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## For the Sake of Art: Risk and Reward at 2,000 Degrees

### Neighborhood Joint

By GLORIA DAWSON SEPT. 1, 2016



Even when temperatures reach 90 degrees, a certain type of New Yorker will choose to stand next to a 2,000-degree furnace. This is a glass blower. Since few of them are able to set up shop in their apartments, many head to UrbanGlass, which started in 1977 as an artists' co-op in SoHo called the New York Experimental Glass Workshop. Under its current name and at its current location in Fort Greene, UrbanGlass gives glass artists, and those who try to be, access to the expensive and enormous equipment they need.

"Studio space in New York is a nightmare," said Cybele Maylone, the executive director of UrbanGlass. "If you add glass to that, it's impossible."

But it is not just access to equipment that keeps artists coming here. Glass blowing is often a collaborative art.

"Painters can be secluded for years — they don't need these facilities; they don't need help," said Moshe Bursuker, who was at UrbanGlass on a recent afternoon. "That's sort of what makes glass blowing so unique. We rely on each other and the space. It's a very social environment."

Recently, Mr. Bursuker was collaborating on a commissioned project with Joshua Raiffe, a "freelance glass blower for hire," who works at UrbanGlass as many as five days a week.

Over the roar of the furnace and between frequent stops to gather more molten glass, Mr. Raiffe explained the importance of trust in his profession. "You've got a lot on the line at any moment," he said. "Even when it's done, it can still break."

That afternoon, Mr. Bursuker sat spinning a blowpipe tipped with fiery glass while Mr. Raiffe blew into the hollow pipe to expand the glass into the vase-like sculptures they were creating.

"It's a high-risk, high-reward medium," Mr. Bursuker added.

New glass artists often need to overcome anxiety, said Suzanne Peck, an artist and a teacher at UrbanGlass who was working nearby. She will be teaching Introduction to Glassblowing and Body Mechanics, a class to help students learn to move safely around the delicate, dangerous materials.

"I've been teaching for over a decade, and I think I've met two natural glass blowers," Ms. Peck said. "It's a great neutralizer. The rest of us have to learn by practice and paying attention."

While glass art is most often associated with large sculptures and vases produced with the help of massive furnaces, the medium takes various forms, all of them explored at UrbanGlass.

Barbra Frankel, a textile artist, had come to UrbanGlass for a stained-glass course and was working on her project during studio hours. To create a dragonfly, she had recently spent hours cutting various pieces of colored glass.



"Much easier said than done," she said. "I came looking for a challenge, and I certainly got it."

Still, the experience had been rewarding. "It's very far out, very meditative and very blissful," Ms. Frankel, 66, said. "You kind of find yourself."

At the nearby flameworking shop, Roxann Slate used a blowtorch to coax thin pipes of colorful glass into a bead shaped like a cat's face. Other works of hers — a Buddha, a robot, an alien — were on the table next to her.

"UrbanGlass allows me to be a practicing glass artist in New York," said Ms. Slate, 29, who has been making her living as an artist for the past two years.

In addition to her bead creatures, she has a line of sophisticated clear-glass jewelry. She sells her work online, at museums and in the store on the first floor of UrbanGlass.

"I try to hit all the aesthetics, all the price points," she said. "I live in Brooklyn. I've got to pay rent."