

Tadashi Torii, co-founder and lead artist of Duckbill Studios, has no qualms about working with 2,000-degree molten glass.

GLASS FEVER

DUCKBILL STUDIOS EXPOSES ATLANTANS TO THE GLORIES OF GLASSBLOWING

BY BLANE BACHELOR

In a small building just east of Decatur that used to be a print shop, Karen MacKay slowly pulls a 4-foot steel rod from an oven-like piece of equipment called a glory hole. Affixed to the end of the rod is a molten lump of glass that MacKay is not exactly sure how she'll shape; after all, this is one of her first attempts at glassblowing, an art form she was first exposed to as a child when her parents would bring her to a studio in California.

"I like fire a lot," says MacKay, a newcomer to Atlanta, as she begins to shape the baseball-size mass by rolling the pipe back and forth along rails on a work bench. "Glass sort of mesmerizes me—the way it moves and the way you have to work with it. It's a very unique medium, but it's very tricky. You can work on something for an hour and then have it explode in the last three minutes."

Unfortunately, a sort of explosion is indeed in store for MacKay's evolving piece; fortunately, it happens a few minutes after she started instead of a few minutes from completion. With the help of another student, she transfers the cylindrical lump onto a blowpipe, which is a hollow steel rod with a pointed mouthpiece on the end. One puff too many, however, and MacKay's creation pops open like a hole in a gum bubble. Smiling and shaking her head, she heads back to the furnace, where she begins to "gather" another molten mass of glass, which sits in a crucible in liquid form at temperatures



Glass artists Meredith Masser (left), Tadashi Torii (right) and Alex Craig (foreground) collaborate on a piece during the Hot Glass Rodeo, Duckbill Studios quarterly demonstration series.

around 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit, and start the process again.

Two years ago, Seattle-based artist Dale Chihuly brought the art of glassblowing to widespread public recognition in Atlanta with his spectacular "Chihuly in the Garden" exhibit at the Atlanta Botanical Garden. But for the most part, glassblowing has remained an obscure niche in the city's arts scene, with just a handful of standout artists and studios in the area.

Tadashi Torii, co-founder, co-owner and lead artist of Duckbill Studios, where MacKay is taking lessons, is doing his part to change that. He's one of eight glass artists in the Southeast whose works are featured in the "Crossing Boundaries" exhibit on Concourse

E at Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, which runs through September.

Born in Osaka, Japan, Torii has been blowing glass since 1992, earning his living through commissioned pieces and gallery sales of his work, from vases to bowls to elaborate sculptures. He was a pioneering force in opening Duckbill Studios, only the second glassblowing studio in the Atlanta area. In February 2004, he joined up with a handful of friends and business partners, and about a year and a half later the facility opened its doors. Every piece of equipment on the floor, including the furnace and the glory hole that artists use to reheat the glass to work with it, was constructed by founders and their friends.

"The shop was founded on a basis for creative artwork or a more creative endeavor as opposed to production," says Meredith Massar, one of four artists who work with Torii at Duckbill Studios. "It's more about teaching and learning and trying new things. A lot of people here are really interested in continuing to learn, even Tadashi. He'll take suggestions from me, even though he's got 10

years [of experience] on me. We learn from each other."

For many enthusiasts like Massar, glassblowing's inherent dangers are part of its appeal. While an artist working with canvas might end up splattered with oils or pastels after a day in the studio, a glassblower—especially a novice—might end up with a severe burn. Protective equipment—Kevlar gloves, goggles or glasses and leather arm guards—is essential, and such gear, combined with the heat, creates saunalike conditions. The final product, with its dramatic swirls of color and ethereal bubbles, is a stark contrast to the raw labor, brow-furrowing concentration and sweat-inducing energy involved in creating it.

Since taking up glassblowing, Torii has also studied drawing, painting, ceramics and jewelry-making—but admits he feels most at home with a blowpipe in his hand. "It helped me in a way, when I just sit down and get away from glass and do something else," he says. "I can study the lines, the colors and concepts from these other mediums, and then come back to glass. It's my favorite—I've got glass fever." **SP**

TAKE A GLASS CLASS

GET STARTED: Duckbill Studios offers a variety of glassblowing classes and workshops. A three-hour beginning class, in which students craft a paperweight, introduces basic techniques, concepts and safety measures. Beginning classes start at \$90 per person, and classes are usually limited to four students to maximize instruction.

MORE INFORMATION: Visit www.duckbillstudios.com or call 404-460-2791. The studio is located at 3172 E. Ponce de Leon Ave, Suite D, in Scottsdale, just east of Decatur. Janke Studios, at 659 Auburn Ave., also offers beginner classes. 404-584-0305. www.jankestudios.com.

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