

tucson

MEET OUR *makers*

Expressing passion is demonstrable an infinite number of ways. For some, it's expressed by sharing a cozy meal on Valentine's Day. For others, it's conveyed by pursuing a lifelong ambition. Tucson-based glass artist Jason Marstall falls into the latter category. Keep reading for more of his story or click on the "What's New" link below for the latest and greatest updates from Tucson.

[What's New](#)



Meet Glass Artist Jason Marstall

For Jason Marstall, the glass is always half full.

That's because for the past 20 years, Marstall has been making glass art, a one-time hobby that became his profession when he discovered he had an "endless curiosity" for the art form.

Today, Marstall is the lead instructor and gaffer or master craftsman at Tucson's [Sonoran Glass School](#), an unassuming warehouse-style building on the southernmost end of the historic Barrio Viejo neighborhood, and he's one of three headliners at the new exhibition "A Cut Above" at [Philabaum Glass Gallery](#).

His contributions to the show come in the form of a series of murrine vessels he constructed using classic Italian techniques that were popularized in 16th century Murano, though the method dates back 4,000 years in the Middle East. Their vibrancy and beauty are a tribute to the complexity of the multi-step technique, which requires pulling cane, or long strands of glass that conceal intricate patterns, then cutting it into thin, cross-sections called murrines and fusing them together to form vessels.

“My newest series focuses on form and visual texture and creating patterns that I haven’t seen before,” Marstall said. “I aim to create new takes on classic techniques.”

Therein lies the virtuoso of Marstall – his ability to contemporize a many centuries old art form in a way that is subtle, yet distinctive and evocative.

He shows me several examples of his murrines on the day we speak. There’s a clear blowfish shaped vessel that’s decorated with brilliant yellow erratic streaks, each one representing an individual murrine. There’s a spirited blue one dotted with concentric, repetitive hexagonal patterns, as busy as it is bold. There’s a gunmetal grey one with white branches that I liken to the tree of life, a piece that’s starkness matches its brilliance.

“I made that one from a single murrine,” he tells me.

In total, he shows me more than a dozen. Remarkably, no two are alike, a differentiating factor for Marstall, who has strayed from mass manufacturing his intricate designs.

“I was once told to be a successful artist I need to find my look for my artwork so that it is instantly recognizable,” Marstall said. “That never really resonated with me because I’m always trying new things. I’m never really stuck on one thing, but I do have to do it in a series so that I can at least really dive into that technique.”



Marstall's portfolio is as diverse as his interests. He's crafted everything from simple glassware to vastly complicated human figurines, and everything in between. Once he's mastered a particular technique, he moves on to another, with the intention of revisiting and refining previous techniques later.

"Once I feel like I'm getting good at one thing, I'm also getting sick of it. So, then I switch gears and then try something totally different," Marstall said. "But I do end up coming back to revisit it with a new perspective."

For Marstall, "A Cut Above" represents the full-circle nature of his journey to glass artist. As a psychology student at the University of Arizona, he took courses at Sonoran Glass School, co-founded by Tucson's most notable glass artist, Tom Philabaum. Under Philabaum's tutelage, the Nogales, Arizona-native grew his craft from a hobby into a profession. As Marstall became more skilled, Philabaum asked him to join his team, a move that eventually led to Marstall becoming Philabaum's lead gaffer.

Marstall refers to Philabaum, a man who's known as the godfather of Tucson's fine glass arts community, as one of his most notable mentors. Though he has since retired, Philabaum's illustrious career as an artist included collaborations with contemporary glass luminaries William Morris and Dale Chihuly, and Philabaum also taught at the prestigious Pilchuck in Stanwood, Washington.

“Working for Philabaum, in a day you would make 50 tumblers,” Marstall said. “It seems like a repetitive thing, doing that over and over again, but it taught me a profound amount about the material itself.”



Though Marstall has fine-tuned his skill over time, he still considers himself a student of glass, and continues to learn from industry colleagues, including Steve Hagan and Mark Leputa, the two other artists featured in “A Cut Above.” Both are recent transplants to Tucson, who were drawn to the Sonoran Desert for a litany of reasons, not the least of which was their ability to rent the Sonoran Glass School’s hot shop to produce their artwork.

When asked why the exhibition’s title is “A Cut Above,” Marstall shared that Hagan and particularly Leputa are known for their post-production or cold work. Cold work is traditionally viewed as a means of putting the finishing touches on a particular glass piece. However, both men’s artwork emphasizes cold work.

“Both of their work has a significant amount of cold work, especially Mark’s. He’ll take it into the cold shop and do a massive amount of cold work, cutting

and grinding and polishing to change the shape and texture and optics of it,” Marstall said.

Unlike Hagan and Leputa, who Marstall refers to as professional artists because they make a living from crafting and selling their artwork, Marstall is foremost an instructor – at the school he teaches a variety of classes, mostly for beginner and intermediate level glass art students – though you’ll find his artwork for sale in several prestigious glass art galleries.

However, Marstall’s been toying with the idea of making the leap to full-time professional artist. If he does, he says he’ll still be very much involved in the operations of the Sonoran Glass School, in part because it has the makings of the more prominent glass schools in the country, and he wants it to remain on its current trajectory.

“The capacity and the staff that we have at the school is right up there with any of the other well-known schools,” Marstall said. “It’s just the community isn’t quite built up to the point of some of those other places yet, but it is growing as professional artists like Mark and Steve move to Tucson.”

Marstall’s influence on the school has helped to build further inroads into the glass arts community. Each year, Sonoran Glass School hosts a famous artist or two for a workshop. Last year, world renowned glass animal artist Grant Garmezy taught a week-long workshop at the school, bringing with him a cadre of followers.

“When you attract artists like him, it brings in students and people from the arts community who live in other places, and the community grows from there,” Marstall said. “We would like to get to the point where that’s happening many times throughout the year. At Pilchuck, they do that week after week in the summertime. It’s a goal of ours at the school to offer something similar in Tucson during the wintertime.”



Like What You Read?

Share our Meet our Makers Newsletter with your friends in the media, who can sign up by clicking the button below.

Newsletter Sign Up



Copyright © 2024 Visit Tucson, All rights reserved.
115 N Church Ave, Tucson, Arizona 85701

Want to change how you receive these emails?
You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe from all communications here](#).