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Simply Wabi-Sabi:

Debbie Tarsitano's new Pate De Verre Sculpture.

By Shawn Waggoner.

"To Taste of Spring (study)," Debbie Tarsitano, 12" x 12", 1" deep, 2010.

"Solitude," Debbie Tarsitano, 4" x 4", 3" deep, 2009. All photo credits Debbie Tarsitano Studio.

Debbie Tarsitano is arguably the world's premiere contemporary female paperweight artist. She developed the modern combination of copper-wheel engraving with classical lampwork and crystal encasement.

Tarsitano learned lampworking alongside of her father, world famous glass artist Delmo Tarsitano. Over the years, father and daughter made work that served as a bridge connecting paperweights to modern art glass. They developed designs that touched people's strongest feelings and intended their work to make powerful statements in bold artistic terms. Delmo, who died in 1991, and Debbie were unafraid of changing their work, if need be, to create a whole new art form incorporating glass.

These ideals primed Tarsitano for the transition she would experience beginning in 1999, when she began to phase out lampworking and paperweight making and started to phase in the techniques and aesthetics of pate de verre. This shift in process and technical focus resulted in an entirely new and fresh body of work.

"In 2001 I showed some of my new sculptures at Glass Weekend, Wheaton Arts, Millville, New Jersey," says Tarsitano. "Doug Heller of the Heller Gallery in New York asked me why I was doing this. I remember telling him I had gone as far as I could with paperweights, and I needed to move on. He said that answer was good enough."

Says Doug Heller, "The pate de verre technique offers Debbie Tarsitano a method of working which is more consistent with her contemplative naturethan paperweight making was. The casting process involves stages in the development of a piece which affords an artist time for reflection. It also frees the subject matter of the piece from the encapsulation that a paperweight provides and gives the viewer the opportunity to experience the artwork on multiple levels.

Debbie's sculptures are now available for a tactile exploration, not only a visual one. As the viewer's eye explores the contours of a piece, their hand can also participate. This hand and eye engagement leads to a more intimate as well as richer dialogue with the object."

An accomplished botanical watercolorist, Tarsitano received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Hofstra University. She has studied Japanese watercolor technique under the guidance of Shigeo Ishi, when he was an artist-in-residence at St. John's University in Jamaica, New York. Her glass paperweights are in the collections of The Art Institute, Chicago, Illinois, The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, New York, The Currier Museum of Art, Machester, New Hampshire, and The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, to name only a few.

In the following conversation with "Glass Art" magazine, Tarsitano unveils her latest glass sculpture and discusses her transition from paperweight to pate de verre.

"Wabi Sabi Bird," Debbie Tarsitano, 7" x 4", 3 1/2" deep, 2010.

“Frozen with Snow,” Debbie Tarsitano, 12” x 5”, 3 1/2” deep, 2010.

GA: In 1997, you were focused on encasement and paperweight making. Discuss how and why your work evolved to include pate de verre?

DT: The last “Glass Art” magazine interview followed the death of my father Delmo, partner in my studio. At this time I was also nearing the end of making fine paperweights. The cover issue had a photo of a paperweight my father and I made together using my dahlia and his salamander. It was our favorite paperweight. The cover marked the ending of something; this article will mark the beginning of my new path towards pate de verre.

Frozen with snow clay model.

I have been on an evolving path with lots of twists and turns. Looking back I can see how the story evolved through many difficult transitions. Today I recognize the value of all the changes that led me to where I am now. I have beenlucky; many good people along the way helped me through each phase.

In 1999 I started moving away from paperweight forms. I began to sculpt hot glass in the torch and came up with many new ideas. I encased my designs within abstract sculptural shapes and enjoyed doing this. My thinking began to turn towards sculpture. I very quickly abandoned round blocks and stopped making traditional paperweights altogether.

As I experimented with form, my concepts grew in new directions. All my years of flameworking gave me an advantage. I could scale my flamework up and easily maneuver and control the glass in its fluid state, shaping it as I wish. I became very comfortable with hot sculpting larger forms in the torch. I found it freeing, and it set me on the first of many new paths.

My designs became more abstract, the blocks for making paperweights began to gather dust and at one point I put them away in the closet. I purchased a GOT hand shaping pad and began to literally shape the hot glass by hand. The carbon pad helped me to make many interesting and new hot formed sculptures. As I sculpted the glass, I began to think about mysubjects in three dimensions. I would think about proportion and gesture. I became concerned with how the piece would look from different angles.

“Medallions,” Debbie Tarsitano, 2 1/2” x 2 1/2”, 1/3” deep.

In 2001 I showed some of my new sculptures at Glass Weekend at Wheaton Arts, Millville, New Jersey. I heard many favorable comments. Then in 2005, I was invited to teach at The Studio at the Corning Museum of Glass. The invitation opened up another new path. I showed my new sculptures at the instructor presentation and was further encouraged to continue.

During the class I met another instructor, Dino Rosin. Dino is a master of large scale sculptural work from Murano, Italy. Dino, his son Diego and his assistant Kevin Shlucker invited me to make a large sculptural piece with them. We made a 40-pound sculpture; I called it “Lens Fantasia.” Watching Dino work excited me, and I was hooked on sculpture.

In 2008 Dino and Kevin invited me to come to Corning for a week and work with them. We made six large-scale glass veils with encasements. I designed the pieces and learned a lot abouthow to execute them from Dino and Kevin. We worked together very well and the week flew by. That experience was a gift, andthe best week I ever had as a glass artist. When I returned to my
studio, I began to re-invent my work applying everything I learned from Dino and Kevin.

I studied with a succession of instructors at the studio in Corning. Jiri Harcuba and Martin Rosol taught me cold cutting and engraving. Jiri and I shared an interest in the Tao and Zen. We had many interesting talks at the studio which revived my interest in Asian philosophy. He introduced me to the Japanese philosophy of Wabi Sabi, which I continued to study when I returned home. This enriched my knowledge and helped me to have greater insights for my new work.

I learned a lot in Cappy Thompson’s painting on glass class. In the class I learned how to mix and fire powdered color in the kiln. Though I didn’t realize it at the time, I was getting closer to pate de verre. Cappy’s class also helped me to return to my roots as a painter.

In the summer of 2009, I was a student in the Higuchis’ pate de verre class at The Studio at the Corning Museum of Glass. I spent 11 days with Shin-ichi and Kimiake Higuchi. Every path I had followed prepared me for this class, and I was ready for it. I loved the class and enjoyed creating pate de verre, which I found to be contemplative, almost like a religious ritual. I enjoyed sculpting the clay model, creating the plaster mold and filling the void in a painterly fashion with colored glass frit. I love the thrill of breaking the mold to reveal the inside. I also enjoy spending time refining each sculpture, rubbing it by hand with different abrasives. I can use everything I know, because pate de verre employs both hot and cold glass techniques.

Pate de verre is hard work and requires patience. The Higuchis are very patient artists. They have reverence for their art and materials and are very humble people. The Higuchis set me on a new path, one that makes everything else fit into place. Today I am making pate de verre full time in my studio.

GA: Were changes necessary to your studio? Describe your current work space.

DT: My work space did not change very much. I am very fortunate; I acquired new equipment over several years after taking different cutting and engraving classes at Corning. I knew how to use the equipment due to Martin and Jiri. I already had a big kiln and programmer from hot sculpting. I am a fan of HIS Glassworks and purchased a lot of grinding pads and materials
from them. I did have to purchase plaster, clay and modeling tools, which were not expensive or difficult to find. Today I use all the grinding equipment acquired over the years to refine my pate de verre sculptures.

I have two tables: I sculpt the clay models on one, and I work with the plaster molds on the other. I keep it very simple. I have to be much more aware of health issues due to the powdery nature of plaster and frit so I wear an apron, protective eye wear, respirator and gloves. I try very hard to keep the room dust free and ventilated.

"Flight," Debbie Tarsitano, 4"x 4", 3/4" deep, 2009.

In 1980, I was 25 and decided to study Japanese calligraphy and brush painting. I stumbled on a book called "The Tao Te Ching." The book was written by philosopher Lao Tzu, 300 to 600 BC, and contained hundreds of poems explaining the workings of the natural world. I began to study the book of the Tao and found many new insights leading me towards a greater understanding of nature's role in life.

I am devoted to the concept of Wabi Sabi. Simply, Wabi Sabi is accepting and honoring the truth that everything in the natural world is transient, in a constant state of coming into being, and disintegration. It is authenticity and beauty in the imperfect and unfinished. In observing this phenomenon, I search for subjects that exhibit this feature.

GA: How were the pate de verre techniques and processes learned, refined?

DT: I learned most of my pate de verre techni ques in the Higuchis' class. Lately I have been trying to adapt what I learned to make different pieces. This past year I worked alone at home,feeling my way along, each piece a separate journey. Sometimes things get difficult. It is very disappointing to reach into the kiln and find a cracked piece. This is a common problem; cast molds and glass tend to crack. I have to have patience. The process has to be tailored to each piece, and that takes time. Each model presents different technical problems. It is not the same thing all the time. I am adding a lot
of flamework to my pate de verre, which presents even more problems. As with anything new, I am dealing with the problems and trying to learn from them. I rely on information posted on the Internet, and there are some books that have been helpful.

GA: Describe your current pate de verre process?

DT: I use two processes in creating my artwork: a process to meet technical demands, and a process for finding subjects. I choose my subject based on my own personal philosophy for my work. For 40 years I studied Asian philosophies of the natural world. It has been an interest of mine that began in the 1960s when my brother, Dr. Frank Tarsitano, went to Taiwan as a part of his studies at St John's University. Frank introduced our family to oriental food, art and philosophy. When I find one that interests me I photograph it. From there I go into my studio and create the clay model, which is a work of art in itself. The clay model is transient as Wabi Sabi and will be pulled out of the mold and destroyed. My technical process is still evolving. I am a novice, just one year into it, and learning as I go along by trial and error. Everyone has a different way to achieve what they want using pate de verre. I am still developing my own technical process. I am by no means an expert. This is my process: I start by taking photographs of my subjects. I love nature photography and especially enjoy finding oddities in the landscape embracing the idea of Wabi Sabi. I form a clay model of my subject. The clay model is detailed and could stand as a work of art by itself. I use traditional modeling clay used for pottery. It will air dry if not kept moist and covered with Saran Wrap. It could take several weeks to form the clay model. I use the Higuchi calculations for mixing the plaster 45 percent plaster to water. Sometimes I use Bullseye calculations, which can be found on their Web site. I have tried Bullseye plaster. Right now I use the recommended Higuchi Castor-Y plaster, which is sold by the Corning Museum of Glass Gallery. I place the clay model on a Lucite sheet and build a dam out of clay around the model to catch run-off plaster. I place the dam about one inch out from and around the model. I make the dam as tall as the piece. (You can use a Lucite dam). I mix the plaster and water in a metal bowl and carefully pour the plaster over the whole model usinga plastic spatula and a paint brush Higuchi style, in order not to form bubbles in any crevices. I cover the model completely using the whole amount of plaster just as the Bullseye chart calculation

recommends for the size of the piece. I let the plaster harden thoroughly, and when it is dry I de-vest all the clay from the mold and clean the mold with hand tools.

Next I fill the mold with colored frit and powder. I mix the powder with water and CMC. I also add clear glass. (You can use either Kuegler or Bullseye powder or frit or any frit and clear you like that is compatible). I dry the mold filled with powdered glass completely and cast the mold with glass in the kiln using a programmer to guide the temperature. Once annealed I carefully de-vest the plaster from the glass. I refine the pate de verre sculpture using sandblasting, hand polishing, electric and manual hand tools, sometimes a Merker engraving lathe. This step can take several weeks.

GA: What was the hardest part of the transition from flameworking / encasement to pate de verre? Did your aesthetic interests/ direction change?

DT: The hardest part was leaving what I did for over 30 years and venturing into something completely different. My work in encasement had become very safe, and I knew many people who loved my work. I enjoyed my years encasing making fine paperweights, and I am proud of the work I did. As I work with pate de verre, in some ways I am a beginner, but in other ways I am an experienced and accomplished artist. I can call upon what I know to solve problems.

Mine was a difficult transition mentally. In the beginning it was hard to think of myself as someone completely different. Changing my work also separated me from my father, which sometimes made me sad. My confidence was invested in the old work. I worried about how my new work would be accepted; but I didn't let the worry stop me.

I had a difficult exit from paperweights. There are still people who would like to see me return to paperweights, but I don't see that happening. I see myself and my work differently now. I hope in time my new work will be accepted and collected. I have not shown any work publicly yet.

My subject matter and mindset have changed; they are well-suited for sculpting now. Sculpting allows me to explore a very wide range of emotion in my work. I have been able to realize more depth, passion and energy in my models.

GA: How have these elements – color, form, composition, style, content, size – changed/ stayed the same?

DT: My color palette has changed to create the quiet presence of Wabi Sabi. My color reflects things coming into either a state of being or diminishing. The color palette for such subjects is often very subtle. I am in the midst of developing a new palette. Today I can have 10 shades of brown in one wing of a bird. There is a Taoist saying that "too many colors blind the eye." My earlier work used a lot of color to make a statement. Today I use the least amount of color as

"DNA Beach Wing," full view, Debbie Tarsitano, 13" x 13", 1" deep, 2010.

possible. The colors in nature can be brilliant like a sunset, but I am looking at the colors before and after the sunset.

When I see a subject, for example, "Wabi Sabi Bird," the form is melting and in transition. Even in "DNA Beach Wing," the bird's wing is dissolving into the ocean. The DNA helix alongside it is corroding, breaking down. I like the idea of emerging and dissolving forms. In "To Taste of Spring" the bird is winter worn and has lost most of its detail. Its gesture is quizzical — it doesn't understand why it can't drink from the frozen pond. It see's the Japanese maple leaves that remind it of spring. In "To Taste of Spring" (study) the Japanese maple leaves dissolve within the ice.

For me the most interesting forms are ghosts of their former selves and not very literal. In "Solitude," the egg and chick merge; there is no beginning or end to each part. I achieve the dissolving form when I make my clay model. I begin eliminating anything that does not need to be there, taking away bits of clay until the bare essence of the model remains. It is a challenge to capture the essence of simplicity. In my earlier work the busier the composition, the better. I enjoyed making complex collages with tons of canes and flamework. Everything also needed to be centered and balanced. In my pate de verre, I keep the composition simple. The composition does not need to be balanced; in fact having things askew is more natural and can imply gesture.

“Letting Go,” Debbie Tarsitano, 10” x 8”, 6” deep, 2010.

Removing the mold from Wabi Sabi Bird 2.

Styles come and go, but I cannot say that my work has a defined style. I do have a philosophy, but that is not a style. Some of the philosophies I believe in have been popular for the last 2000 years. I want to constantly change and re-invent my work as I go along different paths. As long as I can do this work, its content will evolve as I grow older and gain wisdom. Every piece I make comes from something living now, which once lived or that may be alive in the future. I am open to it all.

Recently my subjects have all been birds. I admire their freedom and ability to fly. Flying free is one of the most amazing features in their lives. They live among us and are everywhere we go in the world. We love to watch them, and they watch us constantly, interacting with humans.

Over the years I have owned many caged birds. They imprint on humans and create an unspoken language. They are very expressive and observant of nature; their movements say a lot about what they are thinking. Wild birds have tremendous energy for life. I recently nursed a young blue jay that had become drenched in a rainstorm. When it came time to release him he began to screech and bolted from the cage. I think about the release in terms of our own basic instinct to be free and move on.

I marvel at the way birds renew themselves each spring. No matter how difficult the winter, no matter how many storms weathered, as soon as spring emerges they burst onto the scene chattering at dawn, calling for mates and renewing the circle of life. The appearance and behavior of birds define many of the ideas based in Wabi Sabi philosophy. Often I come across remnants of an empty nest or the remains of a bird that did not make it through the winter; these show the constant transition of life, coming into being and dissolving.

The first pieces I cast in my own studio were small, maybe 3 inches tall. I think it was best for me to start small so I could try to realize my designs technically. Lately the pieces are up to 20 inches in diameter, and different thicknesses from 1 to 5 inches on up. I think that subject matter dictates the size of the piece. It is possible to make very large castings, and I can see myself doing so in the near future. I would have to ask myself how scaling something up in size would contribute to my model. I think sculptors develop intuition about size. Size should make sense.

GA: When and why did you establish your Web site?

DT: Though I've had a Web site since 1993, my latest was built in 2007. I wanted it to showcase my work and give me a presence. I look at my Web site as an evolving work of art. I did not want it to be the usual static site, so I had it built in flash animation.

I am personally involved in every aspect: I do the photography and write the content. Updates usually show new directions my work takes. My site is like a personal diary. I love the music of Al Marconi and Shawn Waggoner and my site features a player. Their music goes well with my work.

GA: Are you still making weights?

DT: I made the last paperweight around 1999, and the last paperweight exhibition I was in was called "Worlds Within" at the Corning Museum of Glass. Laura Cotton curated the show. I entered a sculptural encasement called "The Dream." It had flamework and enamel painting on the exterior as well as encasement inside of an abstract form. Tina Oldknow selected that piece for the Museum's permanent collection.

In the "Worlds Within" show, the Museum placed "The Dream" in a special case with transitional pieces made by Tiffany and Mark Peiser. I was the only artist from paperweights to have work in that special case, and it gave me great pleasure to see "The Dream" where it belonged.

GA: What has this new work allowed you to explore as an artist? Where will it take you?

DT: I have developed a new intuitive eye. I notice the most subtle, unassuming subjects in the landscape. I find this exciting, like finding a treasure. I also feel my work has gained maturity, and I feel able to recognize the value of that maturity. Where will this take me? I am not sure, but the path is right in front of me, and I am going to see where it goes. ☒