a portrait of concentration.

As the afternoon progressed the effect of a room full of kilns and fire was definitely beginning to be felt. The mercury has risen past 95°F, and that’s near the door. Despite the heat, Mr. Gray was a foundation of calm. Midway through the competition I asked him how he felt. Without any pause he coolly replied, “Right on schedule.” Eusheen hunched close to his work, meticulously laying down small stringers, which is a hallmark of his style.

Nate Dizzle made a huge multi donut assembly, but about four hours in disaster struck. Half of Nate’s kiln elements shut down, and his work was in jeopardy. Nate called for tools and immediately began to take apart the back of his kiln, searching for the problem. Working methodically he found the short and began to splice wires. He stayed



cool even as the degrees in the kiln ticked lower, getting ever closer to the strain point. With no time to spare he slid the cover back into place and flicked the power switch. Success! Nate was back in business.

Across the table Scott Deppe raged on despite a crack that would have made most glass-blowers throw in the towel. A piece of the skull he was building popped off, causing those around him to gasp. After a quick flash in the kiln, he turned his Delta Mag way up and coil potted the hole closed. Within minutes the skull has been paddled and sculpted back into place perfectly, and he was back on track.

As I walked the room I was overcome by the effort being put forth. The heat became downright oppressive and still the contestants worked on. It was so hot that the crowd was constantly circulating from the shady areas of the facility back inside to watch.

Throughout the competition Wil was on the mike running the raffle, with prizes being doled out every couple of hours. The prizes got better and better as the day progressed, and the crowd was really into it.

When there were only about two hours left, I walked over to see how the central table was doing. Christina Cody had a pile of flowers and buds she was working on. Corn seemed at ease as she sculpted tiny, fantastical human figures. Sheepdawg was working on some kind of modular assembly filled with scientific joints.

The pace of the work was getting faster and faster as the deadline approached. I looked toward the front of the room and saw a life-size Amber Purple skeletal arm waving back at me. The things being made that day were really pushing the boundaries of how pipes are defined.

The last ten minutes were simply astounding. You could feel the tension in the room rising so quickly that my stomach was in a knot. This was it. Hours of focus backed up by years of dedication had come down to this moment. Buck finished first, and as he closed his kiln door the crowd let out a cheer. Salt was coming to the end of his piece when his table lost power. As a testament to the caliber of the Cornerstone people, they literally ran to help and the issue was resolved shortly. ME was putting the finishing touches on some of the most unique perc chambers I have ever seen. Midas was sweating over his ghoulish creation; from this angle a tortured face was screaming up at me.

Ace finished next, and again the crowd cheered. One by one artists came to the end of their projects. As each finished, the crowd went nuts. Toward the end the cheers were so close together that it was an almost continuous applause.

Wil Menzies informed all of the artists that they would keep working until they were finished. Late entries would be marked down; however, all would be judged. Some worked on through the time limit, intent to finish, while a few others scraped in right at the wire. Outside the band kicked into high gear, techno beats syncing with blasts from the didgeridoo. Spirits were high and the party was lively. As the artists mingled with the crowd, there were many pats on the back and high fives from fans and spectators. Marcel and Abe were in the courtyard entertaining the crowd with another glory hole demo, and this time Matt Dubois stepped in and helped. Everyone was having a great time, and the party continued on into the wee hours.

The second day of the flame-off turned out to be a real landmark for the industry. Artists were expressing their excitement that finally what they do can see the light of day—that their craft is gaining acceptability. I was told that the Mayor Kitty Piercy of Eugene had even stopped in to see what the event was all about. These are truly exciting times, not only for the pipe industry but for borosilicate art itself. The field is growing quickly with new techniques and technologies being invented every day.

Day Three

Judging was set to happen on the third day of the event. The workbench in the middle of the building had been covered with linen, and competitors' pieces stood by the name plates of the artists. The crowd churned and camera flashes were lighting up the room. Everyone clamored to move to the forefront and get the best pictures of the artwork. The judges moved from piece to piece, examining in detail and weighing the merits of each.

Finally it was time. Wil Menzies stepped up and began by thanking all who helped make the flame-off possible. As he read from the list of sponsors and volunteers the crowd buzzed with apprehension. Cornerstone and the volunteers had graciously prepared a gift box for each competitor, and each one was applauded as he or she stepped up to claim it.

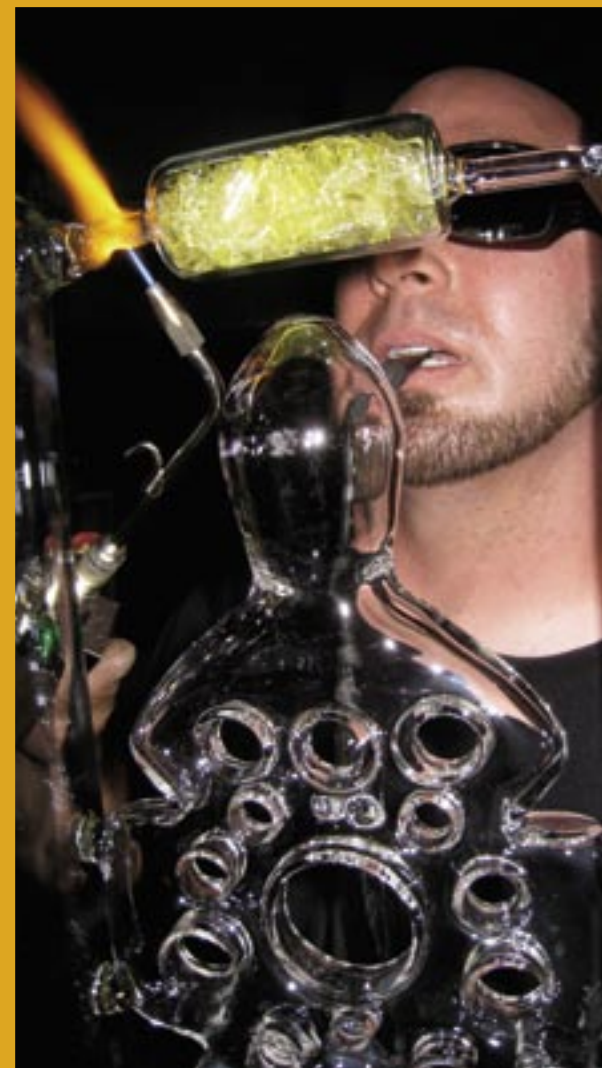
The prize categories were for: Technical/Craft, Creativity/Originality, and People's Choice. The crowd hushed as Wil prepared to announce the first name. The Creativity/Originality prize was awarded first, and it was Buck for his Amber Purple fish skeleton bubbler—a real accomplishment, since this is Buck's first flame-off. Applause was all around as he was handed the winner's box, which included five hundred dollars and various materials and gift certificates from the sponsors.

Next up was the Technical/Craft prize, and it went to Mr. Gray for his smashing abstract piece. It really was a sight to see—hand-assembled in eight hours, shimmering with dichro and standing almost two feet tall. The crowd went wild and people jostled to congratulate him. The prize was five hundred dollars plus hundreds in gift certificates and materials.

And finally came the People's Choice Award, the votes having been tabulated from the previous day. The energy in the room was incredible, and the crowd were literally on their toes. Wil unfolded the paper almost in slow motion. "And the winner is . . . BUCK!"

The crowd erupted. The youngest competitor had stolen the show with a win in two categories. Amidst the cheers Buck was handed a box with the People's Choice prize—a Carlisle CC burner, a Paragon F-240 worth \$2,000, \$500 in cash, and hundreds more in gift certificates and materials. Ever modest, Buck tried to step down but the people were calling for a speech. As Wil placed the headset around his neck, Buck was smiling from ear to ear. Buck thanked everyone and told us he was going fishing. Salt grabbed Buck's arm and raised it triumphantly, causing the crowd to let loose once again. This was simply incredible to watch.

Bob Snodgrass called for a group picture outside. As this motley crew of talented glass artists assembled on the stage I couldn't help but smile. There were so many different people with very different back stories, yet all are tied together by the love of glass.



Honoring the Past but Looking to the Future

What happened at the Degenerate Flame-Off is the product of a rich history. Without the early pioneers who were willing to do more with less none of this would have been possible—men such as Bob Snodgrass, Paul Trautman, and countless others who just loved to melt glass and were willing to push it as far as they could. In a matter of decades an artistic expression of American counter culture has exploded into a coast-to-coast movement. We are witnessing history in the making.

More than a descriptive, the degenerate art name itself holds a deeper significance. Degenerate art is the English translation of the German *entartete Kunst*, a term adopted by the Nazi regime to describe virtually all modern art. While it would be inaccurate to say that there is a direct correlation between then and now, parallels can certainly be drawn. Regardless of the craftsmanship and complexity of a piece, there is still an inherent difficulty separating it from the paraphernalia label. The laws vary in severity from state to state, yet federally the issue is very clear—pipe art is not art. This stance by the state lends the impression of illegitimacy to one's work in our profession.

Every Degenerate artist has heard the phrase: "Ohhhh . . . you make . . . pipes." It takes serious guts, fortitude, and endless patience to run a small business in any field. You assume the mantle of accountant, secretary, worker, salesperson, researcher, and manager, and also have to find the time to foster artistic creativity. These are the challenges that pipe artists must rise to daily, all in the face of social taboo.

The winds of change are beginning to blow in the art community, however. Respected artists are beginning to recognize the firm work ethic and commitment to innovation that is embodied in the Degenerate movement. Renowned paperweight maker Paul Stankard has recently championed the movement, citing his experience with Clinton Roman, Scott Deppe, and other "pipers" as a testament to the artistic ability and fortitude of those in the industry. Paul shared these thoughts at the thirty-ninth annual Glass Art Society conference: "These guys evidence high skill levels, advanced technology . . . and here are these masters, who are relatively young from my perspective."

In this time of social upheaval there is a sense of apprehension in the community. We are not sure what the future holds, nor can we say with certainty if things will get better or worse. It is a safe bet, however, that no matter what the coming years bring nothing can stop art from being made. As the party wound to a close, I was left with feelings of awe and a deeper appreciation for the community that brands itself degenerate.

Last but not least, many people have put hours and hours of their time into this project. The artists, volunteers, and coordinators (Mermonkey and Justin) came together to make this all possible. Special thanks to the demoing artists for donating their time and materials to make the DFO all the more pleasing for the crowd. A huge thanks to all involved who helped out. What has begun here is surely bigger than one flame-off. It was a privilege to be able to watch.

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For more photos of this event, check out the Fall 2009 issue of The Flow.