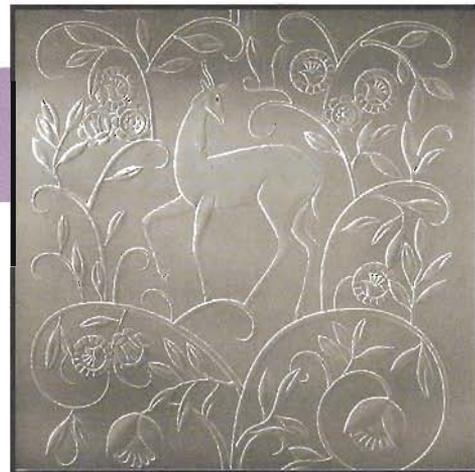


Professional Glass Consultants

by Colleen Bryan



Those who have any history in glass etching have likely heard of Norm and Ruth Dobbins. For over thirty years they've built a solid reputation teaching techniques and writing classic instruction books in the field. But while the Dobbinses' interest in teaching etched glass is well recognized, readers may not be aware of them as glass artists.

When Ruth and Norm discuss glass, they don't dwell so much on the intrinsic beauty of the material. That's a given, the beauty having drawn them to the industry years ago. Rather, they talk about chemistry and alchemy, geometry and tensile strength. They leverage substantial knowledge of the science and techniques of glass etching, as well as fusing and slumping, in the service of their art. This depth of understanding of the physical and transformative properties of glass is a sturdy foundation for their own artwork and makes them powerful collaborators with other artists who want to express their own ideas through glass.

Norm and Ruth own Professional Glass Consultants located in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Two major art commitments, an exhibition and a public works project, currently absorb their attention.

Judy Chicago Exhibit

The more involved of the two projects is a major collaboration with renowned artist, Judy Chicago. Chicago has exhibited fine art in many alternative media in the past including needlework, textiles, pyrotechnics, porcelain, paper, and even a few glass works. But none required the technical glass expertise of her newest concepts.

The Dobbinses met Judy at a gathering of glass artists north of Santa Fe in 2003. The three were soon talking about their philosophies and the challenges of large-scale glass work. The Dobbinses' backgrounds gave them practical experience and industry contacts with other noted glass artists and the major glass manufacturers. Each of these elements was essential to achieving Chicago's vision. So after examining their collective philosophies about art and glass, the three artists set out on a long-term collaboration.

Norm and Ruth focused on developing an approach for

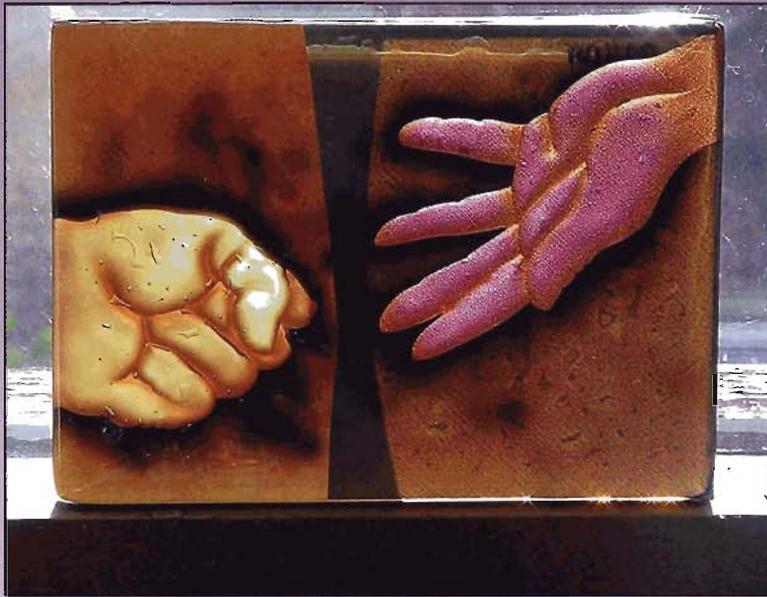
Chicago to use in expressing her art through glass. The culmination of their effort is an exhibition entitled "Chicago in Glass." The six-week show opens at the Lew Allen Contemporary Gallery in Santa Fe starting in October 2006. Information about the show and future venues in other cities can be found at www.etchmaster.com/judychicago and www.judychicago.com.

"Chicago in Glass" considers gestures and the ways that physical bodies are enlisted—often without our conscious awareness—to communicate thoughts, ideas, and commands through gesture. The show includes cast-glass and sculptured hands that have been deeply carved, painted, and refired. Several pieces depict layers of skin, muscle tissue, and bones of the hands as they combine and move in certain gestures to convey ideas. Some pieces in the exhibit are taken from previous projects; one large stained glass piece came from Chicago's Holocaust project on which she collaborated with artist Dorothy Maddy just prior to Maddy's death. But most of the objects are developed for this exhibit in close collaboration with the Dobbins team.

The works in the exhibit address similar imagery rendered in two completely different forms of glass. One collection of solid castings depicts life-size and larger hands; another collection is comprised of flat plates of layered, fused glass or crystal-clear plate glass.

If the backstory on the process is any clue, the exhibition itself should be exciting. Much of the work on "Chicago in Glass" has taken place at the edge of what is known about the media. "When we started this exploration, we ran into constant problems with the technology," remembered Ruth.

The first year and a half on the project was consumed with finding answers to technical questions: What is the maturation rate for a specific paint and color when used on a specific non-traditional material? How will the paints adhere to the changed surface texture of a sandblasted sculpture? Is the melting point for a given paint compatible with crystal? With cast glass? Which paint and surface combinations produce the desired transparency rather than opacity? Matching paints to get a specific color for basic sculptures, minimizing the size and



amount of bubbles created during casting and fusing—all of these things were a painstaking prelude to actually making art.

“We fuse our own slabs of glass in multiple layers of different colors throughout the thickness of the piece, stacking colors to make one solid piece of glass in a fused object,” Ruth Dobbins explained. Norm then blasts and carves images through varying depths of glass to effect color changes. Judy paints the pieces and Ruth refires them, sometimes three or four times, to permanently affix the paints.

During the first eighteen months, Ruth and Norm devoted themselves to making samples, experimenting with techniques and products, and recording results. Only then could they move ahead with implementing Chicago’s design. “In our third year of collaboration, we are *finally* actually working to interpret imagery within flat and carved pieces,” Ruth noted.

Norm and Ruth have invested themselves in a long-range collaboration with Judy Chicago, and they see the path as one that others in the glass industry could follow. “More and more fine artists will investigate the possibility of working in glass,” Norm posits. “Given the complexity of the processes, people who are knowledgeable about techniques and committed to solving problems will be in constant demand.” He further predicts that as fine artists emerge to work in glass, current glass artists will be challenged to focus more on art rather than settling for pieces that are simply pretty and decorative.

RailRunner Windscreen Project

A second large project underway in the Dobbinses’ studio is a major project for a New Mexico transportation district. This is one of the “Percent for the Arts” public works projects. The Dobbinses have a commission to etch windscreens for the



new light-rail system that will first connect Albuquerque to Santa Fe and then eventually extend to all of the cities in the Albuquerque-to-Colorado corridor.

The initial order for nine light-rail stops is for fifty-four windscreens to be etched on one-half-inch-thick, five-foot-by-seven-foot pieces of tempered glass. Well-known Albuquerque artist, Chuck Dunbar, created the images. Norm and Ruth translate them to glass, using etching and photoresist techniques on the largest scale possible. The first leg of the RailRunner project is scheduled for completion by the fall of 2006.

Working in a very large scale, dealing with the technical challenges of moving heavy glass and aligning complex, continuous imagery across multiple panels and thirty-five-foot stretches—these aspects make the job interesting to Norm and Ruth.



Acquiring Credentials as Problem Solvers

Success in projects of this scope requires more than a simple willingness to take risks and learn from them. Ruth and Norm each built solid and separate reputations on two continents for their glass work during the 1970s and 1980s. Their respective backgrounds give them the credentials to solve problems on the scale of their recent works.

Ruth brings masters degrees in art history and graphics as well as print-making that she earned from Marshall University in West Virginia. This training plus the academic credentials enhance her credibility with the rest of the art community. A native of Germany, Ruth and three partners established retail and wholesale supply companies in Europe. They sponsored professional workshops that introduced Europe to American techniques such as copper foil, fusing, and slumping. Ruth also launched American opalescent glass from Bullseye and Spectrum in Europe by using it in her commissions and selling it through her retail stores.

Norm, meanwhile, gravitated toward glass etching early in his career. After starting a stained glass studio and retail store in the early 1970s where he taught himself abrasive etching, he cofounded National Sandblast Systems. This was the first company in the world dedicated to supplying abrasive etching equipment to glass artists. He wrote extensively and traveled internationally teaching glass techniques.

By 1989, the couple married and

divested their respective businesses to concentrate on teaching glass-working techniques throughout the U.S. and Europe. They tallied as many as twenty-four weeks per year on the road. "We guess we've taught between five- and six thousand people from every state in the U.S. and thirty-five countries," Norm estimates. They built a world-wide reputation as experts on abrasive etching.

Eventually, Norm and Ruth decided to trade the extended travel for an established studio space. Both partners resumed making art along with teaching. They concentrated almost exclusively on etching because of its very good profit margins and relatively scarce competition. Still, the considerable diversity in their work offsets Ruth's propensity to be easily bored.

Anchoring the Creative Enterprise

As their business interests expanded, Norm and Ruth split the initial business into several parts. Professional Glass Consultants developed to house studio, commission, and consulting work and has operated for the past twenty-five years.

In 1999, the couple bought Aliento, a ten-acre horse property just outside the city limits of Santa Fe, moved their studio to the facility, and created Aliento Glass School, the educational branch of the business. The school operates from the 3,500-square-foot, fully-equipped studio/office complex in a former horse stable. The school's curriculum



encompasses twelve classes ranging from the basics of abrasive etching on glass to advanced techniques such as multistage carving and shading plus a number of related procedures such as gold leaf on glass, airbrushing or coloring etched glass, photographing etched glass, and etching photographs onto glass.

Since students needed a place to stay while taking classes at the studio, the couple created Aliento Bed and Breakfast from the 3,500-square-foot main residence for the horse farm. The site can accommodate up to seven individuals or couples in quarters ranging from economy rooms to large suites. At www.alientobnb.com, there is a complete description and photos of this artists' retreat.

The Dobbinses are still engaged in writing and publishing books and producing DVDs on glass etching techniques under the auspices of Vitrographics Publications. They also have a mail order business that supplies glass etching equipment and materials through their registered trademark Etchmaster.

Studio work occupies about one quarter of the couple's time these days, and that proportion is rising. Norm observes, "We find there are still relatively few people who etch on the scale and with the intricacy we do. There are many fascinating and complex techniques in glass etching, but they involve lots of experimentation and practice. Most people get stuck at an intermediate skill level. That is adequate to get most jobs done—even produce a good living—so

the artisan can stay there without a crying need to progress. On the other side of that divide, when a job demands more than an intermediate level of expertise, Ruth and I pick up a lot of our business."

Norm and Ruth Dobbins understand glass in an uncommon way, as artists and scientists rather than simply as crafters. "Glass is a seductive medium," Norm observes, "so pretty and intriguing. We love glass—pretty and ugly pieces alike—that expresses concepts and ideas beyond being purely decorative. That is the boundary where craft makes the leap to art." **PGQ**



**Norm and Ruth Dobbins
Professional Glass Consultants**

2442 Cerrillos Road, Suite 350
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87505
505-473-9203 (phone)
505-473-9218 (fax)
info@etchmaster.com
www.etchmaster.com