

Tucson **Flame Off** 2016



John Ryska II, Hallucination, first place piece at the 2016 Tucson Flame Off, one of several prizes awarded the artist, including a torch donated by Bethlehem Burners

by Sara Sally LaGrand

Photography by Nick Rob Letson

Executive Director of the Sonoran Glass School (SGS) John-Peter Wilhite says, “Tucson is one of the few places you can watch art in action and feel as if you were participating.” When over 500 “Flame Fans” converged on SGS in Tucson, Arizona, this year for an annual event that has come to be known as the Flame Off, expectations were high. The event, known for its high-intensity combination of skill and fire, delivered on its promise. The Flame Off, pioneered by glass artist Tom Philabaum in 2001, has become a highlight of the annual gem and mineral show events in Tucson year after year.

Eighteen glass artists were given an hour and a half to complete a glass project in front of a live audience in two different sessions. Projects with the theme *A Long, Strange Trip* were the personal brainchild of each participant. The pieces were then judged independently by a panel of seven judges the next day, with the viewing and bidding taking place at the school as well as online through Facebook. The proceeds were then donated to the school’s ongoing educational programs designed to serve the general public, veterans, and senior groups, as well as Tucson-area schools. Much of the school’s budget is derived from fundraising events such as the Flame Off.

An Action-Packed Event

The action is difficult to describe without actually being in the room—or tent, in this case—but it could be compared to the combination of a sporting event with play-by-play commentary (provided by Micah Blatt, Matt Bain, and Sonoran's Flame Shop Director, Bronwen Heilman) and a carnival game where your shooting stream of water races to push your monkey to the top of the tube. In this case, however, it's open flame and hot glass. The contestants completed pieces, both functional and not so functional, that ranged from a beer tap with a pair of beers by Brandon Pope-Malings to the James Lynch steer head margarita glass.

Lynch, by the way, pulled out an impressive save when his piece broke in the last 10 minutes of his session. Refusing to give up, he was able to complete the piece and stay in the competition. In the spirit of the fundraiser, he promised a “perfected piece” to the winning bidder, but the original glass was actually intact at the end of the competition. It proved to be one of the most exciting moments of the evening.

“I was told a few minutes before round two that a contestant was a ‘no show,’ and they asked if I wanted to hop in,” says artist Lynch (aka Hicdogg). “I happened to have all of my equipment with me from another competition, and I was glad to join in. At the end, when it fell out of my claw holders, I gave up in my mind, but my peers and the crowd kept saying, ‘You’ve got this!’ I used all their energy and encouragement to do what I could to finish.”



(Top to bottom) First competition session of the Flame Off; Brian Jacobson working on his piece inspired by the Grateful Dead; Raven Copeland's second place Infinite Galaxy 5"-diameter marble; and first-time competitor Jake Finsaas finishing his tiki-faced goblet.



Lynch says he feels that this kind of competition is one of the things he loves most about this career. “It’s hands down one of the favorite parts of my job. People all over the world love glassblowing and glass art!”

Netherlands artist, Floor Kaspers, also competed this year for the first time, completing her piece, *The River*, with tiny headpins of glass in a bed of black. The top honor went to Arizona artist, John Ryszka II, for his *Hallucination* piece, which the judges felt reflected the theme of *A Long, Strange Trip* as well as demonstrating skill in execution of the glass and completion of the project. Second place went to Raven Copeland's *Infinite Galaxy* orb, and third place was a tie with Chris Riley's *Illuminated Dagger*, a suspended glass knife with stand, and *Monkey's Fist*, a piece by Kim Edwards that resembles knitted glass comprised of glass rings, sharing the honors.

Flame Off Origins at Sonoran Glass School

The event is run entirely by the committee and staff of the Sonoran Glass School. This year's committee included Katherine Nesci, Margaret Zinser, Nick Letson, and Bronwen Heilman. Each year they choose the theme, recruit artists, and even set up the equipment. Beyond months of planning, the actual days preceding the show involve many steps of troubleshooting and cranking wrenches to make sure the show runs as smoothly as possible. The board, committee, and staff should be proud of this year's results.

Matt Bain, aka Know Ego Glass Art, served as a co-master of ceremonies (MC) for this event and says he has always looked forward to the Flame Off even before it was organized by the school. He remembers attending the first one hosted in 2001 at Tom Philabaums' studio. "I believe it's a great opportunity to raise both capital and awareness for the school," says Bain. "In order for an operation like the Sonoran Glass School to stay afloat, these fundraising events must be successful. The artists are an integral part of this equation. By donating their time and showcasing their talent, both the school and the artists can benefit from the event."



(Clockwise from bottom left) *Chris Riley's Illuminated Dagger and Kim Edwards' Monkey Fist, tied for 3rd place; Raven Copeland working on his Infinite Galaxy piece.*

Bain has participated three times as an artist and won in singles, doubles, and team competitions. This year has marked his third year to MC, which can be compared to a cross between doing play-by-play and providing "color" by demonstrating his knowledge of the artists and the industry. "Honestly," he says, "I really enjoy commenting during the Flame Off. It's less stressful than competing. I guess I'm naturally a blabbermouth, lol."

Perseverance in the Face of Setbacks

While the Tucson Flame Off is the oldest event in flame off history, some years have not been as easy as 2016. “Two and a half years ago, the board of SGS was poised to end the event,” says Flame Shop director Bronwen Heilman. However, after convincing the board to find sponsors to shoulder the upfront costs of hosting, Heilman was pleased when vendors stepped up to revive this international event. After a history in the frameworking community since 1996, she was able to call on her friends in the industry to make sure the costs were covered before the first torch was lit.

Heilman was pleased to continue to count on the support of sponsors for 2016 such as World of Glass Productions, LLC, and the Community Fund for Southern Arizona. Industry partners included Bethlehem Burners, Trautman Art Glass, ABR Imagery, Coatings By Sandberg, Dichro Magic, Blast Shield, Praxair, and Red Hot Metal. Also supporting the Flame Off were Uroboros Glass, Skutt Kilns, Lori Riley Designs Dichroic Strips, Mike Close with Marble-On!, Glass Alchemy, Betts Printing, Soft Flex, Bullseye Glass Co., Paragon Kilns, Frantz Art Glass, and *The Flow* and *Glass Patterns Quarterly* magazines. “I am already getting requests from new sponsors to help with next years’ event,” Heilman says, “and now the Flame Off is Sonoran’s biggest event of the year!”

Plans for 2017 are beginning to gel as the board approved the event again for next year, including the glass art show that was housed in the school building for the first time in 2016. “The first order of business,” says Director of Communications Nick Letson, “is getting a bigger tent!” The Sonoran Glass Art Show, co-run by Doug Harroun of Grey Matter Glass and Sonoran, is set to expand as well. “We will continue to promote the ‘self-representing glass artist’ next year at this show, which stands to double in size,” says Harroun. Letson agrees that the show added something new and exciting and created a “good synergy” between the two events. “Having finished work available has added an extra element to an already successful event.”

Mark your calendars for February 3, 2017, for the 16th Annual Flame Off in Tucson, Arizona, as it is shaping up to be better than ever. “We are proud of the fact that such a small staff can put on a huge event like this,” says Letson. “We are blessed to have such great glass art promoters who step up to help us promote this form of glass art—frameworking.” Continue to check the SGS website throughout the year for information on the 2017 Flame Off.

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(Clockwise from left) Flame Off attendees browsing vendor offerings at the Sonoran Glass Art Show; 1st place winner John Ryszka II on live stream as he creates his Hallucination piece; and James Lynch working on the early stages of his dichroic cow skull margarita glass.



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