

Debbie Tarsitano  
“The sum of all my Experience”  
Art alliance for Contemporary Glass

In my life I would like to be known as honest, straightforward and sensible. In my artwork I would like to be the wild child, having as the Tao says, “the beginner’s mind,” – inventive, unafraid and bold. The world is my canvas and having artwork that is considered relevant to the time we live in is important. I started out loving glass paperweights, and began making them in the 1970s, after years of being an accomplished painter. I could not have dreamed this difficult work prepared me for a life creating art-using glass. Encasement is one of the most technically difficult choices in all glass. You must become a “Glass Master” as Henry Halem once called me. Artists who encase are amongst the elite technical masters of glass on every level.

Born in 1955, I was about 13 when my dad and I bought a small group of American paperweights at a country auction. We were intrigued and my father Delmo particularly wanted to find out how these might have been made. He was technically adept and endlessly curious—fascination grew into experimentation and together our Tarsitano Studio was born. Dad and I shared interests in gardening, collecting and now making art. We were Father, Daughter, friends, and collaborators—we taught each other but we also stayed clear of each other’s ideas and set no limits upon the art each created. How perfect can that be? My mom Kathryn was our biggest fan and invaluable bookkeeper. At 20, I would soon graduate early from Hofstra University with degrees in fine art and journalism. I told the dean I was already immersed in my business and had to finish early, for some reason he listened! In the mid-1970s Dad and I started selling at flea markets where venues ranged from rural high school cafeterias to Madison Square Garden, this was my first serious public sale and recognition. Oh, how I recall some of those outdoor winter markets where we had to take turns warming up in the public bathrooms!

During this time we met Larry Selman of L H Selman, an early dealer in paperweights who single handedly expanded the field. Larry’s friendship was invaluable and together we built a thriving and unique partnership in our mutual love of the work. Friendships came quickly with members of the art glass community, which at that time numbered in the thousands and

included luminaries like Arthur Rubloff creator of Chicago's miracle mile. Arthur was a big supporter of my work. Having L H Selman as part of our team we built a large international following and were very successful for many years often setting records for our work at Sotheby's and Christies in New York.

In 1976, I had a chance meeting with Max R. Erlacher, head engraver for Steuben in Corning, New York. Soon Max and I began our collaboration of over 20 years resulting in the timeless narrative "The Outstretched Hand of Liberty" the story of American immigration, so relevant today. L H Selman introduced these works into the hands of collectors and museums all around the world.

Sadly, Dad passed in 1991 of ALS just as he claimed the right to explore so many new areas of glass art. So sad he never saw The Studio at Corning that would become such a major influence on my work. I went on to realize our dreams alone, pushing my work beyond its traditional limits and busting out towards a new future first in hot glass sculpture and then in mixed media combining cast glass and painting championing the idea of glass as a material to create art. Living outside New York I continued studying the works of Picasso, Warhol and others keeping my hand in the latest contemporary art. Their bold initiatives inspired me to reach beyond the classic glass formats. In their worlds, shape, form, design, color, imagination and the manipulation of material—all seem endless. It was so natural for me to join in with that spirit. I was a fish in that stream, constantly developing new work. I demanded progress; I was a protestor, hoping doors would open and create greater challenges and possibilities for glass. What was once Paperweights began to morph into glass sculptures, they became canvases to me, inside and out, without limitations to shape or embellishment. Their interiors could tell stories and their exteriors could reinforce the ideas and concepts. For many years after Dad died I routinely worked alone 7 days a week, with periods where I rarely enjoyed time outside other than to check on mom, who lives close by. The moment my husband and two boys were off to school and work, I would throw myself into the studio. My husband Martin and I share the three-car garage—my studio and his office. Martin is a well known Management Consultant and author who also taught for a decade at the University of Pennsylvania.

In 2000 I immersed myself totally in hot glass sculpture. By 2005 I became an instructor at The Studio of the Corning Museum of Glass. I studied and worked there with many of the great glass innovators: Jiri Hrcuba and Martin Rosol for engraving and glass-cutting; Kimiake and Shinichi Higuchi

for pâte de verre; Cappy Thompson for painting on glass and Denise Stillwaggon Leone for photo transfer to glass. I worked with Dino Rosin of Venice making large-scale encased sculptures, in one called “Lens Fantasia”, I painted the underside with the narrative of my life’s work. In perspective, the work I created with my Father was a perfect foundation leading to new horizons.

I began glass casting full time in 2009 experimenting and creating new designs. Work in continuous development over long periods of an artist’s life builds a major portfolio. I realized that was happening.

Today in 2019 I create mixed media art combining all these skills. My eye is on reinventing the portrait using glass combined with oil painting as well as using this technique creating narratives and commentary on life today. My work reflects the sum of all of all my experiences. I recently took the plunge and had a custom HUB Consolidated kiln built for my studio to handle larger works. Experimentation is not fun; talented people suffer and it is lonely. But it is a necessity in creating new and profound works of original art. I can’t describe the thrill of opening the kiln and seeing the perfection and mystery of glass in its completion as a work of art. But I can share with you that the result brings something better to this world. Collectors give the art works temporary homes. They are custodians of the art, safeguarding treasure until the next generation is ready to discover it. Ultimately collectors and historians will make of my work what they each see in it. It is left to the viewers of my art to discover my intentions and decide for themselves what of them to make their own. My own mission in life is to continue creating art with the greatest, most honest intention possible and to leave something behind that is good.

It has been quite a life of artistic creation (experiment, sacrifice and occasional triumph), collaboration, sales, and exhibitions—not to mention a full family life.

Paul Berlanga of L.H. Selman says, “Debbie lives with her husband Martin in Westford Massachusetts”. “Two grown sons and Kathryn, her 97-year old mother, round out the immediate family”. Debbie says, “What? You’re asking me what I do on vacation, now that I take some time off occasionally?”

“I go beachcombing for sea glass”.

Submitted by Paul Berlanga L.H. Selman