

Debee Brebes

Let me start this by introducing myself. My name is Garrett Brebes. When I saw the post from The Fow about an all women of glass article I was thrilled. My mother Debee Brebes was a lamp worker from 1976 to 1997. It's incredibly hard to try to fit an entire lifetime of work onto a few pages so please take this as an overview of many events to occur throughout her life

My father Larry Brebes was also a lamp worker who started a few years before Debee. They both lived on the central coast of California, right in the middle of San Francisco and Los Angeles in a small community just miles from the coast. As a hobby, Larry started to make small ocean related items to sell in a couple of shops in Morro bay. Quickly realizing the potential for his work, he developed many sorts of little animals. Moving glass north and south to different locations along the coast, lampworking became his fulltime job. He eventually reached as far down as the San Diego Zoo. After waiting four months to meet with a buyer from the zoo it suddenly paid off with their first order for \$4000 in 1976. This immediately consumed Larry's full potential so he introduced his wife Debee into the art to help keep up with the demand.

A few years later, feeling a need to expand the art and their market they moved from touristy craft stores into galleries.

Expressing all kinds of new ideas and talent, they were quickly creating a whole movement of glass art that didn't exist before. Almost any gallery they walked into was willing to deal with them and this new art of borosilicate sculpture. Only a small handful of other artists, on the west coast were competing for this new window in the market.



This brings us to about 1984. By this time Debee entered around 15 stores, all on the west coast. She was also raising three children. This era of expansion peaked around 87 to 88 where the market started to turn. The success of the few artists who had bought houses and built incredible studios caught the attention of people with connections overseas. She could walk into a store and suddenly see a design she had created, copied terribly, on the shelf for much cheaper. The appreciation for the "artwork" was quickly dwindling into who could create the biggest and sloppiest for the cheapest. The number of stores willing to pay for the work was cut down to a slim few. One of those who stuck with the Brebes was a gallery in a place called Girahdeli Square in San Francisco. They continued to move sculptures for them, also creating a heavy presence in the area; this helped launch the Brebes into a completely unseen direction.

The call came in 1989 from headquarters of the "B.A.R.T." which stands for bay area rapid transit. The city wanted to give out awards of recognition to those who had helped the BART be such a success, and thought that "custom artwork" from the Brebes would be a great gift. As it turns out, the recipients were awarded with a statue of a person holding a pickax in one hand and a shovel in the other. The awards were such a success the Brebes were contacted by other distributors with corporate connections to consider their projects. This was the start of a whole new era of "recognition artwork". Only one or two galleries were still interested in Brebes artwork. One of which was a very interesting place called the Crystal Fox in Carmel California.

The Crystal Fox on its own is worthy of an entire article, but



I will try to cover to the best of our knowledge. I have only discussed the west coast glass movement, but on the east coast a similar thing was taking root. Many artists were blazing trails onto the scene such as Townsend, Frabel and Mickelson. Due to importing and blatant copying of peoples work, lampworking was a fierce environment where secrecy prevailed. Knowledge was the biggest asset and very hard to come by. So the Crystal Fox had the idea to try to gather every contemporary lamp worker at the time for a first ever meeting of the minds. It was the drawing back of a curtain separating the east and west coast Debee was gladly a part of it. The question most asked of her was how



When the company caught wind that she would be lampworking out of her home also, they demanded the rights to everything she made in their facility or not. Causing much commotion, this was the end to the run of production and sparked the move back to California.

Still working through other distributors, production was still there but not as much of it to devote themselves to the Midwest based distributor. A new and exciting avenue opened up when Debee started casting lead crystal. This helped turn out high numbers of very identical yet custom products. During times of lull, Debee also started a jewelry business called Crystal Expressions. She enjoyed traveling

she was creating these incredible exotic parrots and Flowers with rich beautiful colors. It was a technique consisting of sandblasting and paints that were skillfully airbrushed onto the glass. She was the only one who was coloring glass this way making her work very unique. Also unveiled there was a series of endangered species sculptures in which she would donate percentages of each sale to a foundation. This being a success, Debee was about to enter into a national society of glassworkers, Yet instead, a distributor entered the picture that refocused her art back to the corporations.

to fairs and exhibits to present her jewelry. Her favorite and most beneficial were always renaissance fairs that seemed to have a higher appreciation for glass. This lasted until 1996 when the glass casting would suddenly take over with an order from the kenworth truck manufactures. Being unprecedented in size, it would sweep through Brebes Studio bringing in 12 employees and changing her job into management and relations. This would take almost the whole next year to produce and complete.

For the next three years, a company from the Midwest swallowed everything the Brebes could produce.

This was much more promising than a somewhat harsh art scene at the time.

The Brebes decided to move to the Midwest to work in the actual facility of this company, leaving behind over a decade of work and friends. All seemed well at first in this new life. Debee's first order consisted of 500 roses for American Airlines. Followed by many other exciting clients such as Jaguar Motoring, Pillsbury, AT&T, just to name a few. For Debee, stability reached higher importance than artistic expression. This new arrangement worked for about a year until the need to produce art would weigh heavy on her heart.

Debee was dealt a final and devastating blow in 1997 with a diagnosis of terminal cancer to which she fought yet could not hold off. She was a great mother, an incredible businesswoman and an inspiration to a lot of people including myself,

her son who is now on my eighth year of glass blowing. I appreciate the chance to give her a little credit for the glass scene and its contents. Larry Brebes and I, Garrett Brebes continue to lamp work today and our work can be seen at various galleries and at www.brebesstudios.com.

