

“Firefly”

By Debbie Tarsitano

Flamework Encasement Demo

Reprinted from the Glass Art Society Journal

I have always likened my work to catching fireflies. Remember when you were a kid with jelly jar in hand; setting out into your yard on a summer's night chasing and catching the magical creatures? It was like capturing the light! It was such a thrilling sensation holding the glowing radiance in your hands. That is what it is like to encase flamework in hot glass.

In Seattle at the 2003 GAS conference Dinah Hulet tapped me on the shoulder and in her bubbly voice said, “Debbie I’ve put your name down for a hot glass Demo at the GAS Conference in New Orleans.” Time stood still for a moment, and then just as fast, a feeling of ecstatic excitement combined with panic washed over me. Calming down, I realized what an honor it was, and I had a year to work on my presentation to my peers. When an artist like me thinks about sharing her life’s passion with others, self-examination follows. Usually I think of my work from the inside out, now I had to think of my work from the outside in.

Before long I began to examine my own career, my ideas and my techniques. I didn’t want only to show technique to my fellow artists; I wanted to share my own creative process and design approach.

There are four elements to my process. First an emotional connection develops that draws me into an idea arising from an impression, event or situation in the world around me. Second, creating and committing that idea to paper generates a concrete vision of my emotional impression. Third comes envisioning the piece as a whole, while playing with the exterior shape to complement and reinforce the interior idea. Fourth, I deal with the concept of encasement. I do not build my ideas around the encasement process so if encasement proves impossible I experiment until it becomes possible, rather than compromise the idea to suit the artistic medium.

Why encasement? Why take precious and delicate flameworked designs and drop molten crystal onto them? Encased flamework is both delicate in appearance and durable in strength. When we encase flamework we transmit our ideas and thoughts to the future for certain. The moment two pieces of molten glass come together encasing a design; it’s a thrill just like capturing the firefly. As an artist, encasement transforms my ideas into a small sculpture, freezing the idea at a moment in time to be held and examined by future generations.

Bearing all this in mind and wanting to share this idea, I began to plan my demo, I always work alone in my studio, and however for New Orleans I felt it was best to ask a friend, Michelle McGuire, to give me hand. After giving Michelle a crash course on the ABC’s of encasement we were ready.

In my own studio, I sketched and flameworked a design based on DNA and genetics an area of interest for me. Then a week before the conference I shipped all

of my equipment and glass to the hotel. I arrived in New Orleans a day early to help Robert Michelson and Ron Parvin set up my flamworking area. After seeing the smaller torches provided, I told Ron to bring in the “big boy” torches. Ron secured a Carlisle CC+ burner for me. The day of the demo I made sure the torch pressures were adjusted, and the kiln was set at 1010 degrees, all systems were go. I realized artists must be involved with the equipment set up of their demo.

I began the demonstration by showing my flamworked design, which I had assembled on a steel plate. I also presented my drawing of the completed piece. The idea for the piece was entitled “Where do we come from”? After explaining the origins of the design I explained how I planned the exterior shape so that it related to the interior design. Then Michelle and I began the encasement process.

Making sure everything was at melting point, the pivotal moment came to drop the molten glass into the steel collar to pick up the flamworked design. This makes or break moment luckily went well successfully embedding the design in the glass. Next the important step of putting the two halves of glass together and sealing the design forever in crystal. From that point on I molded and sculpted the glass in the flame, changing pipe orientations several times to arrive at the final flamworked sculpture.

The time came to put the sculpture in the kiln, when suddenly I realized I had forgotten to bring my heavy file. The file is a simple tool yet vital to taking the piece off the pipe. On such a simple note the magic of the demo turned to alarm. Ron ran around looking for a glove. I had planned everything except taking the piece off of the pipe and getting it into the kiln. The crowd began rooting for a good outcome. Would this piece make it into the kiln? Ron found a glove and held his hands under the piece like a fireman holding out his hands to catch a baby. I gave the pipe a mighty whack with a wrench. That didn't do it and the audience laughed when I said I would have to stay at the demo forever keeping the piece hot. Then I tried again giving it a harder whack, the crowd cringed at that, but it did the trick, and the piece fell into waiting gloves that popped it into the kiln. Everyone clapped.

In nearly 30 years I have never tired of encasing my flamworked designs. I am drawn back with renewed excitement over and over again. Just like capturing fireflies' in a jar, we open the jar and release them back into the night so we can catch them again tomorrow.

Debbie Tarsitano