



Casanova in Action

Open Studio with Pat Casanova

By Peter McNiff

Photos by Aimee Christenson

G l a s s b l o w e r

Patrick Casanova

is the resident artist at the eponymous Casanova Glass Studio. Of course, that should be old news to anyone in the area that has even the slightest interest in the arts, since Pat has been at it for more than four decades. His work is very distinct: you could say that he is to glassblowing what Warren MacKenzie is to pottery.

Pat's glassblowing story starts back in 1968, when he was a freshman at UW River Falls. Like most freshmen, Pat was interested in just about everything. When his drawing instructor suggested he find a more spontaneous and reactive medium than pencil and paper, he did just that.

One cold November day Pat was walking back to his dorm from Rodli Commons when he came upon a couple of older students who invited him to blow glass with them that night in the basement of South Hall. After confirming that they were talking about an artistic process (it was the 60s after all) he agreed to join them, and the love affair began.

"I relate to glass as a painter," Pat says. "Every time I create something I start with a blank canvas." Pat says this with wide eyes, speaking with the enthusiasm of a twenty-year-old. It's refreshing to hear that the process hasn't become routine for Pat—if he continues to enjoy what he does, then the rest of us can expect to continue enjoying both the man and his art. "Some musicians work to perfect their technique, as is needed in a chamber orchestra," he says. "And that's great. Others, like Miles Davis or John Coltrane, who are technically proficient, work to develop their ideas through music . . . I lean that way."





3 We were lucky enough to meet with Pat while he crafted what would become a lampshade or possibly a bowl, if they decide not to drill it out. He visited with us as he produced the piece, explaining his actions as he went. After our interview and photo shoot it was clear to me that we should share that experience with you.

Days before we arrived Pat made a batch of glass from a blend of powders cooked in a 2,350 degree furnace. That furnace must remain consistently at that crazy high temperature for the glass to remain usable to Pat. This glass is not the stuff in our windows at home; it's specially formulated to have longer malleability.

4 Pat gathered a small amount of fresh glass on the end of a long metal rod called a blowpipe. He began layering the fresh glass on top of a cylinder-shaped piece of clear glass to create a larger, denser piece.

14 A few minutes later he fed the glass end of his blowpipe into the "glory hole" furnace. This furnace is different from the one used to make a batch of glass in that it has an apparatus that allows for quick access to the heat source. Upon pulling the glass from the glory hole, Pat quickly sat down at his main workspace.

He sits between two four-foot-long rails that he uses to rest his blowpipe perpendicular to the floor. He constantly rolls the blowpipe away from his body and then back toward himself with his left hand while manipulating the glass with his right hand. This constant motion keeps the pliable glass centered on the blowpipe much like a potter keeping their mud in the center of the wheel.

5 After adding another dollop of color, Pat repeats the ritual, blending the glass and growing the density. This time Pat lays the 2,100 degree glass on a flat metal surface and rolls the blowpipe back and forth, creating a cone shape. Next comes the drizzle of colors:

6 back at his primary workspace Pat holds his pipe across the support rails as his assistant brings a second pipe loaded with a small amount of very soft and super hot colorful glass. The new glass is introduced to Pat's mass and then pulled away. It creates a thin strand, like pulling chewing gum from your mouth. The overlay strand quickly disappears as Pat rolls the main mass of glass, causing the colorful strand to wrap around the mass. With Pat's masterful guidance, they repeat the dance over and over, creating unique and visually intriguing patterns.

That done, they move quickly: as the glass cools down, it becomes stiff and Pat clips it off. Pat then brings his glass mass back to the glory hole and reheats. With the blowpipe held horizontally across the two rails, Pat instructs his assistant to blow a little air into it. As the air flows into the pipe, Pat cups the piece in a handheld mold, and then with a small stack of wet newspaper. Later his assistant applies heat with a torch and switches pipes, allowing him to access the other end of the glass. He expands the current mass and adds a colorful rim of new glass.

After many rounds of heating and manipulating, then reheating and manipulating, Pat is satisfied with his work. He places it in a 930 degree oven that is programmed to cool down a few hundred degrees every few hours until the new shade is safe to have out in room temperature.

The next day is like Christmas for Pat. "I get to open presents on the day after we blow. Sometimes it's socks and underwear, but when it really comes together well, it's like opening that new toy that you've been wanting"

I expect that Pat is opening a new toy more often than socks and underwear at this stage of his career. He is one of the best in the nation at his craft: he displayed his art at the number one indoor show in the country held at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. just last month. This summer he'll be traveling to Bellville, IL for "Art on the Square," the best outdoor show in the country.

While significant, the fact that he's been at this for more than four decades and that he's invited to the best shows are simply facts. The truly moving thing about Pat Casanova's art is the incredibly tactile and hot process he goes through to create these delicate, fragile orbs. They seem to glow as though they're lit from the inside—it's as though he's somehow put a whole world in there.

Learning the facts and seeing the process were simply precursors to seeing the magic in the finished pieces. It helped me to understand the word "work" in the phrase "works of art," a phrase that is often used too loosely.

To call Pat's finished products works of art seems, if anything, an understatement. Masterpieces might be more in the ballpark.

Peter McNiff is the publisher and editor of Stillwater Living magazine and art enthusiast.

