

Collaborative Partnership

Creative trio join hands for major art exhibition

by Donna Strong

Photographs not credited to Donald Woodman are by Norm and Ruth Dobbins

Study for Tinned Veins with cast glass for Twinned Veins, Watercolor, 9 x 12-inches, cast glass 15 x 6 x 4-inches ©Judy Chicago 2006



THE HIGH MOUNTAIN DESERT OF SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO, IS A WELL-KNOWN HUB OF CREATIVE ACTIVITY. Historic home to artists in all media, the geography is known for its captivating and compelling natural beauty. The glass arts rely on the way light refracts through it and reflects off it, so the stunning luminosity of this region of the country makes it an ideal home to Norm and Ruth Dobbins, partners in life and art. In the decorative glass business as Etchmaster for more than thirty years, as well as being the founders and instructors at the renown Aliento Glass School, "Ruth and I had been talking for about six months about actually doing more glass work, instead of primarily teaching," to quote Norm. What happened next was, "...an amazing bit of serendipity."

THE MEETING

In March of 2003, Flo Perkins, a local artist with national recognition as a glass blower, decided to have a barbecue. This wasn't the usual neighborhood barbecue. This was a gathering arranged for artists from Northern New Mexico to share examples of their glass work and meet Judy Chicago, an internationally renowned artist who believes in, and practices collaboration in her multimedia approaches to large projects.

She was interested in glass as her next direction. Judy and her photographer husband, Donald Woodman, were introduced to Norm and Ruth while looking at their book, *Etched Glass: Techniques and Designs*. The couples began to talk and found a vast common ground of interest. Ruth recollects; "We were drawn to each other by our mutual position in life. We are all serious about having made artistic endeavors our life's purpose and are not naive about what that meant. All of us understand artistic pursuits as a way of life, so we think about our aesthetic concepts and values in everything we do. All of us study to understand the materials of our chosen medium, as well as the processes we use in working with them. We all know that once an idea interests you, you have to find a way of expressing it, which may not necessarily always point to the medium you are trained to work in. For instance, I have a Masters in Art and was trained in printmaking, but have primarily worked in glass for thirty some years."

A POSITION IN HISTORY

Judy Chicago originally trained as a painter, but collaborated in many a medium in her large projects. She has been a major figure in American art since her highly acclaimed and ground-breaking work, *The Dinner Party*,



Norm Dobbins and Judy Chicago discussing the "Temporal Connection" project.



Ruth Dobbins applies rubber resist to the cast hand in preparation for carving.



Ruth cuts the design into the resist.



Norm checking the blasting of the design in progress.



The nearly finished carved hand



Norm & Judy examining the beginning carving process on another cast arm

became a public art phenomenon in the 1970's. Honoring the achievements of women in Western Civilization, this work was seen by over one million people in six countries, through sixteen major exhibit venues. With a career that now spans four decades, she has permanently altered the perspective on women and their role in art. Appropriately, she is now featured in H.W. Jansen's *History of Art*, having taken her place as a leading contributor to American art. It is important to note that when Judy created her classic *Dinner Party*, not one woman was included in H.W. Jansen's classic text, the standard book in nearly every collegiate art history class in the nation.

In talking with Judy, she described what led her to glass. "I first got interested in glass when I was working with my husband, Donald, on the *Holocaust Project*. The very daunting, dark collaboration took eight years. We wanted to end the project with a life-affirming image. I thought to myself at that point, 'light is life.' I had seen the Matisse chapel in the South of France in the eighties; light comes through the glass onto the floor and fills the room with color. I thought that it would be incredible to end the project with a life-affirming positive statement, so I designed a 16-foot stained glass piece."

Judy described another experience that drew her into working with glass. While working with a woman in Indiana, they experimented with industrial airbrushing of acrylic and enamel paints on the glass. Judy wasn't satisfied though, because it wasn't permanent. "I knew about glass painting, and I thought it would be very interesting to explore fired paint on etched glass. It was around the time that I met the Dobbins and discovered that they wrote the book on etching!"

THE COLLABORATION

From Norm's perspective, "We began talking with Judy, she gave us some sketches, and we discussed how they could be



Bony Reach, 5 1/2 x 7-inches, Fused and etched glass with brush and pen work, © Judy Chicago, 2006 - Fusing and etching by Dobbins Studio
 Courtesy: LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM
 Photo © Donald Woodman

This sequence shows stages of the 'Handout/Handsoff' project. The final piece consists of 2 pieces of 18 x 24 x 1/2-inch crystal clear glass pieces. Each glass piece has one hand multi-stage carved on it, which was then airbrushed with glass paints and fired in the kiln, to then be brush-worked with more glass paints and refired another 2 times. Both pieces will be displayed back to back to create one single art object.



Norm peels the resist for stage blasting.



Norm continues to peel the complex hands in stages



One of the hands completely blasted



The same carved hand with first layer of paints applied



All resist removed from glass prior to firing

done in glass, along with some ideas we had for combining etching and fusing in ways we thought hadn't been done before. We gradually developed more ideas, and the experiments looked promising. Much later, we realized there might be an opportunity to produce enough work for a show, and we began talking about collaborating.



Judy Chicago mixing glass paints in preparation for painting in her Belen, New Mexico studio
Photo: © Donald Woodman



Judy Chicago applying glass paint for the third firing of Handout/Handsoff
Photo: © Donald Woodman

me to look through the surface of the hands and explore issues of vulnerability, mortality and choice.

If you imagine the surface of the glass as the front, or the skin, and if you etch behind it, it allows you to see beneath the surface."

For their first show, all three collaborators, Judy, Norm and Ruth, have been pushing the 'edge' on the medium of glass, such as reaching for new ways to fire paint onto carved cast glass, in order to extend the realm of possibility in artistic expression. Collaborations are the cradle of new thinking, providing an experimental birthing ground for an expansion of knowledge and expression to arise from joint efforts.

"We were drawn to each other by our mutual position in life. We are all serious about having made artistic endeavors our life's purpose and are not naive about what that meant."

BRIDGES

Norm relates what it was like for him to bridge the worlds of fine art and glass, "The drawings I started with were Judy's artist sketches- loose and not highly defined. They were not what we usually create for etched or carved glass. Glass carving is very highly defined and precise, with sharp edges. Without knowing a lot more about what was behind the artwork, they were almost impossible to translate into glass. It took a lot of talking back and forth to get the sense of what Judy meant to convey. Where did the designs have to be tightly con-

THESE 4 PHOTOS SHOW THE PROGRESS OF THE 'SAPPHO' PROJECT, A REMAKE OF AN IMAGE JUDY CHICAGO USED IN HER LANDMARK INSTALLATION PROJECT, 'THE DINNER PARTY'. THIS PIECE IS 20 x 20 x 1/2-INCHES IN CRYSTAL CLEAR GLASS, MULTI-STAGE CARVED AND PAINTED.



Numbered resist on glass ready for multi-stage carving by Norm Dobbins.



The finished carved piece.



Judy applying glass paints to project.



Removal of resist after painting and prior to firing.



Ruth Dobbins (left) and Judy Chicago apply paint and do a 'quick-dry' while working on 'Sappho in Glass', an adaptation of one of the plates from Chicago's famous monumental installation, 'The Dinner Party'

Photo: Donald Woodman

trolled and where could they be loose? In other words, where was I supposed to cut the resist?"

The dialogue between the two artists proved enlightening to Dobbins, as Norm added, "While I expected her to want to control every aspect, she was open to my ideas in interpreting the designs. It was very freeing. Most of what I came up with she liked, but there were things that she wanted changed and she was great about explaining why. Judy's explanations, though, were not in glass etcher's terms, but in artist's terms, which I just had to learn to understand. This was a very unusual and challenging approach."

From Judy's perspective, this was an important area of negotiation that was critical to their success as collaborators. "I wanted Norm to 'translate' my drawings into the sandblasting. In other words, I wanted him to bring what he knew about blasting to bear on the image so that it would come to life. That was the meeting point. My drawing was a step in creating an image that couldn't be made any other way but in glass."

Norm expressed his growth of understanding, "It took me a while to get it through my head that a piece didn't have to be carved to completion, since Judy wanted the opportunity to add detail with paint that would be fired on later. She looked at the first couple of pieces I did and said something like, 'Hey, you didn't leave anything for me to do!' Now when I do a piece, I need to know just what will be painted and where to leave room for interpretation to her."



Judy Chicago applying glass paints to etched glass of Sappho plate design translated from The Dinner Party ceramic plate design, Belen, NM

Photo: Donald Woodman



Judy Chicago discussing coldworking of glass castings with Zdenek Lhotsky, present owner of the Lhotsky Glass Foundry



Judy Chicago, Ruth Dobbins and Steve Polaner, who supervised the castings, examining glass pieces at the Lhotsky facility.



At the Lhotsky Glass Foundry facility, outside of Prague, Judy guides coldworking through Steve Polaner (center), who translates her instructions for Robert Husek, a local artisan.



Glass castings prior to coldworking



Color samples of glass used at Lhotsky Glass Foundry.

This is another exemplary aspect of this triad's collaborative process, the willingness to do what it takes to bridge from one realm of understanding to another, and then keep exploring as they move to the edge of the known set of information, and eventually, take another leap from the foundation of their combined understanding.

Norm describes their work now, "We start with either a flat fused piece or a heavy cast piece of glass. Both Ruth and Judy supervised the casting of the pieces, made at the Lhotsky facility just outside of Prague [Czech Republic], at the original facility started by legendary glass artists, Libensky and Brychtova. Ruth fuses the other pieces here in Santa Fe from several layers of colored Spectrum or Uroboros glass for me to carve. Almost all the pieces will not only be carved, but will also be painted with glass paints and fired in a kiln. In using Judy's drawings there is always a creative challenge, both in figuring out the best approach to the artwork and then how to implement it technically. Discussion of the work is an ongoing key aspect of our partnership with Judy. Ruth generally applies the artwork to resist on the glass and cuts it out, and then I begin the blasting process. Sometimes I have to spend a few hours or days just looking at the piece, visualizing the blasting process in my head. I don't start until I can see it. After I start, I usually work until I am finished. I rarely stop in the middle with interpretation problems."

THE DANCE

Ruth offers her own compelling description of what it is like to be in the 'last throes' of working on the flat pieces, "Most people wouldn't have any concept of how concentrated these work sessions are. Judy and I discuss what we're going to work on and outline a plan. Next, the studio has to be prepared with all necessary materials close at hand; all exhaust and ventilation systems have to be functioning. Then we select the colors, mixing and straining them into storage containers, and filling the airbrush bottles. The carved glass piece has been prepared beforehand with the necessary frisket/resist to cover the areas, which need to be protected from the newest layer of paint. Judy applies paint, and I follow her motions with a hairdryer, drying each coat of paint before the next. This way we systematically work through the piece, covering and uncovering specific areas until all design areas are painted. All of this is happening while wearing a respirator for hours, which will only allow muffled communication. While we work, it is like dancing, anticipating each other's moves. This level of anticipation is very exhausting, since every strand of your being is at attention."

The choreography of these two artists' energies in such finely tuned in-the-moment application is a clear indication of well-matched creative expertise and a deep commitment to their pursuit. This is the alchemy of artistic passion, translated into action, to bring forth



Study for 'Flayed Arm # 3', 15 x 22-inches installed, by Judy Chicago, done in 2003. This piece is etched and kiln-fired painted on flash glass. The etching by was rendered by Dobbins Studio.



Study for 'Temporal Connection', 10 x 12-inches, by Judy Chicago, done in 2006. This piece is etched and kiln-fired painted on flash glass. The etching by was rendered by Dobbins Studio and it was 15 x 22-inches installed.



Musclehand', 15 x 21-inches, by Judy Chicago, 2006. Fused and etched glass with pen work - Fusing and etching by Dobbins Studio.

new understanding. Norm comments on what happens after he is done, "I am almost always amazed at how much additional visual information Judy and Ruth create with the painting and firing process, and how much it adds to a piece that I look at as being finished when I give it to them. They are able to add a sense of contour perception, almost like painting on sculpture." The synergy of all three definitely creates something greater than the sum of each of their parts.

THE ARTIST AS EXPLORER

Judy brings her lifelong exploration of artistic possibilities in many media to this collaboration. She is confident in her intuitive sensing, to choose a medium to explore, find the right partners and gain the working knowledge in order to realize the ideas that have galvanized her passionate pursuit of discovery.

Norm comments on some of the attributes of his collaborators, saying, "Judy is tenacious and never lets go of an idea until it is thoroughly explored and considered from all angles. Frequently, we discover different ways around a problem instead of having to discard the idea behind it. This helps develop our approach to the artwork and takes it further down the road. She's also a good listener and learns quickly when we need to explain the characteristics of glass as a new working medium. Ruth combines the seemingly contradictory qualities of being very well organized and efficient, with being very creative. As a child, Ruth lost the sight in her left eye, leaving her without depth perception, yet she always has excellent input on how to interpret 3-D carving in glass."

"The synergy of all three definitely creates something greater than the sum of each of their parts."

Each one brings decades of study, discipline and experience; mutual attributes that combined, wield an amazing strength and richness. Ruth offers her perspective, "Norm works his wizardry in glass by carving the image into the glass, or shading and surface etching it. Norm's personality is both very logical and good at creative problem solving, so for example, he helped figure out solutions to the complex problems we have come up against when repeatedly firing cast, carved and painted glass pieces with large differences in thicknesses."

Judy's experiments in this project began with an Artist-in-Residence at Pilchuck Glass School, a groundbreaking site for emerging expression in glass. While there, Judy tested whether paint could be fired onto



Photo: © Donald Woodman

Fused study #4 for Handout/Handsoff, 5 1/2 x 7-inches. Fused and etched glass with brush and pen work, © Judy Chicago, 2006- Fusing and etching by Dobbins Studio Courtesy of LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM



Photo: © Donald Woodman

Study #1 for Bony Hand, 5x7-inches, Fused and etched glass with brush and pen work, © Judy Chicago, 2006 Fusing and etching by Dobbins Studio Courtesy: LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM



Photo: © Donald Woodman

Bony Reach, 5 1/2 x 7-inches, Fused and etched glass with brush and pen work, © Judy Chicago, 2006- Fusing and etching by Dobbins Studio Courtesy: LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM

cast pieces and some Norm-etched glass pieces specifically. It was at this point that Judy first thought about simple images involving hands. Judy recounts, "I thought about how a hand gesture could mean a multiplicity of things." In only three weeks, she found herself thinking outside the edge of the technology.

Finding reliable information on how a paint could be fired on what materials was almost impossible to find. "It took a year and a half to solve the paint problem," according to Judy. Together Ruth and Judy tackled the issues and have since made many discoveries. Judy acknowledged her colleague with this statement, "Ruth has an incredible range of technical experience and background."

Even as they come down to the wire with the final pieces, mere weeks from the first exhibit, they are still on the edge of discovery, finding out how far they could go. From Judy's perspective, the focus was intense, "There's a precision in etching and casting that I like. You can't make mistakes with etching and casting. You can't. A mistake can't be incorporated into the image. [Likewise,] working with airbrush and glass paint is also incredibly demanding and challenging." As they approach final production, Ruth gives her account of what remained at this pivotal point. Her work in firing the painted cast pieces was a key aspect to be completed: "Finally, the pieces are waiting to be carved, painted and re-fired. My adrenaline meter is going up daily, as the firing of these pieces comes closer. The castings still stare me in the face, and soon enough I'll have to go at it with them again."

IT'S SHOWTIME!

It takes guts to be an artist. Even with years of training and learning creative 'poise-under-fire,' being out on the edge and pushing the limit leaves a mark. The thrill of discovery and fear of failure both run on the same circuitry and some days it can be a bit much to handle.

Despite the current peak of pressure, both Norm and Ruth have spoken to the effect this exploration is having; they are shifting daily priorities to redirect more of their

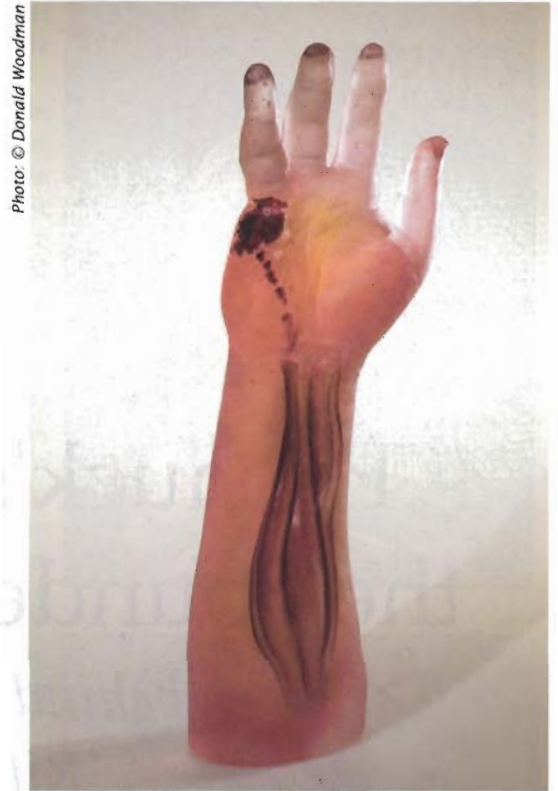
focus to the creative working partnership. In collaborating with Judy Chicago, they took a risk and decided to share some ideas that they had been holding onto, waiting for the right time for exploration. They decided to share them because, not only did they fit the needs of the project, but also they believe in Judy's integrity as a collaborator. One of the most unique techniques are the fused pieces made with different layers of colored glass that are then carved to reveal different colors in the carved areas and along the edges of the carving to reveal rich color detail.

Judy addressed their mutual hope that the exhibit would lead them to larger scale commissions. Her instinctive and witty description of their work thus far, was the pun, "...we've just scratched the surface!"

Life issues for everyone, the themes of vulnerability, mortality and choice are inherently evocative. Issues of vulnerability expressed through gestures of the hand provide a poignant perspective to explore for artists who make keen use of their own hands. As creative types, they also have to face issues associated with mortality; facing resistance, dread and not knowing the outcome in the work process each day. The life of any creative person is filled with the need for courage to make choices in one's work, such as what medium to explore and what subjects to pursue as points of expression. The working partners are now infusing their own life experience into the art of glass, bringing the richness of their combined acumen and the synergy of their creative involvement to a round of completion. It's not only the medium that is alchemically changed in the process, but the artist as well.

As frustrating and daunting as collaborative exploration can be, for these three, the call of creativity is undeniable. These partners in art all have a 'hand' in the outcome, as they unveil their discoveries in glass. The first exhibit of their combined synergy will be shown at the LewAllen Contemporary gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico from November 3 - December 31. The show catalog is being written by David McFadden, Chief Curator of the Museum of Arts & Design in New York City. The show is simply titled, *Chicago in Glass*. ❖

Donna Strong is a freelance writer living in Huntington Beach, California. She writes on the subjects of the arts, culture, creativity and spirituality. Visit her website at www.DonnaStrong.com.



Damaged Arm, 16 x 4 x 4-inches, Cast, etched and painted glass, © Judy Chicago 2006 - Firing and etching by Dobbins Studio. Courtesy: LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM