

Josh Simpson
“Heavenly Inspirations, Earthly Visions”
Debbie Tarsitano 2005

Every day Josh Simpson steps down onto his large granite front steps and begins his day experiencing life on this planet. He is aware we all reside on a wondrous planet. Weather you are talking on a cell phone while driving to work or walking along a crowded city street, we all exist on the great blue marble called Earth.

On a crisp New England morning Josh stops for a moment to pet his cat, Wild Thing, and walks toward his studio, a large red barn next to his house. On the way he glances up at the sky knowing it will be filled with different colors and textures on this day. He fills his minds eye with the ever changing atmosphere of this planet. For Josh the sky is a living moving design to be captured in glass.

At the same time a woman wakes up in the suburbs, glances at her alarm clock and goes down to her kitchen to make coffee. As she runs the water in the sink she glances up to the window sill and sees her Simpson Glass Planet perched next to an African violet. The woman thinks briefly that life is more than making coffee and running out to work. For a moment she picks up the shiny glass planet and examines the colors turning it with curiosity. The woman places the planet back on her window sill, glances up noticing the blue sky and sun; she is reminded she a human being who exists on a living planet.

I have known Josh Simpson for nearly 25 years. We are always glad to see each other when we meet at glass events. Everyone that knows him has experienced his humanity in one way or another. Josh always mentions my Dad Delmo, a glass artist who passed away 14 years ago. He recalls a time when my Dad was kind to him and never forgets. Josh embodies a person who enjoys life and appreciates everything.

Josh invited me to drive out to his studio in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts to interview him for this article. Although I have been a long time admirer of his work I had never been to his studio. When I drove up the road his home and studio are on, I wasn't really sure I was at the right address. The property before me looked like a pristine classical New England farmhouse and barn. I didn't notice any modern embellishments, and there was no evidence at all of a glass studio.

A Tour of Josh Simpson's Studio

Josh welcomed me to his home and we started our tour. It is a great treat to be invited into the world of a living working artist. Few people ever see the intimate details behind the work. I invite you in to share the environment Josh has created to nurture his art.

The tour began where the art ends up, in a foyer stacked with art work in big wooden crates waiting to be shipped to Josh's next Museum show. His last show was at the Sandwich Museum of Glass in Sandwich on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. Josh is involved with many museum exhibitions all over the world.

Josh's studio has many compartments, each space designated for a process needed to create the work. His studio is like a little city, a Mecca for ideas, experimentation and completion of exciting new designs. Josh carefully researches each aspect of the work and sets aside a place for each specific task – every square inch is occupied – providing evidence of the many years of careful dedication and planning as well as great expense.

From the storage area and ante-room we paused in a colored rod storage area. Hundreds of glass rods lay stored carefully in floor to ceiling cubby holes. Josh explained how choosing colors is his first step for making canes and ribbon twists. Josh has developed a unique color palette. He is also very careful about compatibility and constantly checks his colors against his clear glass's expansion coefficient. This led into a room for storing canes and ribbons. The walls of the cane room were lined with boxes of canes from floor to ceiling like a library of glass. This room holds a virtual history of all the canes Josh has created and included in his work since he began.

The next door led into a large area that serves as the studio's machine shop. Many metal working machines as well as several types of welding equipment are placed around the room. Josh told me he used to do most of the metal work and equipment repairs, but he now has several machine shops and an assistant who takes care of those tasks.

From the machine shop, we entered a storage area for glass working equipment from past and planned projects. Making massive new artworks takes special oversized kilns and large glory holes which usually is not available commercially. So Josh custom designs his equipment and has it specially built. He may only use a very large kiln once or twice a year to make a very special piece, but it is waiting in this staging area ready for use in the hot shop when needed.

Josh also pointed out special programmers he had built with carefully planned annealing curves for annealing huge pieces over times that can run for several months uninterrupted. Annealing over many weeks necessitates a back-up generator in the case of power failures. Even with the right equipment, skill and resolve, it is a miracle that an artist can create a 90 pound planet or even larger under any circumstances.

We continued on to the grinding shop where annealed work is bottomed and polished. The cold shop is run by Paul Novak with John Strong assisting. The grinding room is adjacent to a packing and shipping area which, in such a large studio, means that the finished work only has a short journey to shipping.

Our last stop on the studio tour was the heart of the studio, the hot shop. The hot shop is spacious and bright with very high barn ceilings supported with huge steel beams and columns. Furnaces line one wall and glory holes of different sizes are located strategically around the room. Most hot shops have their entrance on the ground level, but Josh's also has a balcony and open catwalk above the studio floor with a stairway leading down to the working level. Standing on the cat walk high over the studio makes you feel like a bird looking down on a marvelous scene. Heat from the furnaces rise to the ceilings and warms the cat walk, which Josh takes advantage of by hanging and drying laundry there.

Each morning the room is prepared with all materials needed for the day's work. Canes, colored rods and frit are carefully laid out for encasements or blown work. Depending on the work of the day Josh brings equipment in and out of the studio as needed. A team of very talented glass artists assist him in creating the work. The crew include Rick Bardwell, Emelia Fleck, Scott Lesure, Varis Mohler, and Cody Webb who seem to enjoy their time working and learning together, and under Josh's guidance, help make hot glass dreams a reality.

The Work – Thirty Plus Years of Hot Glass

After our tour, Josh outlined a brief retrospective of his glass artwork:

Goblets 1971 to 1987 -- Josh's goblets are traditional in shape but reveal new design elements within the bowl of the goblets, producing effects never seen in goblets before. His goblets reflect the colors and qualities in the atmosphere which surrounds the earth. This design element gives the user a new experience beyond charm and practicality. The user is invited to drink in the colors of the heavens.

New Mexico Glass 1974 - Josh combined several techniques to create New Mexico glass and evolved the idea into tumblers, vases, bowls and large round chargers that reflect the patterns in complex celestial maps.

Planets 1976 - Glass Planets exist in a category by themselves. Josh invented a new art form with a new name. Development of the Planets opened up new possibilities for what can be created in glass. This new design allowed collectors as well as other artists to break from tradition and think about creating a new generation of ideas in glass by thinking outside the box.

Tektites 1976 – Real tektites are glass formed by the intense heat of a large meteorite striking the earth. They are rare and look like obsidian glass. Josh's

tektite techniques opened up the door for artists to use texture as a major element in sculptural glass. His designs were inspired by natural elements and a combination of geological surface textures and smooth cut glass. Josh says: "Some tektites are believed to be of extraterrestrial origin." In 1991 Josh introduced Portals, cuts into the tektites that allow for further inspection of the interior design. The objective of the cutting is to direct the viewer's attention to elements hidden inside.

Copper Baskets 1990 – Copper baskets combine technique and materials using glass and metal in a multi media project. Josh is a master of many techniques and is able to combine design elements in interesting and innovative ways. First he welds metal into a three dimensional sculptural armature. Next he blows hot glass into the metal cavity filling the armature with a blown vessel. The metal armature contains and releases the hot flowing glass creating the effect of moving glass in a fixed sculpture.

Megapanets, Saturn's and Mega Vessel 1993 - Megaplanets are among the most ambitious works made in glass today. It is a personal challenge for an artist to attempt exceeding his own expectations. Creating such a work challenges the human spirit and leaves behind an enduring accomplishment. In the end an artist looks back on fulfilling a quest and feels satisfied. Megaplanets, Saturn's and Megavessels embody this accomplishment.

Bert Cohen Collector and Supporter:

Mr. Bert Cohen a noted glass collector and world authority on marbles has the following to say about Josh and his work:

"Josh and I have known each other for over twenty five years. I first saw his "inhabited planets: in 1980 and visited his studio and watched him work. He is a friendly, affable and talented young man. I was quite impressed with his creative, passionate and dedicated approach to his work. So in 1987, when the Smithsonian Magazine wanted to do a marble feature and came to my home to photograph my collection, I recommended that they also visit Josh at work. Before we knew it, we were the lead article in the April 1988 issue and two million copies of the magazine sold out! This opened international opportunities for Josh and for collectors like me. I convinced Josh to sign his marbles, make them colorful, and to vary the sizes. He makes some very large ones up to five inches in diameter. Josh's work is unique and exciting. He is always surprising us all with new glass creations. He is a very special person and a remarkably talented glass artist."

Debbie Tarsitano Interviews Josh Simpson

On October 19, 2005 it was my pleasure to visit and interview Josh Simpson in person at his home in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. Josh made lunch and we talked informally in the kitchen of his nineteenth century farmhouse.

DT: *How did you find this location?*

JS: When I first started working I lived in a tepee that I sewed together on a treadle sewing machine. Food consisted of cheese, chickpeas and sometimes tomato soup. I was able to trade glass for food at a local store. I worked in a small studio that friends and I built together in Marshfield, a town in Northern Vermont. The time came when I was faced with the sale of the property and had to move.

I didn't have much money but upon receiving orders for my goblets I was able to secure a bank loan. I then built a studio on my Grandfather's land. When my Grandfather died I had to move again. I drew a circle around the University of Massachusetts and looked for property there.

When I saw the property I live in now, the barn was in good shape but the house needed work. The property was a former dairy farm. I have put a lot of work into the house over the last 30 years. I have lived happily in the house with my family for many years.

Most of my work is concerned with space or sky themes and this property has been the perfect high clear spot to look up at the heavens. The furnaces have to be attended to in the middle of the night like farm animals, so many times especially during March I have seen the *aurora borealis* flashing across the night sky.

DT: *Tell us about your studio space, your day and favorite time to work?*

JS: God, I love my studio. The furnaces are alive with hot breath. There are days when the stereo is so loud that it can change your genetic structure and then there are other times when it is peaceful (the furnaces are never quite quiet). I get up every morning around 5:30AM make breakfast and then sometimes walk out to my studio before anyone arrives to get the lights on. Someone comes in to help set up for the day at 6 AM and then the rest of my team arrives by seven o'clock. We usually work until 3:30PM and then I usually do paperwork, answer letters or email, or I sign the previous days work or make phone calls. I like working early in the morning best. There are fewer interruptions and in the summer at least it is usually cool early.

DT: *Are you the first major artists to work in the town of Shelburne Falls?*

JS: When I moved here there was a leather worker in town. Now there are several glass artists working in the area. Some of them were former apprentices in my studio. People who have worked for me have gone on to open their own studios in other areas of the country too. Everybody that has ever worked here has had amazing integrity. They leave here with the skills that enable them to make their own work and no one has ever copied my work. They all use the information they obtain from working with me to design and

create their own original designs. There are many more artists in the Shelburne Falls area today, it's a great place to live and work.

DT: *Why do you think no one has ever copied your work?*

JS: I think to be a good glassblower you have to understand that you can use this material to express your own point of view, your own aspirations. Why copy someone else when you can invent your own designs. I think the people that work in my studio see the effort that I make to make sure that my own work is original and they respect that. I could easily derive designs from someone else but I do not do that.

DT: *Your work is so original, how did you develop your own style?*

JS: No one ever taught me how to blow glass I taught myself that's the way I learn. I had so little money that I had very little influence from the outside world. I lived outdoors; remember I lived in a tepee. When I first started out on my own I didn't have a newspaper or a radio or a TV. I went to bed when it was dark and woke to the light. I lived in a bubble so to speak. I had a lot of time to think.

The idea of trying to interpret the sky came to me slowly. I would sit on the top of my studio roof and wonder about how amazing the sky looked I would study the colors and the blackness and the richness and the depth. One time I got permission to tour a nuclear power plant as an artist. I was lifted above a pool of spent fuel in a harness; at the bottom was a radioactive assembly in a glowing pool of spent fuel at the called Cherenkov radiation. (The blue glow in the water surrounding nuclear reactors is Cherenkov radiation. The charged particle excites the water molecules which then return to their normal state emitting photons of blue light.)

At the time I was really trying to emulate Tiffany glass, I had seen Tiffany glass in my grandmother's house and tried for a long time to make iridescent glass. I tried the process of melting silver, and then I gathered clear glass over silver and began to explore that. I would get these streaks from that process. I noticed the effect would be accentuated by using a certain color of glass. One day I had a breakthrough while making wine goblets. I was making what I called my "New Mexico" wine goblets (goblets that are reminiscent of colors in the New Mexico sky). I ran into a neighbor at the Post Office, he said "we were drinking out of your wine goblets last night and at one point I realized I wasn't drinking out of a wine goblet I was drinking out of the sky" It made me realize that people could get it! I had accomplished my goal.

I began to look at my large platters more as paintings. I could include the maximum amount of detail and diversity on the surface as possible. For some people viewing my work, the experience may seem as if they are looking at the sea from above, for others it is looking up at the night sky.

It is how each person perceives it. Glass allows depth of detail and color and I take full advantage of the medium. (Josh continuously transforms art forms he is known for)

DT: *Tell us about your design process, How do you plan and execute your designs?*

JS: I can't say that I had a detailed life plan when I first started to blow glass, or had any notion of where it would take me. Even now, I never know quite where I'm going until I look back and see the progress. I sometimes think I have a concrete idea of what I want to make, and then discover something else along the way.

I guess that evolution is an apt word to describe the trajectory of my work – making an idea for design into reality is an organic process for me that happens over time and is full of trial and error. I can look back and see the branching in the evolutionary family trees of my work. In the moment, when I am in my studio, I try not to think about where I've come from, I just ask the next question and with any luck the glass and I move toward the answer.

Thirty years ago, I started out focusing on making goblets because to me they represented the ultimate challenge. I spent seventeen years trying to make a perfect goblet. That wasn't all I did during that time. With the goblets and then planets, vases, and iridescent glass, as with all my work, I've learned by experimenting and making work. When I came up against a technical obstacle I couldn't overcome, I read from my growing personal library of books on glass and often consulted with the folks at the Corning Museum of Glass or the Rakow Library. It's probably a character flaw, but I don't give up easily. I usually work at something until I'm satisfied that I've got it right.

DT: *How did the original idea of creating planets in glass evolve?*

JS: When I moved to Shelburne one of the local 8th grade teachers asked me if I could demonstrate glassblowing to young school children. After thinking about what would fascinate them, I felt the children would enjoy seeing a marble being made. It would be quick and interesting to them and they could relate to it.

At the same time I was thinking about Jim Lovell and the moment when he was in the space shuttle and discovered he could cover the earth with his thumb. I remember seeing a photo of that. I felt a marble representing our planet earth could give the children something to think about, how valuable this earth is. It allowed me suddenly to use many techniques I had spent years learning to do. All the techniques suddenly could be put into this little unique sphere. No one was making a planet in glass.

I have always been interested in space travel being a child of the 1970's. I loved science as a young boy. It was that photo that turned things on for me. Later I married NASA astronaut Cady Coleman. My wife didn't become an astronaut until 1992 - I made planets for many years before we met, but it is ironic that part of her job is to orbit our planet. I have always been fascinated with space and undersea exploration and technology and my work has reflected that interest for most of my career.

DT: *Mention a few turning points in your career.*

JS: As I look back I think the desire to perfect the making of thin stemmed wine goblets without using any sort of molds was a turning point for me. I didn't know of anyone else at the time (back in 1972) who was even attempting to make stemware.

By 1977 I was well known enough to have my goblets and water glasses included at a Senate wives luncheon hosted by Joan Mondale, wife of then Vice President Walter Mondale. I have to add becoming a Fellow of the Corning Museum of Glass was another turning point for me.

DT: *Tell us about your most ambitious piece?*

JS: My most ambitious piece to date is the Planet paperweight I am about to make for the Corning Museum of Glass. They have commissioned me to make a 100 pound Planet to be the 1000th piece in their paperweight collection. I gave a talk to the docents and described how I create the large worlds.

Everyone who saw my talk egged me on to make the 100 pound planet. The weights in the collection are quite small and this world will be so much greater. I really don't know if I can make something that heavy and I don't know if I can anneal the 100 colors I will likely try to put in the piece without having it explode.

DT: *Is creating the work physically demanding? Tell us about that.*

JS: It is incredibly physically demanding. After I am finished with an eighty or ninety pound Planet and I am carrying it around the studio, I wonder how in the world I was able to move the sphere of hot glass when it was attached to the end of a five foot blowpipe. The physics of it just astounds me. I do try to workout if I have time. Staying strong is the only way I know to keep going.

When I work with my team we look like a bunch of football players trying to do ballet. It's a challenge to control a 75-pound ball of molten glass on the end of a five-foot-long blowpipe; the physics are definitely working against you. My team knows what to do, working through experience and few words. You must be precise and graceful, as well as extremely strong, because the glass is so responsive and alive.

DT: *Would you like to collaborate with other artists and teach more?*

JS: I am open about trying to do collaborative work. I would also love to teach more but it takes me away from my studio. I have taught at Pilchuck and Haystack, as well as the Corning studio. These days I have so many responsibilities with work and family it is hard to leave for any length of time. The last time I was teaching at The Corning Museum Studio I discovered a machine that cuts large diameter canes beautifully. It has made such a difference in my studio. So every time I teach I learn too.

(We continued to talk while Josh made and served cappuccino.)

DT: *How has the internet changed your Studio?*

JS: I think the Internet will change our lives as artists forever. I have had a website since 1995. My wife astronaut Cady Coleman was going into outer space on the shuttle

Colombia October of 1995. That was the first flight NASA allowed spouses to be in touch with each other in outer space via e-mail, I got an e-mail account in order to communicate with Cady.

Shortly after that I created a website of my own. I thought of it as a brochure on my work for people to see. Back then it was complicated to change photos and text, but I hoped in time that would change and I could post the latest photos of my work.

DT: *Can collectors communicate with you through e-mail?*

JS: We have many people who call us and ask us for more photos of the work. I answer some of the e-mails personally as best I can when I have the time. I also have an assistant Deb who can answer e-mails. I hardly ever have collectors come to my studio as I am usually very tied up with my work. I am very happy to be able to answer a query from people via e-mail. It is easier for me to set aside time to do that. There is a lot of information about the work on the web. When you Google for Simpson Glass you can find my website as well as many galleries that sell my work.

DT: *Tell us about the "Infinity Project". Is that part of the legacy you wish to leave for future generations?*

JS: In 1976 I discovered several hand made marbles outside my kitchen door that had probably been left there by children a generation before. The marbles were still just as bright and colorful as they were on the summer afternoon they were lost. The discovery made me think about the longevity of glass. There are so many priceless glass objects in museums around the world that spent eons buried in the ground before an archaeologist happened upon them.

In 1976 no museum had acquired my work. I thought - Why not hedge my bet? I began to hide planets – first near my house, and then later I brought them with me to leave behind whenever I traveled. Once I learned to fly, I was able to drop planets in truly remote locations from a tiny window on the pilot's side of the plane. I've left planets in mundane places, and now thanks to the Internet and the "infinity" project - planets can found in truly exotic locations around the globe. Some are meant to be discovered quickly, perhaps by someone in the future who will wonder what it is or what it was meant for. Others are likely to lie hidden for centuries." For years I've been giving planets away to kids who probably lose them just as easily as the ones outside my door had been lost. I've been giving them away to kids at Halloween for years, as well as to children who come to the studio to visit with their parents.

Another child or an adult might find them someday and be delighted with the discovery. I wonder what they would think of it, not having ever seen any of my other work, and not knowing what my little sphere was meant to be. There is no identification mark on the hidden planets, they are an anonymous gift. I hope that future archaeologists will be confused as to the meaning and purpose of the little spheres, what are they and how did they get here?

DT: *Do you have any plans for expanding your current forms and vessels? Are you working on any new designs? What's next for Josh Simpson?*

JS: I have been making quasi-photographic images using tiny glass beads for the past six years. There have been and still are somewhat complicated technical issues that need to be solved for this work to be successful. The images are digitized photographs that are translated to a pick and place robot that has been adapted from the semi-conductor industry. The robot replaces each pixel in a photo with a colored glass bead and then places individual beads on a platen designed to prevent them from rolling out of place. Next, in a distinctly low tech maneuver, the beads are transferred onto a brass plate that is then heated about a 1000 degrees Fahrenheit before they are picked up using traditional glass techniques on a molten gather of glass at the end of a blow pipe. Lately I have been constructing a steel mold around the brass plate and then 2300 degree molten glass is poured over the beads to create a thick glass tile with the image on the front or back (or suspended within).

The beads are about 1 millimeter in diameter. The pieces are small if you hold one in your hand, but large by photographic pixel standards. My glass photos have only about 100 pixels per square inch (where modern digital cameras record photos in millions of pixels per square inch). Large pixels make for very grainy images. In fact the photographs I choose are almost unrecognizable if they are viewed from a close distance. I hope they will become obvious only as the viewer steps away.

DT: *Tell us about your most recent museum show, and other museum shows you have planned?*

JS: I've been lucky enough to have several museum shows over the years. Two of them have toured nationally and internationally – *New Work, New Worlds* which started at the Emerson Gallery at Hamilton College, *Visionary Landscapes* which started at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, CT and *Visions of Our Galaxy* at the Sandwich Glass Museum, Sandwich, MA. *Visionary Landscapes* went around the world to Spain, Portugal and even Brunei, a small country on the tip of the island of Borneo. I was lucky enough to travel there for the opening under the auspices of the Art in Embassies program. I was also fortunate to meet with His Majesty, the Sultan of Brunei, who it turns out is also a pilot... We talked mostly about flying, I found out his favorite helicopter is his American Blackhawk that he uses for recreation.

My future exhibitions will be at Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery in Waterloo, Ontario starting in June 2006 through September 2006. A retrospective show of my work is being organized by the Huntsville Museum of Art in Huntsville, AL. to open in May 2007.

Permanent Collections

Josh Simpson's work is in the permanent collection of the Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY; Museum of Fine Art and Design, New York, NY; Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC; Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada; Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague, Czech Republic and other prestigious museums, and private collections.

Josh Simpson was president of the Glass Art Society from 1992-1994 and was instrumental in starting CERF a relief agency for glass artists in need.

To learn more about Josh Simpson read “Josh Simpson Glass Artist” hard cover book, By Andrew Chaikin
Josh Simpson www.megaplanet.com