

Curiosity Is Key

INTERVIEW WITH *Toots Zynsky*
BY *Jessica Shaykett*



TOOTS ZYNSKY IS A CREATIVE force: Over the past 40 years, she has exhibited in museums and galleries the world over, helped establish the Pilchuck Glass School, lived on several continents, raised a family, and invented an entirely new method of forming glass.

We checked in with the artist, who was elected to the American Craft Council College of Fellows in 2008, about a lifetime of exceptional creative expression.

Glass has been your primary medium for decades. What first drew you to it?
At the end of my freshman year at Rhode Island School of Design, I was prepared to leave – probably forever. I had not found a department that I wanted to major in; there was no glass department listed as a possibility because it was being introduced under the auspices of the ceramics department. I had already requested an official leave of absence – and had

decided to look into the study of medicine, which had always fascinated me – when I discovered the new glass studio.

The doors were open, the furnaces were roaring, loud music was blaring, everyone was dressed in wild drag and making a pretty dubious-looking film, amid a chaotic, spontaneous “choreography” with hot glass being swirled everywhere through the air. I was hooked.

The glass program was intense, energetic, demanding, and attracted students from diverse disciplines, which gave it enormous vitality. We all worked very hard and were required to learn and learn and learn about all aspects of the medium, along with being immersed in the larger world of art and design. Our exposure to art was vast. Glass was never really taught as a craft. Curiosity, exploration, and experimentation marked the program.

During this time – the early 1970s – you also studied

glassblowing at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts and helped establish the Pilchuck Glass School in Washington state with Dale Chihuly.

I spent only two or three weeks at Haystack in the summer of 1969, taking a workshop, but the learning experience there is always very concentrated. There are exceptional faculty and students of all ages – and it’s a very beautiful, inspiring place to be.

Building Pilchuck was a great challenge – and we did it – and it’s still there, bigger and better than ever. Having to rise to meet the challenges and figure out how to solve problems as they appeared was an invaluable experience. The sum of all of this – with RISD being the largest part – amounted to a great education, and that’s always the best preparation – for just about anything.

When did you begin experimenting with other materials?
It was part of my own personal evolution of experimentation and discovery that led me in mid-1972 to first create large sculptures from slumped plate glass combined with other materials such as wire, metal rods, plaster blocks, and nails.

In early 1973 I moved on to a series of video/performance works incorporating hot liquid glass, plate glass, and sound. Later in that year, I left working with glass for almost six years and often worked with cloth, sound, and barbed wire. There was one exception during that time. I met Tom and Marilyn Patti, and Tom invited me to use the glass kilns in his studio. I collapsed some sheets of glass so I could nail them to the wall like cloth.

It wasn’t until 1979, at the invitation of my longtime friend Therman Statom, that I began working with glass again, pretty much full time.

Let’s talk about filet de verre, the technique you developed in 1982. It involves fusing thousands of glass threads produced on delicate machinery that you and Dutch inventor Mathijs Teunissen van Manen created. The process has often been compared to drawing or painting. What led you to deviate from more traditional methods of shaping glass?
I “deviated” a long time ago! My initial introduction to working with glass was glassblowing because that was the only course offered in the beginning years of RISD’s

glass program. Many of us began “deviating” right away – and the program ultimately expanded to incorporate other possibilities.

By 1982, after having worked for several years forming glass by pretty much every other known method, I simply, step by step, began evolving this new method, which I named “filet de verre,” a play of French words combining “pâte de verre,” “fil” (thread), and the classic cooking term “filet.” It’s all about curiosity and satisfying curiosity. Technique interests me only as a means to an end.

You’ve traveled extensively and also lived abroad for 16 years, primarily in Amsterdam, but also in Paris, Ghana, and Italy. Did those experiences shape you as an artist?
Simply walking down the street every day shapes us all in some way – or perhaps “reshapes” is more accurate. Travel, and even more so living in other cultures, on other continents, expands our knowledge and understanding and inevitably leads to growth personally and artistically.

And, by the way, travel does not have to be expensive. All of my early travels were totally by the seat of my pants – on a shoe-

string. Those were some of my best adventures, too.

Has American studio glass evolved since you first came onto the scene? What, if anything, remains the same?
In the late 1960s and early ’70s, there really wasn’t much of a “scene” yet. It was the very beginning of what would become an ever-expanding work in progress. Everything about it has evolved.

Based on your diverse experiences, what advice would you give to those embarking on a career in the arts?
Shed preconceptions and learn as much as you can and never stop learning. Be open. Work really hard and focus on the work itself. Take risks. Be alert to new opportunities and make the most of them. Good luck is all around.

What’s next for you? What do you look forward to?
A lot of surprises.

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Jessica Shaykett is the American Craft Council librarian. The Minneapolis-based ACC Library maintains more than 3,000 artist files, with photographs, correspondence, catalogues, and more. Learn more at craftcouncil.org/library.

40 YEARS OF INNOVATION



1972
Untitled wall piece, thermo-formed glass, steel nails, 4 x 5 x .7 ft.



1979
Breaks and Re-locations, blown, thermo-shocked, and thermo-fused glass, 14 x 14 in. dia.



1982
AWOL, assemblage of blown glass forms, kiln-fused and slumped glass mesh overlay, 7 x 12 x 12 in.



1988
Untitled, from the Tierra del Fuego series, filet de verre, 6 x 11 x 11.5 in.



1992
Icebergs, filet de verre, 6.5 x 13 x 8 in.



2008
Aquila, filet de verre, 20.6 x 17.5 x 11.25 in.



2012
Turrito Mizimah, filet de verre, 18.25 x 14.5 x 10 in.



2012
Intermezzo, filet de verre, 14.4 x 18.1 x 13 in.