

Julie Riggs—

Figures, Fairies, and Flameworking Magic

Below are excerpts from a Glasscaster interview featuring flameworking glass artist, Julie Riggs. Glasscaster podcasts feature “hot glass talk in a high tech world.” This series, hosted by Marcie Davis, can be found at www.fireladyproductions.com or on iTunes.

Tell us how you got involved in glass to begin with, Julie.

I was taking classes at a local community college, and they started offering glassblowing classes. I’ve been doing visual arts my entire life. Other mediums came so easily to me that they became boring after a while, and I had been searching for a medium that challenged me and held my interest. As soon as the teacher mentioned blowing glass, it was like a light bulb exploded in my head, and I just knew that was what I had to do.

Every time I signed up for the class they cancelled it, because they didn’t have the facilities—they didn’t have the teachers, the zoning—and this went on for a couple of years. After I had my daughter, I decided to continue pursuing trying to learn glass. The college still didn’t have the glassblowing facilities, so I started hanging out around some of the local head shops and became friends with some of the people who blew glass. I started trying to get apprenticeships, but I still wasn’t able to get any. Nobody wanted to teach me. One of the guys who was talking about giving me an apprenticeship said, “Girls don’t usually do this, because they’re afraid to get burned.”

It took me a long time to find a teacher, too. I finally found a little old man named Cortes Lorow, who was blowing glass at the Miami Museum of Science in the early ’80. We became really good friends, and he became my mentor and my teacher for two years before he died. But when he was talking to me about flamework and girls, he said, “You’ll probably do the lacework, because that’s for girls. Girls don’t blow glass or work with the tubing,” I vowed at that moment in time that I would never do lacework or knit work. There were a lot of assumptions that maybe we couldn’t handle or weren’t interested or were afraid of the heat. Maybe they figured the little knit work/lace work was comfortable because it was like knitting. But you obviously didn’t accept that, correct?

That drove me to pursue it on my own. I went online and started looking up everything else for myself. I got a loan and bought everything that I thought I needed that I knew about at the time, and I built a little metal shop—one of those Home Depot put-up shops—and started teaching myself. I got some videos and some books and just started trying to learn on my own.





In addition to the line of paraphernalia, what were you exploring artistically?

I've always done a lot of human figures and faces and body. I've studied the human form since I can remember, so it just was very naturally where I wanted to go in glass. I tried to make a figure, and it was just awful, but it wasn't until my very first class at Penland with Shane Fero and Fred Birkhill that I tried my first figures, and I was hooked. Ever since then, most of my work has stemmed from the human form and nature.

What's the most difficult thing about making a human figure?
I've always thought it would be kind of intimidating.

I don't exactly make them completely realistic. A lot of the body parts are exaggerated. All of my women have pointy breasts and large hips and are more a kind of goddess form. I actually get a lot of my inspiration from the artwork of Olivia. She's an amazing painter and she does that same thing with her figures. She makes them more graceful.

I think the goddess form is actually very realistic. We just have to see the goddess in ourselves all the time. So you're just helping us find our inner goddess, that's all. What kind of work are you doing these days?

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Right now I'm working on building a cold shop in the back of my house. I've got a sandblasting cabinet, I just bought a Mark IV grinder, and I'm going to get the arm to do faceting. I took Robert Mickelsen's Graal class years ago and I haven't had much of a chance to explore anything that I've learned. I've tried to sandblast in my studio, and it just gets stuff everywhere. I'm really excited about exploring more Graal.

So you're really interested in cold working, too. Is that a big part of your work?

No, it's not. It hasn't been, and there's this sandblasting that I really want to play around with.

What techniques do you use, principally, in your work?

I would say sculpting.

What body of your own work are you the most proud of?

Probably my fairies. I love the fairies. I've always loved fantasy.

How large are your fairies usually?

I've made some really tiny fairies. One I made was as small as my pinkie nail that I encased in a marble. I guess the largest one I made was probably fourteen to sixteen inches tall.

As far as your palette is concerned, do you use bright, bright colors or more subdued colors? What do you like?

I really love striking colors. That's why I got a Bethlehem PM2D. Jesse Kohl actually took me to Northstar and had me work on each of the different types of torches that they have there. I was really able to get the effects I was looking for. I still love a Carlisle, but I just didn't know how to get those colors.



There's something specific, I guess, about the flame atmosphere of the surface mix aspects of the Beth and the PM2D in particular. Suelen Fowler swears by it for developing color. It works pretty well with those particular reactive colors and gets you what you're looking for.

I was amazed with the very first time I made something out of Amber Purple with a Beth. I took it out of the kilns, and it was this dark, beautiful purple that I had been looking for and trying to achieve.

Can you give our listeners a little bit of advice about how to get that good purple, because Amber Purple can be difficult for some people.

Get a Bethlehem. So many people are obsessed with other types of torches. Every torch is good and works differently on the glass for different purposes. The Beth just works best for me, and I've tried to encourage any of my students who like the striking colors and are more drawn to the striking colors to get a Bethlehem.

If someone wanted some of your work or wanted to take a class, where can they contact you?

E-mail angelicflamesva@aol.com.



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Visit www.GlassArtists.org/JulieRRiggs to view more of Julie's glass art.

Visit www.theflowmagazine.com under Articles to discover how Julie Riggs incorporates the human eye form into her glass art. You can also find a description of the project that Julie helped to create at the International Hot Glass Invitational and a tutorial from teammate, Tim Williams, in the Fall 2009 issue of *The Flow*. Also visit www.theflowmagazine.com in the Tutorials section for a tutorial from teammate Tim Kornahrens.