

An Interview with

Sharon Peters

by Kendra Sanders

Photography by Jim Trenkle

I love your work, Sharon, and it's a thrill to have the chance to talk to you about it. One thing I'm wondering is where you get the inspiration for such unique ideas, not to mention the titles.

Everywhere! You can find design nuggets in everything around you—fabric patterns, cloud movements, advertisements, bad jokes, art prints, nature, television, and conversations. I have a lot of fun with language and clichés and generate puns constantly. Those feed into many of my designs. And parental visits with Lawrence Welk TV. Those gave me *Swine on Harvest Moon*, *Chattanooga Chow Chow*, and *Demons are a Ghoul's Best Friend*. Priceless!

I have trouble doing the same pieces over and over—low boredom threshold. When I'm stuck doing production work, the designs start to morph and change after the first hour. If I have to make eight *Beanie Boys*, it's guaranteed that number four will have three eyes, number five will be female, and number six will be roadkill.

I bring an idea scrapbook full of images, patterns, and fabric bits to my classes and encourage the students to make a book of their own. It's a great design resource and works well when "beader's block" sets in. You can close your eyes, open the book at random, stab down your finger, and then try to incorporate a part of the image you've selected into a bead. It's a really good way to insert new design elements and direction into your work.

What about lampworking gives you the most joy?

Playing with new designs, attempting the impossible, and blowing a whole day on the torch without producing a single sale-worthy piece of glass. You can't allow yourself to be trapped by production work. You need to set aside a block of time to just muck around with the glass, tools, powders, frits, and metals. You need to take classes, try new techniques, and play around with your ideas. Otherwise, you won't be able to grow as an artist and technician. Life, deadlines, and commitments get in the way, and I have to be really creative to free up the time to mess around, usually to the detriment of the 23,500 e-mails that land on me every day.

What gives you the most headaches?

The 23,500 e-mails that land on me every day and the lousy paperwork! The business part drives me nuts. Advertising, shows, exhibits, publications—it takes an amazing amount of time to fill out forms and contracts, write bios and submission text, build and update the website, select images, meet deadlines, order badges and electric for shows, book flights and hotel rooms, and jam everything back in the carry-on after the airport strip search. Thank heavens for Jim the Hubby. If he hadn't dived in and taken over some of this stuff, I would have been toast years ago.





Do you have a favorite tool?

Probably the brass pin punches. I use the larger ones to make inset eyes on dragons and gremlins, and the smaller ones are great for air-bubble decorations. The tools I use the most would be the utility blade tool, graphite marver, BBQ mashers, tungsten pick, the warm end of a glass rod, and gravity.

Tell us about your most favorite project.

Probably my first story necklace, back in 1997. I've been doing serial cartoons since I was six, each one telling a story, and I attempted to immortalize one in glass. I'd only been torching for a year, but it came out okay. It taught me the mural technique that I teach today. The images are wrapped around cylinder beads, so no good pictures. I'm thinking about remaking it with tabulars.

When you're not at the torch, what do you like to do?

Read, when I get the time. I also set up meetings and programs, write flyers, and handle communications for the Norcal Chapter of the International Society of Glass Beadmakers (ISGB). I'm the point person for our chapter with the Beads of Courage program. Our beads go to kids in cancer treatment. Check out the program at www.beadsofcourage.net. It's a great thing.

I also did stand-up and improv comedy for a couple years. I loved improv way more than stand-up and practice now at bead shows—poor customers! I've also collected and repaired rhinestone jewelry since I was fifteen, do all kinds of artwork, and occasionally get some sleep.

What is the biggest lesson that you've learned about lampworking?

Probably that burnt hair smells really, really bad. I actually learned a lot of things, and most of it was stuff my mother told me as I was growing up.

- Practice makes perfect.
- Persistence pays.
- If at first you don't succeed, put it away for two months and try again.
- Lots of play time at the torch generates lots of new ideas and eventually a personal style.
- It's okay to fail, as long as you give it a decent try.
- Don't be discouraged by other people's opinions or negative input. Listen to them, consider what they say, and make your own choices. You're an artist with your own ideas and inspirations.

• Banana Boat aloe gel mixed with French lavender oil is a miracle burn ointment that has saved me more than once.

Any advice you'd give a beginning lampworker?

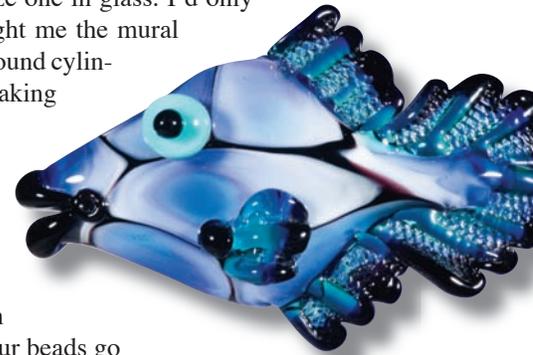
• Take every class, watch every video, and read every book that you can. Even if you already know what's being taught, you'll learn new tricks and tips and techniques. In the first five minutes of a Loren Stump class, I learned how to cut stringers with thermal shock (wet needle nose pliers!) and that was worth the entire price of admission.

• Join your local bead society and go to meetings. Hook up with other glassworkers; you can learn from each other. Join the ISGB. The discussion forum is a great learning resource and the annual Gatherings are bogging experiences.

• Practice, practice, practice! Don't think you can take a class one weekend and be ready to sell on eBay the next. It really does take many months of practice to gain real control and longer than that to work your way into a personal style.

Any encouragement for a seasoned, burned-out lampworker?

If melting glass isn't fun anymore, the shows are a pain, there isn't any joy in the work, the motivation is gone, and you're tired of dealing with customers, there's probably nothing I can say that would help. You're going to have to examine what you love and hate about glass work and what else you might do with your life. But if it's something less dire, like beader's block, then just putting the work down and doing something else for a while—a day, a week—might help. Maybe trying



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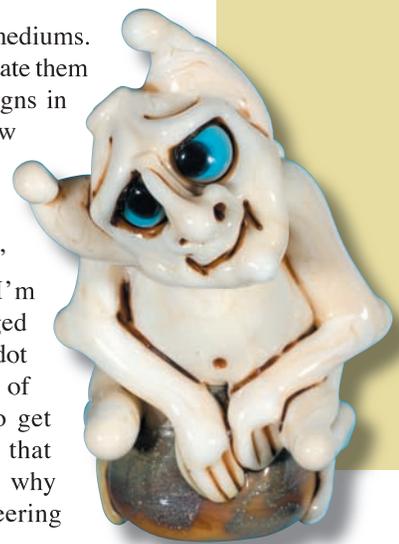


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out your designs in other mediums. Paint your bead patterns; mutate them in Photoshop; use your designs in fused pieces; play with new jewelry techniques for a while. If you absolutely *have* to produce beads, do your most basic “no fail” production work. When I’m blocked, I turn on unabridged audio books and make five-dot filler beads until I’m so sick of them that it’s a pleasure to get back to the fancy stuff. If that doesn’t work, I fuse. That’s why my shower is filled with leering cat-head tiles.



What are your plans for your own lampworking?

To keep doing it, hopefully, take bunches of classes, and get better! In the best of all possible worlds, I would:

- Do a lot of glass painting. I learned from Bronwen Heilman, and it was a revelation. When you combine vitreous enamel painted images with lampwork or fusing, your drawings, doodles, and original artwork will last for ages. Literally. That’s the very best thing about what we do. Our work could be collected and worn thousands of years from now.
- Learn to love making murrine. It’s an awful lot like work.
- Figure out how to incorporate electroforming and PMC into my designs. Multimedia is great. It breeds inspiration!
- Get my own local teaching studio, which will actually happen soon. Aanraku Glass Studios in San Mateo, California, just finished remodeling an old hot dog factory, and it seems appropriate I should be there. The studio’s open now, and I’ll be teaching and scheduling lots of other types of classes very soon.
- Improve my off-mandrel glass control. Then I’ll try making some small Pretentious Sculptures and (cross fingers) scatter them in museums and galleries around the world (approaching Fantasy Land . . .)
- Bring my creatures and their stories to the attention of Pixar and get them into movies. The glorious quest of the Alien Mosquito, desperately searching for a pile of men’s dirty, stinky socks to incubate in, finally emerging as the full-grown “Bob” after countless near misses with feet, dogs, and a washer/dryer. This is Animated Short Feature Academy Award material at its best. (Firmly in Fantasy Land now!!)
- Sell enough work to buy Jim a villa in the South of France with a private golf course. (He asked me to put that in.)



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