

Ice and Fire

Inside glass artist David Ruth's playground of color trails—undersea worlds, astral planes and abstract paintings

GLASS CAN BE A CRUEL LOVER.

For David Ruth it began with infatuation. He created his first glass mosaic at age nine—and still owns and treasures it. Sure, his interest drifted. But, by the time he'd hit college, glass was back—more mosaics at first, very part time, then stained glass.

Unlike most studio glass artists of his era—this was the 1970s and the studio glass movement was less than two decades old—Ruth never took to blowing glass, which was all that was taught, all that almost everybody else was doing. His desires were elsewhere.

“The idea of melting glass,” he recalls, “just opened up this whole different world.”

He remembers watching in Los Angeles as the Basque-French artist Roger Darricarrere, a hero of the Resistance during World War II, poured molten glass from a crucible into a mold, with just a smidge of cobalt included.

“The cobalt would concentrate on the bottom, and as it poured it would leave a trail of color wafting through there, or variations in the color, or shading in the color. And if you looked inside these pieces, it was like,” Ruth says, pausing, “it was like a mineral. There's a whole world of interest in there.”

Yes, the romance was back.

“In 1974, [Darricarrere] showed me how to make the colors, and I saw the depth that could be created in a thick glass body,” Ruth has written. “...I gazed for hours into the small blocks [of glass], looking at the little world inside the best of them.”

In the years since, Ruth, who works and lives in an East Oakland warehouse-turned-studio, has developed a way of working in glass unlike that used by any other artist.

It involves his making sinuously shaped colored glass ‘trails,’ each a foot or more long, that he surrounds with clear glass in a furnace. The works are fired, and then polished, to create sculptures whose interiors suggest undersea worlds, astral planes, abstract expressionist paintings—or images of the inner mind.

“Interior space is not something that sculpture had dealt with before,” Ruth

says. “For years I felt that by using glass I had a kind of a unique playground where, inside of a solid object, I could have kind of an abstract storyline going on.”

“There's kind of a world inside,” he says.

Ruth expresses surprise that no other glass artist, to his knowledge, works with glass trails.

“Glass is very sensitive to how it's worked,” he says. “Each different way of working and technique you use on it leaves its mark. That's why my work looks like no one else's, because no one



else uses this technique.”

“He's a pioneer,” says David Wagner, a longtime glass artist, friend, and a consultant to glass artists nationwide and in Canada.

“David was really pivotal” in discovering techniques for hot and warm glassmaking, techniques that have been popularized in books by some of the glassmakers who worked with Ruth during the early years, Wagner says.

“He has a unique method of casting [glass], putting 3-D imagery into big slabs of glass, and then polishing them out. It's pretty interesting,” he says.

“He does good work.”

And Wagner is not surprised that no one else does what Ruth does.



MELTING GLASS. Left: David Ruth stands alongside his Light Marker Series: ‘Tabueran,’ ‘Pinaki,’ ‘Teraina.’ Made of glass and stainless steel, 120 inches. Top left: Pouring hot glass into a mold. Above: ‘Tega’: cast and polished glass, stainless steel, 47 inches.

“He's got the machinery and techniques he's developed over a long time. So I'm not surprised,” Wagner says. “It's hard to do, it's really hard to do.”

“He's got one polisher, I call it the tombstone polisher, that's a big-ass, expensive machine. Very few people have that machinery and expertise.”

As a consultant to glass artists, Wagner says, “I've been in most [artist] glass studios in this country and Canada. I haven't seen anything like David's studio.”

David Ruth may love glass. But does glass love him back?

It can be a moody material, hard to work with, as heavy as concrete but much more fragile, more unforgiving.

“The failure rate on these pieces is not insignificant,” Ruth says, leading a



tour of his studio, filled with furnaces of his own construction, one of which can top 3,200 degrees Fahrenheit.

Certainly it's been a difficult relationship. Unlike most of his compatriots in the early 1970s, who were blowing glass with pipes, Ruth was exploring different ways of working with glass, first making his own stained-glass sheets, then creating thick glass sculptures—and encountering new problems.

What's it like to mix differently colored glass, each with a different ‘expansion coefficient?’ “It's glass,” Ruth says, “so they have to match really closely or they'll expand or contract apart.”

Cooling down also proved a problem. They call it ‘annealing,’ very slowly cooling glass to prevent cracking. With

small, blown objects like bowls, this can take a day or two. With larger objects, Ruth found, it was taking five days, ten days—months, depending on size.

No one at the time was annealing as long as Ruth was.

“The actual, physical making of the piece is expensive,” Ruth says, noting that it can cost \$100 a day to keep the furnace burning and up to \$3 a pound for the raw glass.

Ruth's interest in glass began as he was growing up in two gorgeous, glass-walled Berkeley homes designed for his parents, both city planners, by their friend, the architect Donald Olsen, known for his austere but witty interpretation of International Style.

“I was obviously highly interested

mural for the hotel restaurant at Tokyo DisneySea. “It was a fantastic experience in just every way,” he recalls.

Despite that success, Ruth says, “I've never really made any money” as an artist. But Ruth's career as an artist has provided him access to the raw materials, kilns, and other equipment needed to work in the field that he loves. “I've survived,” he says, “and I've lived to do it again.”

Next up for Ruth is a return to his project on Antarctica, which he toured in 2006 thanks to a National Science Foundation grant, making casts of rocks and glacial ice.

Now he's turning the casts into glass and working on a potential museum show involving photos and videos—filmmaker Werner Herzog, also on the



ROCK & ICE. Above left: David Ruth in his Oakland studio working on one of his Antarctic sculptures. Above right: Ruth's art prominently showcased in the window of architect Don Olsen's East Bay home. Top left: ‘Nebula’: cast polished glass and bronze, 50 inches. Left: ‘Kirbati’: cast, carved, and polished Pyrex and concrete, 44 inches.

in mid-century modernism,” Ruth says. “I saw the possibility of making glass pieces that expressed some of that heroism and character and expression.”

Ruth has found good times as well as heroism in the arms of glass. A residency in Bangkok, lectures and workshops in Europe and Israel, three years in France, making casts of sand patterns at Crown Memorial State Beach in Alameda.

“I'm getting paid for doing my job [while] hanging out at the beach? What could be better? It's the artist's life,” he says.

He has galleries showing his work, has done public and private commissions, does work for other glass artists and interior designers, creates custom tabletops, and recently has been polishing the damaged glass top of a Noguchi table for a client.

His favorite job ever?

A hundred-foot-long undersea glass

trip, provided the camera—and his own immense ice-like constructions of glass, steel, plastic wrap, and silicone.

“The idea of preserving these remarkable artifacts of the South Pole, icebergs in glass, that's just amazing,” David Wagner says.

Ruth loves the surfaces of his Antarctic sculptures, the way they work in the light. They may not have the visual pizzazz of his interior world sculptures, he says, but they possess “philosophical and conceptual depth. They have the potential to start a conversation that is existential.”

“You can't go to the Antarctic without thinking about [global warming],” Ruth says. “It's the interface between rock and ice.” ■ —Jack Levitan

Photography: David Toerge, Dave Weinstein, Scott McCue; and courtesy David Ruth

• For a gallery of David Ruth's glass art, visit davidruth.com