

HOT ART

"I like how the glass responds to process. Its physical properties are known. Once understood, they can be reliably counted upon. Yet it is uncompromising if you violate its rules."

Tom Hower



Glass artist Tom Hower develops a piece of glass into a vase. The "glory hole" radiates heat with its temperature sitting about 2,200°F.

Hower's passion for art and science unite in glass work

Marion artist donates works to local gallery for online August auction

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS
Staff

The chance to help advance technology to allow instant internet access anywhere in the world opened an opportunity for a Marion man to learn an art form that can be traced back to the first century B.C.

Now, Tom Hower has brought the craft to Marion.

In what appears to be a simple garage sits a piece of equipment dubbed the glory hole that when in use sits at 2,200°F. Another contains about 40 lbs. of molten glass. Coming out of the studio, a 90-degree day feels cool.

From the combination of that intense heat and technique and artistry comes fragile beauty — hand-blown glass creations.

Hower has lived in Marion since the early 1980s when he came to work with Brunswick, now General Dynamics. A few years ago, Hower changed career paths and accepted an opportunity to work for Kymeta, a Bill Gates start-up in Seattle that's working to develop an antenna that will provide instant internet access anywhere in the world. Hower envisions it on top of a vehicle to help rural first responders connect or doing the same for a ship in the middle of the ocean.

Pre-pandemic, the work regularly took Hower to Seattle. The Washington state city just happens to be one of the world's glass blowing capitals.

"I've always had a passion for glass blowing," Hower said. The combination of art and science appealed to the engineer. "Glass is predictable," he reflected, "while humans are not."

In his artist statement, Hower says, "I like how the glass responds to process. Its physical properties are known. Once understood, they can be reliably counted upon. Yet it is uncompromising if you violate its rules."

Hower's journey took him to Pilchuck Glass School



Glass

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There and at other studios, he was able to study under several instructors for three to four years. Even today, he still frequently meets with one instructor via Zoom.

Traditionally, glass blowing, Hower said, is a team sport. To practice the art here, he had to add tools and techniques to blow glass alone. Instead of having a partner to do the actual blowing of the molten glass, Hower uses a blow hose.

With all the Seattle studios closed now due to the pandemic, Hower reflected, "I'm fortunate to have my own studio. He built all the equipment in it. Noting that Marion isn't close to glass studio suppliers, he said, if it breaks, "I can fix it."

Calling the COVID-19 pandemic, The Great Pause, Hower said, he's used the time to investigate different colors.

The process, Hower said, begins with molten glass that he blows, inflates and shapes – mostly into open vessels. From color to the glass, he said, "Everything comes from the earth."

The key, he said, "is to control the temperature, to keep the glass happy."

Throughout the process, Hower said, numerous surprises develop. With a grin, he added, "sometimes they're pleasant."

No matter the final object – bowl, vase, drinking glass, pitcher or wall hanging, Hower explained, "It all begins with a bubble."

From that initial bubble, a unique object will be created.

"Working with hot glass is limitless in its combina-

tions of form, composition, color and pattern," says Hower in his artist statement. "Each glass artist brings their own unique artistry. Each piece has its own unique characteristics."

Over the last 500 years, Hower said, the tools of glass work have changed little. As he made a vase on a recent Wednesday, he used wet newsprint, a wooden paddle, and giant tweezers to help shape the hot glass into his vision.

The artisan shares images of his work at www.tomhowerglass.com. However, he's adamant on this point: "I don't sell my art. I give it away. I'm not in it for the money, just the passion."

This month, Hower is giving several pieces of his art to the Appalachian Spirit Gallery in Marion to be auctioned online to raise funds for the non-profit.

Anne Hull, a coordinator for the gallery, is excited by the prospect.

Glasswork, she said, requires intensive training and considerable talent. She doesn't know of another local artist working in this medium.

Hull, also an artist, said, "He is an extremely talented artist who very quietly, and without fanfare, works to produce beautiful art glass pieces. Tom's entire family is involved in creative endeavors and they deserve to be showcased for the varied ways they find to express themselves."

Tom's wife, Marilyn, is a recognized fiber artist who creates abstract quilted pieces and has recently begun working with eco printing.

The couple's two adult sons inherited the artistic genes. Layton is an



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Here, Tom Hower shapes the glass with wet newsprint.

abstract artist and Fleet works with Locknesters, described as "part puzzle and part toy [that] are the result of a fascination with unconventional geometries and a desire to create design work that encourages interaction."

Tom Hower's donation to the downtown Marion gallery will help sustain it through the pandemic.

Hull acknowledged, "This year has been challenging for us at the gallery as we struggle to find creative ways to stay open and to continue to show-

case regional fine art and crafts."

However, she declared, "Thanks to the support of the Town of Marion, The Bank of Marion, and faithful supporters, we have managed to keep this non-profit gallery operating for more than 15 years; and we are not going to let the pandemic close our doors now."

The auction of Hower's items will begin this week and run until Sept. 4.

The items will be numbered and bids will be accepted on one or more



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

These four Tom Hower glass works are being donated to the Appalachian Spirit Gallery for an online auction this month. Funds raised will help support the non-profit gallery.



AT RIGHT: Tom Hower, who trained in Seattle, says each piece of glass art begins with a bubble.

of the pieces. Individuals may make a bid any time calling 276-706-2909 and leaving a voice mail message with your bid amount and contact information. Individuals can also log on to the Appalachian Spirit Gallery's Facebook or Instagram page to leave a bid amount and contact information.

The highest bidders will be notified on Sept. 4, and can come by the gallery then to pay their donation/bid amount and pick up the item or the gallery can arrange for the pieces

to be shipped.

Under the CARES 2020 relief bill, Hull noted that the winning auction/ bid amount qualifies as a tax deductible donation to the 501(c)3 non-profit gallery. The deduction can be taken by any individual or couple, regardless of whether they itemize their taxes or not.

Hull said the gallery plans to continue the trend of offering art and craft pieces for auction on a monthly basis through the year's end.