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Jesse Kelly

(American, b. 1976)

Not many people think of 1,200 degrees as cooling, but Jesse Kelly refers to such intense heat in that way when he describes the moment his glass sculptures take shape. When his art medium begins its life at 2,000 degrees, it's all relative. One also could use the word "relative" in connection with his path to becoming an artist, though not one based in spontaneity. "My mom, Ginger Kelly, is a glass artist and designer," he says. "I had been around glass since I was 10, but it wasn't an attraction. When I started working at the production studio where she worked, it was a physical job. I would make paperweights, ornaments, and oil lamps." The basic designs and production of between 20 and 30 products provided the Seattle-ite with "a great foundation for working with the material and a good design concept," he says.

More inspiring yet were his subsequent affiliations with two celebrated maestros of glass: fellow Washingtonian Dale Chihuly and Venetian Lino Tagliapietra. Jesse attended Chihuly's Pilchuck Glass School, where he became a teaching assistant, and then worked at the master artist's Boathouse studio. In addition to six years with Chihuly, he worked over the span of 12 years with Tagliapietra. "Lino Tagliapietra was a big influence on me — leaps and bounds as far as concepts and coloring," he says. In the early 2000s, Jesse traveled with his mother to the Czech Republic, where he showed a glass studio in Prague how to make her designs and, in turn, he learned Bohemian Crystal glass-blowing techniques.

His first signature glassworks were pears and apples sold by Nordstrom. Ultimately, the influence of growing up in California and Washington led him to more botanical creations — initially individual leaves and then clusters of leaves in large-scale plants. Tall agave and bamboo spears (up to 6 feet tall) serve as architectural designs that accent exterior spaces, as well as interiors. "The Northwest is gray, so I have been attracted to bright colors, and that has been a natural fit for the desert," he says. "My love of the material and the fact that I can control it — turn it into a liquid and add color and transform it into a beautiful piece of art — keeps me inspired. And I find satisfaction in creating something that will be around thousands of years."

Jesse regularly puts in eight-hour days at his 4,000-square-foot studio and showroom in north Seattle. "In a day, I can generally make two or three designs," he says. "I sell individual work, but I also am hired by other artists or museums to make something." In late 2017, for example, he made 400 glass

ornaments for Tacoma Glass Museum, turning out 100 a day. Concurrently, he was working on a commission for a chandelier measuring 9 feet by 5 feet with 135 individual pieces.

In his leisure time, the father of two boys enjoys playing shortstop in a softball league. As for an occupation that he could pursue if he weren't a glass artist, he figures it would have to be something that capitalized on his talking skills. "I could see myself being in real estate — or being a priest," Jesse says, though he finishes that statement with a chuckle that indicates he really only sees himself working with glass. "Art is deemed a luxury, but I feel it would be tough to go through life without art," he says.