

The Chicago Project

A Weekend of Smiles

by Becky Wheeler

On a hot July weekend, I found myself in Peoria, Illinois, at Unbroken Glass, a glassblowing studio that was full of talented glassblowers who had come together to kick off the first Chicago Project event. Founded by Bryan “Fugly” Ellul, The Chicago Project brings glass pipe artists together to collaborate on works that will be auctioned to raise money for Smile Train, a nonprofit organization providing the necessary tools for doctors in Third World countries to perform cleft lip surgeries. So far, this organization has helped more than 780,000 children. Raising money for Smile Train holds a personal connection for Ellul, who underwent cleft lip surgery as a baby.

Off to a Good Start

Inspired by such a great cause, the glassblowers were already hard at work when I arrived. Walking up to the open bay door of the glassblowing shop, I was greeted by the whoosh of blazing torches and the beats of thumping music. Jon E. Walker was putting the first completed piece of the weekend in a kiln, a sweet little mini in-line rig with new Glowlight mouth wrap and horns. A Glowlight dome was completed for it later that night.

Brett Hoerr (pronounced here), owner of Unbroken Glass, was just finishing a tube pull on the lathe, made of colors donated by both Northstar Glassworks and Glowlight glass. When Brett finished, a section was taken into the back room for a closer look under a black light. It glowed beautifully and seemed to glow from within when the light was switched off. Made by Justin Trott and his crew at Glowlight Glass Supply in Minnesota, this new color was hailed for its workability and brightness all weekend. Justin and his brother also brought the ingredients to mix a batch of Glowlight rod, which was done Saturday.

Back in the shop, ideas were swirling around on possible collaborations. Eventually, Nathaniel Dark, Jon E. Walker, Brett from Glassadelics, and Adam Jordan came out with an amber-purple skeletal fish found fossilized after choking on its last meal, a smaller fish made entirely out of Glowlight. The smaller fish is attached within the ribs of the larger fish as if it almost swam in to be dinner. Entitled *Cause of Death*, it got the weekend off on a good foot. That same night, Nathan Adami created a nicely worked black-and-white stand-up dry piece, and Friday night finished up with everyone feeling excited and exhausted from the long, hot day's work.

Clowns, Aliens, and Glowing Glass

With the artists eager to get back and start pulling their creations out of the kiln, Saturday was another beautiful morning that quickly swung into a fully hot day. The Tail Pipe tour arrived and brought a youthful crowd to keep everyone entertained and amused. Tony from Goodstash with the www.helloglass.net questionnaire put artists in the hot seat throughout the weekend. This newly launched website gives people the opportunity to learn about many artists in the glass world. I even gave a couple of interviews, which was quite fun.

Jacob Lee, aka Creep, stopped by with a beautifully sculpted and sinister looking clown head. After catching the vibe, he immediately jumped on the torch and began working on an alien head for collaboration. While Creep worked on that, Brett made a gridded donut for it, and Seth, aka TRUE, began on some horns.

In the back room, Nathaniel Dark and Jon E. were selecting which colors donated by Glass Alchemy (GA) to use for the second tube pull. They decided to go with a fire tube, then later, if time allowed, an ice tube. Among the new GA colors they were excited to try were Sapphire and Tiger's Eye. After the pattern was laid out, Brett happily hopped back on his lathe and stretched down the Fire Tube, which was being used as quickly as he could pull it. By the end of the weekend, there was just enough leftover to be reserved for the completion of a Creep Clown Head tube collab, which was to be finished later.

Alien Head tube collab with Creep, Brett Hoerr, Jon E. Walker, Nathan Adami, and TRUE. Photo by Chris Famelette.



Brett Hoerr working on the Alien Head tube. Photo by Becky Wheeler.



Glowlight fish by Jon E. Walker lit up in the Cause of Death collab. Photo by Becky Wheeler.



Jon E. Walker prepping the crucible for the Glowlight rod pull. Photo by Becky Wheeler.

Midday, we had the opportunity to watch a demonstration of a Glowlight rod pull. When the crucible was at temp, Justin assumed his position atop the table. After the ingredients were added and mixed, he began the slow process of extracting the newly formulated glow rods. TRUE was on hand to assist in the pulls, and within twenty minutes, there was a chute filled with new Glowlight glass to be used over the weekend.

Brett then spent much of the evening and the following day assembling the Alien Head Tube, which got a mouthpiece by Jon E. and Glowlight horns by TRUE. Creep finished a hatching Alien Egg Dome that really pulled it all together for me, and Nathan Adami completed a ray gun dabber that conveniently holsters itself on one of the horns. I thought the completed piece looked phenomenal.

While my Saturday wound down a little earlier than the previous night, a few artists stayed on into the wee hours of the morning working hard. So Sunday was even more of a treat to come back in and see what had been completed the day before. Some of my favorite pieces were Dahn Lindstrom's Sushi and Sashimi Hammer and Jon E. Walker's Solar Flare Sherlocks.

A Grand Collaboration

Typically, the last day of an event is a time to finish up what you already have going on. Not the case here. These guys took it as a last opportunity to come together for an elaborate collaboration. The idea of an ocean floor scene, inspired by the *Cause of Death* collaboration, elicited a positive reaction. With each artist working hard on his contribution, the day sped by.

Ben Lang made a sea turtle using dichro donated to the project by Coatings By Sandberg (CBS), while Nathan Adami produced some of his specialty seaweed dabbers out of Glowlight. Jon E. also used Glowlight to make a large coral tree as an installation to stand behind the *Cause of Death*, while Nathaniel Dark made a spiky sea shell and two aquatic chillums, one a slime jellyfish, the other an octopus on slime. By the end of the day, I felt the scope of these pieces was toned down a bit, as the hands on the clock did not relent, pushing the night later. Other pieces were demanding attention as well.

TRUE sandblasted two tubes, and he and Ben worked together on a dry piece that was not quite finished by the end. Jon E. started late on a magnificent tube with Brad Gordon, aka Gordo, TRUE, and UBG that took us into the early morning hours. Yes, I heard birds chirping as I laid down in the back of a truck to try for a few hours of shut eye. And as far as I know, TRUE's torch was still going when I fell asleep.

All in all, the weekend was a brilliant experience at which I met many exceptional people and saw many amazing works of art. I am looking forward to the DVD of The Chicago Project that is being produced by Red Shamrock Productions to relive the highlights of the weekend. The camaraderie of the artists was commendable, especially at a first-time event, and another opportunity for the degenerates of the glass world to contribute to the community was created. Best of all, the artists and sponsors hope to raise at least \$17,000 for Smile Train through auction and sales. At \$250 per operation, Smile Train can use this money to give 68 children the chance to smile.



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