

Pat Owens

Interview by Milon Townsend

I am an artist. I went to a 4 year liberal arts college in Kansas City, after that I went to the KCAI, and spent another 3 years getting a BFA in painting, and a minor in ceramics. I was always an artist. Even when I was a little girl. I was always drawing. I guess a lot of people think that's what they're going to be when they grow up, an artist. I guess I was typical. An artist continues. It's all you can do, is be an artist.

Were there any people who supported or encouraged you, along the way?

Several of my teachers, my high school teacher in particular, encouraged me. We still communicate after all these years. She's a fantastic woman. She's a Benedictine nun. In her 80's she has published a home school art book, and just recently at 89 stopped teaching in the school system. She did a masters series. She's a remarkable woman. She's really devoted her whole life to teaching people art, and the spirit of art. I owe everything to her.

So she taught you as much as or more about the spirit of art than the technique?

Oh, definitely. It was always the spirit, more than the technique. All of her students have gone on to win all kinds of prizes.

I won a national scholastic art prize all because of her and her direction, the spirit of art and the masters. It was not about technique, ever.

I was painter then, with a minor in ceramics. It was a tossup, do I want to be a painter or do I want work with ceramics. I loved both. I studied under a really strong person, Ken Ferguson, at the KCAI. He's had shows in museums. He's very excellent in ceramics. I thought ceramics I know I could do, but it's also a question of challenge. I thought painting would be more of a challenge, so I decided to go into painting.

Why was it more of a challenge?

More of a challenge because, and I suppose that it's true with glass too, that there are certain limitations. You're working a certain form or material you have to work with. Whereas painting seemed more of challenge mentally, so...

What kind of subject matter, theme, and style did you work in?

When I was at the Art Institute, we trained with the figure. We had a live model all the time. A lot of drawing and painting from the nude. My instructor there was very traditional in terms of figure, color and form. So I had a very traditional, formal training.

Talk to me of the relation of technique and ideas and the relative importance of each...

I don't subscribe to the theory, in painting, in glass or in anything, that technique is not important. When I heard that, I'd go to the museum. I'd look at paintings from certain eras. I'd see that the best painters or the painters that stood the test of time had wonderful technique. The paint was beautifully applied. So I think technique is necessary, but I think if you achieve a technique then you can go beyond that to express your ideas. I come from the opinion that technique is necessary, but it's not the end of everything. You take the technique and you forget about it, and you do your thing. The spirit comes out. But in high school, there was technique, but she never emphasized that. It was mostly the spirit of art. She is a very spiritual woman. I don't think I'm religious, but I'm very spiritual. I love the spirit.

Is your art spiritual?

Personally I would like to make my art more spiritual. I want it to speak to that spirituality in someone. I want it to be uplifting, in other words. It is a goal of mine.

How important is it to you that people get what you want them to get, out of the work, as opposed to getting whatever they get out of the work?

I think if they respond to my work, in any way, at any level, that's good, I'm happy. I think there're probably different levels in my work and I think in everyone else's. You can take it on a purely formal level, colors and form.



If they respond just on that, then that's OK too. But there are other levels that I intend to be there. Not everyone's going to see that. But that's what I intend.

What happened after school?

I continued painting, and somewhere along the line I became interested in glass. I was at the Chicago Art Institute, they have a terrific collection of paperweights. I was looking at those paperweights, and I was looking at some of the intricacies of some of those weights. They were really beautiful, and I was curious about them. But when I came back to Philadelphia, it was not easy to get a glass class. At that time there weren't that many glass classes available.

When was that?

It had to be early 1990. I took an evening class at Buck's County Community College. It was the only school in my immediate area that offered glass. I took evening classes in the furnace blowing glass. I remember the first time I opened that furnace door, I thought, "Oh, this is hot, I'll never be able to do this!" (laughs) I think probably 75% of the people dropped out of that class, but all the better. I had all this time to work at the furnace by myself. I just loved it. I grew to love it. After that, I took several classes at Penland, I took a concentration there for several months.

With whom?

That was with Tom Farbanish, a very skilled glassblower. I did take a flameworking class with Shane Fero and Fred Birkhill, and a one week class with Paul Stankard, Richard Ritter and Mark Peiser. That was in 1993. Then in '94 I applied for a fellowship at Wheaton Village, and in '95 I was awarded that fellowship. I was there about 2 ½ or 3 months.

Would you describe what the fellowship program was like?

Every year they offer I believe 12 fellowships. It's an international competition with a jury to select 4 fellows each quarter. It was awarded to me on the basis of my blown pieces. There were 4 of us who shared a provided house. We had complete use of the facilities, the furnace, the casting facilities, and also there was a torch there. So I was blowing glass and also working on the torch doing some raw, basic figurative work. Toward the end of the 3 month session Lucio Bubacco came over to demo for Glass Weekend. I happened to be there at that time and he gave a demo. He and I worked in the furnace together a couple times. He was inspiring to me. I showed him how I made my figures, and it was quite different from the way that he worked. He was working with Moretti, and I was working with regular soda lime glass drawing rods from the furnace. After that, things took off as far as people recognizing my work.

So, now you've met Lucio, he's inspired you, people begin to recognize you, did you take on gallery representation at that time?

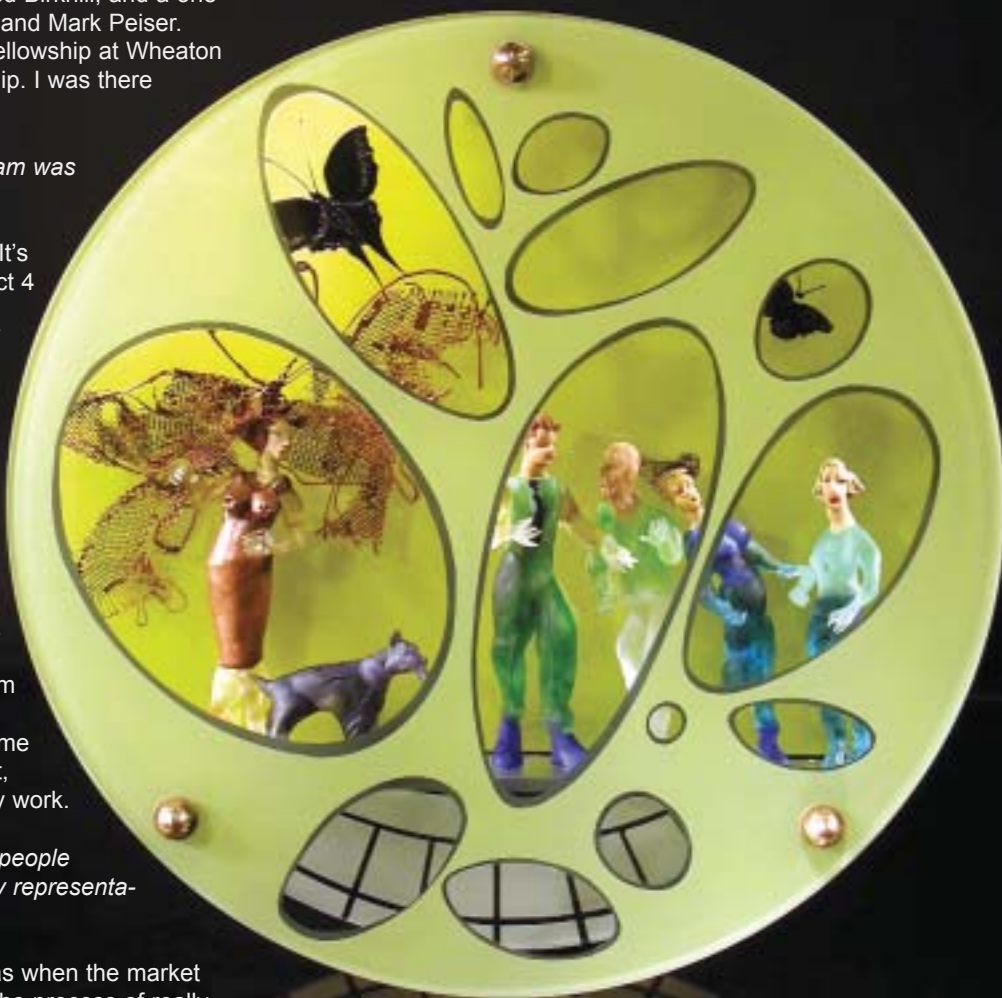
Galleries approached me at that time. That was when the market was booming. So, I didn't have to go through the process of really going out and getting galleries, which I have to do now.

Just describe for me the kind of pieces that you made, why you made them that way, and the idea behind the pieces.

It was always my idea to combine the painting and the glass making. I was always searching in the back of my mind for a way to do that. And yet make it unique, and not just in a unique fashion. I wanted to say something with the figures, but at the beginning it was just all I could do to technically get a figure together out of soda lime glass.

How much of that did you get through at Wheaton Village, and how much of it did you have to keep struggling with for a while?

I struggled for a long time with it. I'm sure that all these techniques anyone can do, but you have to have this fire inside of you to want to do it. Or else, you're not going to do it. It has to be something that's very appealing, or part of your spirit or nature to want to do this. Somehow, you develop your own techniques that way, because of what you are. I struggled with the figure. My figures are probably different than anyone else's. They're about me. But I wanted to get the painting and drawing skills in there. So finally, this working with plate glass. I thought, "Well, I can just paint on the glass. And draw on the glass." And I started finding out how to do that, and just experimenting. I'm still experimenting. And getting the technical side of getting the figures and the glass together. Whether I wanted it to hang on the wall, and be more freestanding. And somehow, from working with painting for so long, the wall sort of took over. (laughs) So that's how they started being what they are today, but they're still changing.



How thoroughly do you plan them in advance?

First of all, I was just struggling to get the figures, so I wasn't able to realize any ideas. I was just happy to get a figure, and then do something with it. At a certain point, I was able to control the technique, and get the figure that I wanted. At that point, I started to think that I could really say something with this. That I could do what I wanted to do. All these ideas come from whatever kind of person you are at the moment. And that's the sum of all your experiences at that moment. And it's always going to be changing. You can't say where the idea specifically comes from. You have this feeling inside of you. It's a gut thing. You want to say something about this, and how are you going to do that? And then you work on that. I do drawings and research on whatever I want to talk about or whatever my objective is.

Give me an example.

As I was saying, I remain friends with my teacher, the Benedictine nun all these years, Sister Helen. I was talking to her, and she was looking at some of my pieces on the web, and she said, "You should do something in regard to the Bible." And so I started, in terms of research. I grew up with the Bible and the stories, but you tend to forget. I went back and started re-reading the Bible. Then got different books on the Bible. Then some interpretations and women of the Bible. I want it to be not just a representation of some story, I want it to speak to a contemporary person. I want it to have some meaning in today's world. So I started this new series on Biblical themes. I'm sure that anyone looking at this is not going to say 'It's from the Bible', but for me it was. For instance, the first piece I started was Jacob's return. That's the story of Jacob stealing his birthright from his brother. I was re-reading that, and trying to get that into the piece I'm doing. You can look at it and decide whether I succeeded or not. I'm doing a series of 4 of those. I have 3 done. One of 'Jacob's Return', one of 'The Wise and Foolish Virgins'. I thought, you know, who is a virgin these days? How is that going to relate? So I had to work through that. The other piece was the wedding feast of Cana and Christ turning the water into wine. That one I was very happy with. Again, having a contemporary feel. I'm still thinking about the 4th one that I want to do. That's one example of how I do research and think about it. I'm able to do that at this point, whereas I would never have been able to do that

while I was just beginning glass. I didn't have the technical control. That's where technical control comes in.

How many galleries represent you now?

Well, let's see, not many. That's something I have to work on. It's part of my least favorite things. Absolute least favorite thing. I would love to just do work and not worry about galleries. That's my weakness, I would say.

Do you work entirely by yourself, or does anyone help you?

I work entirely by myself. No help. I like it that way. Not that I don't like working with people - I like that too - but once you're involved in this piece, it's all yours, and I enjoy that.

What would you tell a young person considering a career in art that they should be most concerned with?

You have to have a total commitment to your work, number 1. And somehow find a way financially to do it. When I think of some of the great painters, I know that they had the equivalent of a trust fund. So they didn't have to worry about money. Not that they were living rich, but they had money. Historically.

What's the most difficult part for you, of being an artist?

The marketing. That would be the most difficult. You have these glass pieces, and you want people to see them. You want to get them out, but, ohhhhhh, it's such a process. For me, it's extremely difficult.

What's the hardest thing about actually making the work, either conceptually or physically?

It's challenging to come up with a new way of looking at the work. I always try when I'm working, even when I'm making the figures. I try to push the work in some way. Or else you'll stay on the same level, unless you push it. It may not work, and you may end up with a mess. (laughs)

Do you think about the ideas that you're putting into your artwork, and the effect that they're going to have, as content?

Yes, and I think I want more of the spiritual feeling or quality in my work. That's what I'm after. And I want to communicate that. I'm not sure I will be successful, but... You know, people talk about giving back to the community or the world. I think one way an artist can do that is through their work.

Do you ever do teaching or speaking?

I have taught a lot of art. I taught at the KC Art Institute as a TA. I taught high school grade and grade school art. I've taught adults. But it's not something that at this stage I want to do.

Would you say that you are building on the work of others? Are there contemporary artists today that influence you?

Oh, I think so. I can't say in what way, but I'll look at some art... John Cray, he just had an exhibit. He's a realist oil painter, and figurative. There's something in his work that speaks to



me. I like his work quite a bit. Of course I love the old masters. I love the early 12th century icons, I love all that stuff. I love the Indian miniatures, the decorative and storytelling quality of it.

You're so quiet, and yet there's so much energy going on inside.

Yeah, I am quiet. Actually I don't usually talk this much.

You know what I'm enjoying? You talk like this (gestures energetically with hands). That's in your pieces, it's such an important part of your work, the way the figures communicate with their hands. You do that all the time. You can't really speak about anything without making a point and illustrating it with your hands. You influenced my work about 10 years ago when I spent 3 days next to one of your pieces in a gallery in Florida.

What's it take to be an artist?

It takes a fire in the belly. It's not only the skill or the technique, it's the intense desire.

Do you write about your work? Are you comfortable with words?

I would say I can write prose. I'm particularly creative with writing. I can write, prosaically. I don't think I have the flair for words my husband has. He's a wonderful writer.

Tell me about how you and he collaborate on the names of the pieces.

Having a title for a piece is important. You can't just say 'A, B, C, D', although I think maybe a lot of artists would like to designate their pieces that way. I've talked to people who buy my work, and they'd like some clue as to what it's about. Sometimes the title gives them that. With my husband, I'm talking about the piece to him. He's not an artist, but he has good visual instincts. I tell him what it's about, and he'll say, well, I'll give you a title for it. He'll write down a list of maybe 4 or 5 titles, and I'll say, "No, that doesn't do it." I'll tell him again what I really want in this piece, what I really want it to convey, then he'll come back with maybe more titles. Maybe I'll pick something out of that, or, maybe I'll think of a title myself, and use that. He's a big help that way.

What kind of work schedule do you keep? What's a typical day like?

I get up early, around 6 am. I'm in my studio early, because I'm a morning person, and my skills, my lampworking skills are best, early in the morning. In the afternoon, I hardly ever do any lampwork. That's all in the morning. You wouldn't believe this, but sometimes the skills aren't there in the afternoon. It's still my weakest link, the lampworking. The painting, and the other things, I do in the afternoon.

How many days a week do you work?

I generally work every day. Doing something. Not always intensely. Or reading about stuff, you know, it's all part of it.

But that's going to change, right? I mean, if you're going to take off and zoom, you can't take it too easy, right?

(laughs) No...



Zooming takes high-octane fuel. Are you a coffee drinker?

In the morning, yes. One cup. How about you?

In the morning, then the mid-morning, then the early afternoon...

All right, you're a coffee drinker. I have tea, after coffee in the morning, in the afternoon. My high school was in Kansas City, Kansas, and then my friend's convent was in Atchison, Kansas, which is probably about an hour away. Some summers I would go back to visit her, when I was in college, and I would stay with her at the convent. We would get up early in the morning to go down by the river and watch the sun rise. It was always real exciting to me, we would bicycle down to the river and watch the sun rise. It was a very emotional sort of religious experience, spiritual experience. Something about mornings are that way.



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