

Steve Sizelove— Making the Most of an Alternative Education

by Colleen Bryan

Steve Sizelove calls himself an art school dropout with great hand skills, and in his mind there is a causal relationship between the two. The thirty-three-year-old Indiana flame-worker started art school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and dropped out to go to Colorado and play in the mountains. By accident, he was exposed to flame-working and spent a few years making borosilicate pipes during the week and snowboarding the slopes of Summit County on the weekends. He moved in quick progression from initially experiencing the glass to developing a saleable product to riding the wave of the fad. Within five years, he and two partners had moved into a 1,200-square-foot studio with eight torch stations and began hiring employees to help them make production pipes.

Steve makes no pretense that these early pipes were anything akin to art, and he is no apologist for the alternative lifestyle they represent. Still, he reflects that a lot more was going on than mere manufacturing. “Everyone needs some way to earn a living, so money is always a consideration on some level. Having a saleable product of medium quality allowed me to make a living while I developed better hand skills.

One of the things Steve encountered when he had the opportunity to stay in the tech house at the Pittsburgh Glass Center was a group of people who had all gone through school programs, who shared a great love for glass, and who were willing to work very hard for almost no money in exchange for studio time. “I found it hard to imagine trying to become proficient with the material in such a limited amount of time. Coming at glassblowing through my winding experiential route helped to build a level of proficiency that would have been much harder to garner from the twelve hours a week in a studio that a college art student can expect.”





On the other hand, the level of resources and structure that students experience in traditional art schools is much greater than in most real-life studios. Paradoxically, this relative glut of resources can drive students to find external solutions for the artistic challenges they encounter and promote something almost formulaic in their artifacts. Many students in a given school can be found to create within a similar range of exploration as students look to the world around them and emulate what they see.

Sizelove's accidental alternative staging of academy and practice coincided nicely with the developmental imperative of early adulthood—to make things that make one's mark on the world. "By breaking up my education, I put it to use as a tool in that process. Filtering education through direct application with the materials made it at once less serious and more authentic. There was nothing of the reverence and formality that might have accompanied an institutional setting. It was always clear to me that the education was in service to the art."

Does that mean that Sizelove is not interested in going back to art school? Not at all. "My earlier foray exposed me to some core principals that I was able to incorporate into my work. I want to go back at some point to round out a full vocabulary, to be a well-informed, well-rounded student of art. That can only make my glasswork better. But I feel fortunate to have had an opportunity to become so intimate with the materials on my own time and in greater depth than any school could have afforded."

Sizelove hesitates about whether he would recommend that other people follow his route. Especially now, as a father, the course seems capricious and economically unrealistic. He will urge his children to finish an academic program, even while recognizing that life experience adds an irreplaceable and equally precious dimension to classroom learning.

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Discover more about Steve Sizelove's business and wholesale marketing strategies in the Spring 2008 issue of Profitable Glass Quarterly.



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