



ANDREW GRAY

DISCOVERING THE THRILL OF MARBLE MAKING

Text and Photography by Wendy Gray

In 2000, Andrew Gray was operating Island Vibrations, a gift shop in Key West, Florida, when Colorado glassblower, Keith Engelmann, wandered in and sold the shop some of his glass art. Andrew and Keith became friends, and eventually the artist let Gray hang out with him while he worked. Andrew discovered that it was fun to watch glass art come to life, and he picked up several “Keithisms” along the way that still influence his work, including “Clear is the coolest color” and “There is no wrong way to blow glass.”

After a few months, Keith had to leave the Keys to help a family member and sold Andrew a lampworking setup that included the torch and kiln he still uses today. He didn’t really know anything about setting up a lampworking studio, however, and the equipment sat around for a month or two while he researched and installed ventilation and set up two stations. Another friend brought a glassblower down from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who helped him with setting up lines and pressures, then gave everything a safety check. A few days later Andrew started making low-end “wrap and rake” production pieces. He rapidly moved into inside-out cane and line work.

From Selling Gifts to Making Glass Art

After the Twin Towers fell in New York City in 2001, tourism dropped to a trickle in Key West. Making his own glass helped keep Andrew’s business alive, but it was in a slow death spiral. The gift shop finally went out of business in 2003, and he moved north to the Cocoa, Florida, area. Andrew continued to make glass pipes and sold them at wholesale to businesses in central Florida until the summer of 2008, when it became difficult to sell enough production work to stay in business. A job opportunity came to him that summer, which he took to support his family.

Andrew stopped lampworking glass in June and didn’t turn on the torch until late in 2012. He attempted to return to piping, reestablishing old accounts and setting up some new ones. In the spring of 2013, it became difficult for him to sell pipes at all, however, since the state passed legislation banning them. One of his



customers, the manager at the Purple Ringer in Orlando, Florida, suggested he try selling marbles or pendants on Facebook. The artist didn't even know you could sell a marble that wasn't attached to a pipe and was excited to try it out, so he set up a profile and met the community there.

Up until that point, Andrew had largely worked in a vacuum. Over the years when he needed inspiration, he had gone to catalog pics and watched *Taboo Glass* until it wouldn't play. He had seen only three people work in person over 13 years, and two of them only for an afternoon. Access to the community through Facebook answered many of his questions and gave him a window into different forms and styles of lampworked art.

Positive Influences and Preferred Expressions

Over the summer of 2014, the artist went to Art Glass House to get in on the deals while they were closing the store and had the opportunity to meet Ron Bearer Jr. They talked implosions and space marbles, and Ron explained the technique that Andrew would later alter slightly to use for his skull marbles. Having the chance to meet Ron and share techniques even for a short time had a positive influence on his work.

Marbles are Andrew's preferred expression in glass. Many of his marble buyers are from scavenger hunt groups and inspired him to start Hidden Glass Orlando with the help of Megan Coduto. The group promotes art appreciation by sharing glass art and marbles that are perfect for hiding and collecting.

Andrew continues trying new techniques and improving his execution of those he has been doing for years. There seem to be too many aspects of the art to be able to explore everything, but he is doing his best to discover them all. Visit www.facebook.com/graysglasspage to view more of his work.

Instagram @graysglassauctions

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