

# Contemporary Canadian Glass

Magazine of the Glass Art Association of Canada

## Red Deer College Summer Series

October 15, 2012

By: Larissa Blokhuis

In 2007, I took a summer glassblowing course at Red Deer College. It was an incredibly fun experience, blowing glass from 9 a.m. until 8 p.m. As a student, I just enjoyed the experience of learning new techniques, trying out new ideas, and practicing the basics. I didn't put much thought into what was going on behind the scenes. This summer, I got the chance to see behind-the-scenes as a TA for Jeff Holmwood's course, "Advanced Glassblowing for Beginners."

Jeff Holmwood studied glass at the Alberta College of Art + Design from 1990 - 1994, and has had an active career as a glass artist since then. He has been at Red Deer every summer since the mid 90s, first as a student, then as a tech, and now as a teacher. He teaches two one-week courses back-to-back, so that students can take both courses if they like. We did have two repeating students, and several students who have taken Jeff's courses before.

I found out that Jeff was in need of a TA, and I jumped at the opportunity. Jeff, myself, and three techs (Cailey Buye, Paul van den Bijgaart, and Jie 'Amy' Yang) worked to make sure the students had all the support and instruction they needed. We used so much glass that the techs had to charge the furnace every night. Jeff's enthusiasm and energy pushed the students to go big, go complex, go murrini. With such a high number of teachers, I feel we had a successful run at catering to everyone's different learning styles.



Photo Credit: Larissa Blokhuis. Photo Caption: Calm action in the hotshop.

Jeff and the morning tech arrived before class every morning to light up and ensure the equipment was working and the benches were all set up. All five of us did demos and worked with students individually. Jeff's experience at Red Deer College has taught him that there is always a mix of beginners and advanced glassblowers; the course must be adjusted for each student's different skill level.

Although class ended at 4 p.m., Jeff stayed late every day to continue working with students. He ensured that every student had the opportunity to make at least one murrini piece, with murrini he brought from his personal practice. After shutting down for the night we often gathered at Jeff's residence to see each other's artist slide shows, with the night tech ducking out occasionally to charge the furnace. Many of the students were quite accomplished in other areas such as ceramics or painting.

One of the students with no previous glass experience, Carlie Marsh, had this to say about her experiences in the class:

"I decided to take a glass course because I wanted to try something I had not done before. I am currently a Fine Arts student at Red Deer College, so I have a good general knowledge in many different types of artistic media. I wanted to expand my artistic horizons from the typical drawing and painting classes, to something that I had no experience or knowledge in. And for me, that was trying glassblowing.

"I had first seen glass art in Seattle, and was immediately inspired by the forms and colours that gracefully became a unique expression of an artist's ideas. Being in ceramics at RDC helped me to get an idea of how glass artists may have

created pieces, but after trying it, I realized how far from ceramics it was. I expected it to be a lot easier than it was. All the experienced glass artists make it look so easy. It was hard! But I enjoyed the challenge of it. I think the difficult part is having to work quickly and with such precision. I also learned how much of a team experience it is. You are always working with someone, if not many people, communicating and creating together. All other art up until now had been done by myself, and glassblowing really opens your eyes to collaborative work.

"I definitely think what I learned from the course will carry over to my other art. I learned so much about how important communication is, and the possibilities created while working with others. It really opens up more opportunity for inspiration. I think I am going to take that with me, just learning and feeding off of other artists and their advice. It helps so much, and it really makes you want to create stuff ... just make the most of everything.

"The teachers, technicians and assistants were all really, really helpful, especially in the beginning. When you sit down at the bench for the first time with blazing hot glass on a punty, you don't really know what to do with it. You are just fixated on having hot glass and not really on what to do next. By the time you're done thinking "Man, this is really hot!", the glass has already cooled down. It happens so fast! The teachers and assistants really guide you and help you to multitask, and keep you from falling into the "staring at hot glass" mind frame. They keep you moving to the next step, and that in itself is a big help in reaching your goals. If you don't know what to do next, it's hard to do anything by yourself. Once you know the steps, they can help you with your own ideas and give you inspiration with demos and their own creations. That's when it all comes together, and that is when it gets awesome.

"If I had to share anything about my experience, I would just say that keeping it fun and safe makes everything that much more awesome. You can't get attached to something too much, because odds are, something is going to flop. That is okay though, it is all part of the experience. And that is what helps you learn, helps you to be better. It's the experience you invest in.  
"My advice ... don't wave a hot punty around like a mad man ... that just scares everybody. If you want to be in the business of scaring people, directing horror films is where it's at.

"Overall, I had a great time with the people at the glass course. They made everything fun. It was challenging at times, but that is why I think people fall in love with it. I am going to do it again, I'm sure. Seeing the journey you take through the pieces you create in the end just shows how much you can improve and the potential you have to do more. It is exciting! Everyone has to try it or at least watch it. It'll change you. Just do it."

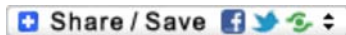


Photo Credit: Larissa Blokhuis. Photo Caption: Jeff's murrini.

As a teacher, it was very rewarding to work with Carlie and the other students. It was great to see someone develop new skills and understanding because of my instruction. Carlie has great potential in the arts world, and now thanks to the whole team at RDC this summer, she has a new set of skills for working with glass.


The summer series team helped to create an environment of learning and creativity that will positively affect the practices of current art students, whether they choose to pursue glass or not. For those just looking to try something new and have fun, I feel we increased appreciation of the skill involved in glassblowing. Overall, being a student and being a TA were both great experiences. I recommend both to anyone looking for a little kick-start to their creativity.

Larissa Blokhuis attended ACAD and graduated with a major in glassblowing in 2008. She currently works at New-Small and Sterling, where she blows glass weekly. Larissa has also attended Red Deer College in 2007 and Pilchuck in 2011. She looks forward to developing further as a glassblower and gaining more exhibition experience. [blokhuisglass.weebly.com](http://blokhuisglass.weebly.com).



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1.  *Jamie Gray* says:  
[October 17, 2012 at 10:19 pm](#)

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