

* PLANELY SPEAKING

Blazing New Trails in Boro, Meet Mike Plane and His New Prototype Torch





With a new sponsorship, resident artist gig, and new prototype burner called the "Python," Mike Plane may be poised to break some major boundaries in the borosilicate arts. All eyes are on the young artist who doesn't hesitate to push the boundaries, live the art, and follow his obsession wherever it takes him.

by Rye Armstrong

Mike Plane is at one with the glassblowing universe. His ears are smoking. His skin is sizzling. His face is smashed up against his visor. It's hard to tell where his arm ends and where his torch begins. A group of students crowd around his lathe, hypnotized by the light of the torch like deer in headlights.

Sitting there in his reflective silver suit, squinting under his visor at the blinding heat, he doesn't notice the crowd around him. He's absorbed by the project at hand. He doesn't look up unless it's to make an adjustment on the lathe or to wipe the sweat off his forehead. Beneath him is a spinning sphere ringed with color, glowing brilliantly at the spot where the torch just kissed it. The glowing object seems extraterrestrial and Plane looks a bit unearthly as well, outfitted in his silver thermo-suit and gigantic torch.

When the torch is killed and the helmet comes off, Plane looks like your ordinary glassblower at first glance; the scruffy beard and bloodshot eyes, the faded clothes... but Plane is no ordinary glassblower, and the torch he's using is no ordinary torch.

If you're into borosilicates, Plane's latest breakthroughs will shove a whole new realm of possibilities right up your glory hole. From hipster goblets to mind-twisting vases and bowls, the industrial artist's revolutionary glass work sheds new light on an art form that has been around for centuries.

"He's pushing the boundaries of surface, not just in style and technique, but in texture," says Susan Webb, president and owner of Glass Alchemy, Ltd. a manufacturer of borosilicate color in Portland, Oregon that recently co-sponsored the artist.

"It's truly the artists who cut the edge that allow the industry to exist," Susan says, "...the few who go above and beyond." Mike Plane is doing just that. He's raising the bar for flameworkers who struggle with the confines of using borosilicate glass as a medium. If art media is truly defined as "an intervening substance through which something else is transmitted or carried on," Plane is transmitting big-time. He's doing things with borosilicate glass that no one has done before. And he's got an army of gurus behind him who are pushing him to expand the limits of the art in order to open it to new ideas.

With his sponsorship by Alchemy Glass, an extended resident artist gig at the new Eugene Glass School and his spanking new prototype triple-mix burner called the "Python," Plane may be on the verge of producing some of the largest, most intriguing borosilicate pieces ever.

The Torch

Up until now, Plane used a Delta Elite by Glass Torch Technologies. The Delta produces the widest and hottest flame available and was the company's biggest production model. Plane used the Delta to make all his vessels. Mike reached a maximum size, one that he could push beyond but to get the heat he needed he'd have to use a reducing flame; the reducing flame ended up reacting with the colors as a side effect. Now that's changed.

"It's the biggest torch out there," Plane says, holding up the Python. "It opens up a whole new door as far as scale goes. Because I can do all the color work by hand and then assemble the vessels on the lathe . . . I no longer have these limiting factors with color . . . all of a sudden I can make huge pieces that I couldn't do before."

The Python is the latest invention of Glass Torch Technologies, a company that specializes in cutting-edge torch design. The torch's new burner head design utilizes a second oxygen valve to inject additional oxygen down the center of the fuel stream. This greatly increases the flexibility of adjusting the flame. The flame can be made cleaner, hotter, longer or shorter, with sizes ranging from that of a needle to a 4-inch flame that measures 40 inches long. Because of the unique design, the torch body always stays cool. But you still have to wear a reflective suit, that is, unless you enjoy third-degree burns.

"The Python is not for every studio," says Webb. "It has to be treated with respect. You really have to be aware of your environment...it's a huge torch." Plane needed the bigger torch so he could still run the lean flames and have the flame atmosphere he wanted while still attaining the heat he required. "The Python opens up many new doors," Plane says, "and makes so many new things possible that never even entered my mind before. But at the same time, it opens up a new can of worms because now I have to deal with the heat and safety aspects...you can't just run that thing anywhere." Glass Torch Technologies presented Plane with a prototype of its latest design. Plane was the first to get one and he's the first to really explore what it can do. Now that he's got the right hardware, the materials and a gratis studio facility, the only things standing in his way are the technical challenges and his ability to push his ideas through the limitations of the glass.



The School

Last year, when the folks at Eugene Glass School (EGS) first met him, he kind of just rode into town in his mobile home with his two dogs. Today, Plane's a permanent fixture at the school. EGS's customized studio classrooms and skilled instructors present Plane the ultimate growing opportunity, a place not only to experiment with new techniques but to refine those he's already mastered.

Located in the self-styled "flameworking capitol" of America - Eugene, Oregon - the school props itself as "a dynamic learning center for new and experienced glass artists to learn fresh techniques and applications through knowledge-sharing in our open-concept studio classrooms." Formed in 1998 and organized as a nonprofit corporation in 1999, the 10,000 square-foot facility was designed and customized by sixth-generation German glassblower Karl Ittig and his son Hans . The father, son team spent months installing unique studio classrooms with the help of Josch Borz, a German furnace expert who constructed their new custom glass furnace.

Plane was impressed with EGS and their programs, not to mention the extraordinary facility. He was excited by the idea of working at the school so he applied and was accepted for an artist in residence program (which was recently extended for a second term). He never would have guessed he'd end up in Eugene, but the access to equipment and the knowledge of the board members and those affiliated with the school have all been invaluable to him. It gives him the opportunity to push the boundaries of flame-worked glass, increase the scale of his work, and explore new ideas.

Today Plane is like a kid in a candy factory at EGS. "The residency I'm doing is a great opportunity for me to go nuts," he says. "It allows me to work on new ideas and techniques without the burden of expenses." He's been

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coordinating huge events in the flame shop, doing things he's never been able to do under regular circumstances. Plane feels right at home at EGS. All told, the school's new programs have put it on the map as one of the best institutions around.

Although Plane's got the ultimate playground, and he's set up to start making waves in the industrial arts, it wasn't all gravy getting here, he says.

Roots and Culture

Born in Durban, South Africa in 1975, Plane is fascinated by the African art and songs he used to dig as a child. He remembers the seductive sculptures and carvings, the wild colors and rich, earthy tones, all of which you can see reflected in his art today.

At the age of three, he moved to Australia with his parents, who brought him to America a few years later. He spent the remainder of his youth growing up in rural Pennsylvania. He was one of those kids who's always excited by the process of creating, willing to take on any challenge. Mike's biggest asset is his talent for problem-solving in his work.

After graduating from culinary arts school and working as a chef in Vermont, Plane set up a studio at home and started working with glass as a hobby. He found moving from cooking to glassblowing a natural transition - the color combination, presentation, personal aesthetic, creativity, chemistry, heat and flame. He was instantly addicted to glass and the process of sculpting. Later, he would quit his job (hence career) and go on to begin blowing glass as a full-time gig. He spent his first years playing around, experimenting and learning by trial and error. After working on his own for four years, teaching himself everything he possibly could, he realized he still needed to grow.

Obsession and Progression

In 1998, he got an apprenticeship at Gallagher Glass in Saratoga Springs, New York. Jim Gallagher taught Plane how to run a furnace and how to build and maintain equipment. Plane was hungry to learn. He worked full time at Gallagher glass for free and spent his nights and weekends working in his flame-working studio at home to pay the bills. His apprenticeship at Gallagher influenced his approach to glass and totally changed his flame-working style.

In the summer of 2001, Plane set off in his motor home with his two dogs to explore the country. He loaded up his rig with his essential equipment and set out for the west coast, not knowing for sure where he'd end up. He spent the summer touring glass studios across the country, any he could find. He would visit schools, teaching where possible, meeting glass workers and cramming his brain with anything and everything that had to do with glass. Somehow he ended up in Eugene. His original goal was to attend a class taught by Carl Ittig, one of the legendary German glassblowers who helped build the Eugene Glass School. He had no idea that Eugene was emerging as an oasis for glass artists (rumor has it Eugene has over 2,500 blowers in the area), but he would soon find out.

Direction

"To be an artist is the hardest career anyone could choose", says Webb of Glass Alchemy. "You do it because you're passionate about it and you don't want to do anything else." In fact, Webb says she warns wannabe artists not to get into it unless they're totally possessed. "Most people think artists can eat air," she says, speaking of the meager wages most artists can only hope to earn. "Having been one of those artists [for 20 years]...and supported children, if I can identify a few that have a possibility of making it more comfortably - and make a difference - these are the ones GA looks for." Webb envisions Glass Alchemy as a springboard for young artists like Plane

After meeting Plane and seeing his work, Webb sponsored him for Glass Alchemy's resident artist program. The company provides Plane with the raw materials he needs, and as part of a symbiotic relationship, uses the feedback it gets from Plane to conduct research into making materials better, brighter and stronger. But that's not all Glass Alchemy provides. The organization nurtures artists from creation to market by helping them answer the tough questions: What problems do you want to solve? Where do you want to go?

"It gives me the opportunity to find somebody who is pushing the envelope for borosilicate," Webb adds. "Mike is doing things that no one else has done. He's pushing the limit...that's why I sponsored him."



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"I require a direction," says Webb, who won't accept just anybody into her program. "They need to be researching so that we talk weekly on what's happening. A lot of science is involved." She says their program is not only about working with skills coaching, but it's also about helping students discover where to go, what kind of shows to do, what type of galleries to enter, and most of all, discovering where their roots are from.

"One of the things I work with in artists is not to develop a style so young, but to develop enough techniques to broaden their vocabulary." When Mike first began he floundered a bit at first, she says, mostly with heat-related problems. Susan's husband, Henry Grimmer (co-owner of Glass Alchemy), has been working with Plane to help resolve the technical issues: cracking, incompatibility, annealing schedules, heat, etc. It was a win-win situation for both of them. Plane gets the technical tutoring he needed and Glass Alchemy gets the information it relies upon to improve its materials. By observing an artist who is doing something no one's done before, Webb says Glass Alchemy is able to uncover the anomalies and improve research for future product offerings.

For Plane, the access to free materials is a godsend. Up until now, he has overcome many challenges - the burden of studio fees, the cost of materials, the hazards of unsafe working environments, not to mention the learning curve associated with trying new methods. Now, the only things holding Plane back are the limits of the media itself (the challenge of making boro do what he wants it to do) and discovering the depths of his own artistic voice. So far, the artist has produced an impressive array of pieces that are both unique in style and unprecedented in size. Yet, he's still

not satisfied. He wants to go bigger.

Knowledge Gathering

Last year Plane spent some time in Murano, Italy, where he met international glass-master Cesare Toffolo. The artist invited Plane and some other boro-workers on the island to visit his home studio. Plane gave some demonstrations for the Italians on techniques for applying borosilicate colors, and offered some technical information about how to use colors in specific applications. The fact that Toffolo was able to organize the artists of Murano together in one studio at one time for an open dialog and exchange of ideas with American artists inspired Plane, he says. He was proud to be part of a movement initiated by someone of Toffolo's stature. While traveling, Plane also met Lucio Bubacco, spent some time with him and checked out his studio. Bubacco opened Plane's eyes to the possibilities of working with soft glass with a torch.

But Plane credits many of his latest revelations to Robert Mickelson, who he took his first class from and has worked with several times since. "I never had any formal training," Plane says. "I was all self-taught. I was doing everything backwards. I took Mickelson's classes and it all just kind of clicked."

Style and Voice

"I'm trying to get away from the whole glassy, shiny look," Plane says of his work. "I've been experimenting with new techniques and different ways of doing things," he adds. Plane's undulating vases and vessels, strong lines and balance combined with his unique way of bringing the color and texture together are the subtle strengths of his work.

"He's very classical," says Webb. "He does vessels in a historical context, "but he is pushing the boundaries of surface." The primal, earthy, organic forms that have manifested from his African upbringing are evident in his work. But it's not just his history of Africa that forged Plane's style, Webb says, "but also the doing, doing, doing...the making of things and how things go together...we learn a lot from him on how to make the glass better."


But Plane may be a minimalist at heart. "He doesn't necessarily look for the pretty elements inherent in the glass," says Webb. "Glass is a very seductive medium; it's very easy to make beautiful items, but for an artist to use glass not because it's beautiful but rather as a medium to translate their ideas-his ideas are the important thing, not the glass itself. This is what I look for in a fine artist...that I hear they have a voice and I see in their work that they have a voice. It's just a coincidence that he works in glass. If he were in metals, his voice would still come through. It has to come out. And his voice is getting stronger."


Building Momentum

To really gauge what Mike Plane is about, you must simply look at his work. Each piece is a bold expression of a man completely absorbed - the attention to detail, the symmetry

and balance, the layer upon layer of texture, the transition of rock-solid base to delicately radiating tendril.

Although he may have struggled at first, he's building a momentum that his mentors are watching closely. They're waiting to see if he can not only conquer the technical challenges, but whether he can meet the real challenge of learning to project his artistic vision through the glass. At the young age of 26, he's way ahead of the game.

"I think over the next five years we're going to see come through him a very strong voice as he learns to translate it into his medium," says Susan Webb. "I think he'll come into a maturity I don't think he's even aware of . . . I'm very interested to see what he'll do next." 



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