

Art Meets Industry— The Captivating World of Sally Prash

Below are excerpts from an interview featuring flameworking artist and scientific glassblower, Sally Prash. Glasscaster, a new podcast talk show on hot glass hosted by Marcie Davis, can be found at www.firelady.com or on iTunes.

Marcie Davis: I think you should start at the beginning.

Sally Prash: I took some YWCA classes in 1970, and one of them was flameworking with Lloyd Moore. We used soft glass and made little teddy bears and Christmas ornaments. Lloyd was a scientific glassblower at the time at the university in Lincoln, Nebraska, so he introduced me to scientific apparatus during the week. On weekends he would take me to craft shows. We would roll into town and no one would come over to us, because this elderly black man and this young white woman was kind of an odd thing to see. It was a learning experience for me on prejudice.

Lloyd also had me start teaching beginning flamework classes when I was fifteen. That really put me on the spot, because I had to learn to demonstrate something perfectly! He taught a lot of hollow techniques. We did ring seals, bells that were all glass, all of these different things that were kind of scientific in some ways.

I knew that Lloyd made much more money doing scientific apparatus than doing craft shows. When I went to college, I didn't know about Salem Community College at that point. I got a degree in hot glass and ceramics and then I went right back into flameworking, because it was so expensive to keep a hot shop running.

The year after college, I did hot glass for a couple of years and then started working with Lloyd again and finally found Salem Community College. I was just there for two semesters and got a degree in scientific glass technology and also a degree in applied science. That took me to AT&T working on humongous quartz apparatus. I continued my artwork while I was working for industry, but what industry gave me was a look into how to do things really large, how to work really hot and not burn yourself up or burn things up. At AT&T we were working fifty-five-pound pressure hydrogen coming in on one-inch lines, and we had a lot of those quartz torches that would almost wrap around the whole tube, because we had Gemini 3 bell jars that were three foot in diameter, one-inch thick quartz.

You had to melt that?

Not completely. Sometimes we would just have to put a phalange on. These were bell jars, and a lot of times they had a crack on the bottom or the window in the side. We would grind it all out around the fracture, have torches going on the inside and the outside, and heat it up and fill it in with quartz. Then we would put it into the annealing oven, but sometimes it would crack. The quartz would sound so beautiful when it cracked, but it would make your heart sink, because those jars were at that time about ten thousand dollars!



How does quartz behave when you heat it?

It vaporizes. We had cobwebs all around us of vaporized quartz. It doesn't really flow like a liquid would flow. It was like when you're soldering or welding something, and all of a sudden it goes "whoosh." You could push it with the torch but as you're doing that it's vaporizing, so you get cobwebs and things turn white. It condenses on anything cooler around it like a fine, powdered silica.

What was it like for you as a young female in what I am assuming was a hugely male-dominated scientific industry?

There was a major problem. I didn't understand that until I went to college, and it wasn't just scientific. It was definitely in the artistic world, too. Working with Lloyd, we worked with the black/white issue, so I never understood that being a female glassblower was different. When I went to college, the first thing my professor told me was, "I'm sorry, but I'm not going to work with you. You're a female. You'll go off, get pregnant, and forget about glass." And I was paying out-of-state tuition! I was ready to quit, but there were two grad students there and they talked to me and helped me out a lot.

In the hot glass industries in the '70s and '80s, it was all males. In the classes I took, most of the time I was the only female. And the comments they made were very rude. Maybe it's funny the first time, but you get tired of that. In the scientific industry right now, I would say there are about six hundred males to about four females.

Of which you are one and Doni Hatz is one. So who are the other two?

There's Jan Singhouse and then there's Angela Gatesy at the University of Vermont. I'm sure there are others that I don't know about, but these are the women who come to the American Scientific Glassblowing Society conferences.



You've been in it long enough, so I'm assuming you have now commanded respect regardless of your gender, or are you still fighting this battle?

I think if I'm giving a demo at the Scientific Glassblowing Symposium, I have to do it perfectly. If I make one little mistake, if I say one little thing wrong, it's, "Oh, this woman!" I've actually had somebody say, "You can't do that." And I say, "This is what I do all the time." And they say, "No, you're a woman. You can't do that." I have to sit down and show them that I *can* do it.

One time I was in Oxford in 1998, and I went in to introduce myself to the scientific glassblower. I just wanted to see how they work over there. I introduced myself and he bent over laughing. Then he said, "I'm sorry. I've never met a woman glassblower before. It's so *funny*! We'd talk for a while, and he'd just start laughing again. It's insulting, and you have to deal with those kinds of things all the time.

What's the most challenging or maybe the largest thing that you've ever fabricated?

Quartz diffusion tubes for AT&T. They're about eleven feet long and about twelve inches in diameter. We would put the phalange on, the thermocouple in, and a tube coming off the end so that they could hook up to it with a ball joint. In industry you can work very large or very small. Sometimes we can cut to the angstrom.

How big is an angstrom?

It's smaller than a human hair.

Was your art more concise because of that, or were you happy to go with a more fluid, let's say "ovarian," influence when you were working on your own stuff?

I've gone through a lot of changes. In the very beginning, things were very colorful, and now I don't work with color at all. For a

while my work got really tight, because my scientific glassblowing was really tight. Now I'm in the phase of really letting loose. That's hard for me to do sometimes—really letting things flow, stretching things out, making it so I can't ship it because it's too fragile, just taking it to the extremes. Now I'm incorporating other materials, pouring some bronze to go with the glass.

Are you still working in scientific glass?

Right now I'm working for the University of Syracuse, and I also have my home business.

You want to tell me about the project you're working on now that sounded so intriguing?

I'm working on a project at Syracuse University with Steve Pen in the physics department. He has these beautiful pieces of quartz that are quite heavy. The first time I worked with him, we would hang in a vacuum chamber from a single fiber that was about the size of my hair this piece of quartz that was about fifteen pounds. Then Steve would start it ringing and measure how long it would ring. It would ring for three or four months, which is amazing. He wants to make it ring longer, so we're trying different types of materials that we could use to hang the quartz. It would be nice if it could just be hovering inside this vacuum chamber, but it has to be held somehow.

Can you hear an audible tone?

No, it's all on the computer, so you see the vibration on the computer screen. You don't hear a hum.

Visit www.praschglass.com to see more of Sally's work and find out about her class schedule.

www.firelady.com

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