

## Interview / Larissa Blokhuis

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*Larissa Blokhuis is doing some wild stuff with glass. My favourite thing she says is that contrary to popular (amateur) belief, glass does not behave in random ways. The artist can very palpably be in control of the material. A dedicated glass artist for over 5 years now, Blokhuis has taken the earth and rendered it in this series with varying levels of abstraction. While the sculptures may not precisely resemble the bushes, flames, smoke, animals, buds, jellyfish, branches, water and other fragments of Mama Nature that inspired them, the glass functions as an apt medium to depict the tone or feeling of the forms. It's a stroll through a sort of futuristic forest. The sculptures are sometimes bulbous, strange, but they seem familiar and organic the way earthy matter does.*

**Sad Mag: You work with glass in some truly unique ways. How did you come to feel like glass was primarily the medium for you?**

**Larissa Blokhuis:** When I was entering the BFA program at Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD), I decided to take glass because it was so unique. I didn't think there would be many other opportunities to learn glassblowing. I knew that if I decided to use other materials after graduating, I would have more varied opportunities to develop skills related to those mediums.



Larissa Blokhuis and Christine, a preparateur at Leigh Square.

Glassblowing is a skill that takes a lot of practice. You can learn quite a bit from watching, and from discussing with other glassblowers, but ultimately it comes down to hours spent working in the studio. A pet peeve of mine is when inexperienced glassblowers say that the glass behaves in a 'random' way. When you spend enough hours working with glass, you realise that glass is a consistent material, and what changes is the attention of the artist or craftsperson. When you reach the point of feeling like you understand the material, it's hard to turn your back because it takes years to get there. I have recently enjoyed experimenting with new materials, but glass makes each piece come alive. Blown glass is a rare element in sculptural work, and I feel it sets me apart.

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**SM: There are lots of forms in your work that resemble nature and do well balancing a combination of hard and soft materials. How would you describe the intention of your practice at this moment in time? How have you seen it progress since you began?**

**LB:** When I first began blowing glass professionally, I was working in a studio that was very different from the one I'd learned in. The glass was a different brand, and the peculiarities of the heat and working time were something to get used to. So my intention was centred around trying to re-learn things I had felt I had already learned before I graduated. I wanted to be good enough to work efficiently, and I was very focused on glassblowing. In those first years I was a bit lost, regurgitating ideas I had in school and trying to figure out how to take art ideas and make sellable objects.

In 2011, I took a 3-week intensive glassblowing class at Pilchuck [Glass School], and it completely changed my way of working. It's so strange to think now that I needed to be reminded that I am an artist who blows glass, not a glassblower. The difference is that as an artist who blows glass, I give myself permission to work in any medium. Before the 2011 class, I was too focused on glass, wanting everything I made to be pure glass, that it caused stagnation in my creative process.

Although the class I took was glass-centred, I think what really helped me was being out of my familiar surroundings, and immersed in a community of artists. While in art school I was in a happy art bubble, and when I graduated I was out on my own. When stagnation occurs it can be difficult to assess the situation and figure out what needs to change.

The intention of my practice now is to create work that excites me. Since the 2011 class, I have developed new concepts, separate from the ones I used in art school. I feel that I have found my adult voice as an artist in the last few years.

**SM: Are there any glass or mixed-media artists in particular that you would say have influenced your work?**

**LB:** In terms of technical possibilities, I have been influenced by artists around me, artists who I have worked with, TA-ed [teacher's assistant] for, and assisted. Each artist usually has a specialty and a particular way of working. Although I don't incorporate every technique I see, working with many other artists helps me build on my understanding of what is possible.

Themes of my work are influenced by a desire to learn about the world. I watch documentaries, read articles, and do research before or while developing my visual concepts.



Nature is one of Larissa's inspirations.

**SM: How does the experience of teaching effect your personal practice, if at all?**

**LB:** Teaching has made me realize how much I do without thinking. As well, performing a task and explaining that task are two separate skills. Teaching has made me think more technically about why I do certain steps, because I will have to explain what I am doing and why.

One of my teachers at ACAD told me that subtle movements are what make a good glassblower. When I am working as a TA, I have to focus on the subtle movements of the teacher to replicate them for the students, and I have learned from each teacher I've TA-ed for.

In terms of the work I'm interested in creating, teaching hasn't had much influence because concept development hasn't been part of the directive for any class I've taught or TA-ed.

**SM: Would you say that the classes you offer are more oriented around technique or concept? Tell us a little about that approach.**

**LB:** At this point, I have taught and TA-ed beginner/intermediate glassblowing mostly to hobbyists. My goal in learning to blow glass has always been to use glass as an artist, but glassblowing is a technique used by artists and craftspeople. The classes I have taught and TA-ed have mostly happened outside the context of any long-term course of study at art school, and have therefore had craft-focused curricula. I don't find it useful to push concept on students who may not have the same motivations as me. I am always happy to discuss concept with students, but many are excited by the material and challenged with the heat and motor skills needed for glassblowing. Concepts are more easily pursued after skills are developed past the beginner/intermediate stage. I don't want new students to feel discouraged by the gap in what they want to make vs. what they are capable of as beginners. I believe that anybody who can do the basic steps of glassblowing can develop their skills until they are masters, but it depends on the dedication of the student.

**SM: What is the definition of the collaboration here with Cheryl Hamilton? What has it been like to work alongside each other on this exhibition?**

**LB:** For several years I worked at New-Small and Sterling on Granville Island, which shares an interior wall with Cheryl's studio, ie creative. When Cheryl and her studio partner first moved to Granville Island, she was mesmerised watching David New-Small blow glass. She decided to learn how to blow glass, and has worked at New-Small and Sterling's studio developing her skills for about 10 years. We had casual interactions for a while, and when I needed help hosting workshops at New-Small's, I asked her if she was interested. Since teaming up for the workshops, I have also started to learn some metalworking skills from Cheryl. She is a very accomplished metalworker, the only full-time TIG welder on Granville Island, and has been making public art sculptures with her studio partner for about 20 years.

We are each showing our work as individuals in "Growing Connections," so our collaboration has had more to do with sharing skills and information. When I was accepted for this exhibition, I was also asked to select an artist to exhibit with. I knew Cheryl would be a good choice because she is a dedicated artist. She works hard and does what it takes to make things happen, while maintaining a generous spirit and a sense of humour.

**SM: What can people expect to see at this particular exhibition?**

**LB:** This is an opportunity for the public to see Cheryl's 2D work. She has established herself as a sculptor, but her skills are diverse and she paints and draws as well. This work is very personal for her, and is not shown frequently. Her 2D work draws on internal organ forms, interpreted in stark black and white or wildly vivid colours, utilising her great cartooning abilities.

My work is part of a relatively recent exploration of using mixed media elements. I combine glass, ceramic, wool, polymer, concrete, wood, steel, and anything else I think will work to make forms which imitate parts of existing or extinct organisms. I re-organise those parts and add imagined elements to create new forms. Some bizarre-looking forms have evolved throughout the history of Earth, and so many new forms are possible.

*Larissa Blokhuis is currently exhibiting in tandem with Cheryl Hamilton at Leigh Square Community Arts Village in Port Coquitlam. The show is called Growing Connections, an expression both of their comparable fascination with terrene forms as well as of the cross-over and knowledge-sharing between each of their individual practices. The gallery is open: Mon, Wed (10:00am to 6:30pm); Tue, Thurs (10:00am to 7:00pm); Friday (9:30am to 6:30pm); and Saturday (12:00pm to 4:00pm); closed on Sundays. Visit Larissa online [here](#) and Cheryl Hamilton [here](#).*

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