

A Talk with Artists from Artful Ashes **by Heather Olson**

It's August. It's 85 degrees outside, and over 100 in the Pratt hot shop. The furnaces are blasting at 2100 degrees. It's HOT. And Jesse England and Minhi Winkemplek—Artful Ashes Artists—are dedicated to their craft.

Tell me about Artful Ashes and what you do.

Jesse: We are largely a service. A lot of glass artists make product that they hope to sell, and we make things that we are asked to make. It's much more personal, and it exposes people to a trade that they might not otherwise see. A lot of what we do is not about the product, but about the healing that takes place. People are able to let go and have closure through this process of making art. It takes very little ash to make these memorials, so people can have several made and still have ash to spread if that's what their loved one's wishes were.

Do you get to hear the stories behind some of the pieces you make?

Minhi: Sometimes, yes. Greg and Christina, the owners of the company, are the ones who meet with clients and they get to hear all of the stories. Often we learn about them after we meet families if they are here for making the memorials.

How did you make the leap from glass artist to working at Artful Ashes?

Minhi: Both of us have always supplemented our art careers with other glass production jobs. We believe in this company and in the founders, and our hope was to be able to merge into the Pratt community. We wanted to have more exposure to artists. We have worked in factory settings before and were more removed from the community.

Jesse: In factory settings, you are doing production and making multiples of the same object all day. All of glassblowing has some repetition—you have to hone your skills and do something thousands of times to get good at it. But this is more unique because there is someone who is a part of each piece. It's still allowing us to hone our skills. We try to do this in a way that is healthy. We are able to switch positions on our team so we use different parts of our body. It helps to have us—the artists—in charge of our teams rather than someone who is only concerned with the numbers. This is an expensive trade. Lots of artists have other jobs in order to make their art. Some of my favorite artists are educators. They are not risking their livelihood to make their art. They aren't compromising themselves for the market. They can be more artistically free. We try to balance those things. We want to make art, and be able to eat, and to love our jobs.

Can you tell me about your experience working in the Pratt hot shop?

Minhi: Pratt has been a pivotal part of our artistic pursuits. There is a camaraderie and community here that is pretty rare, and it's a great feeling come into a place and feel supported by everyone, whether they know you or not. We love this place! It feels like home.

Jesse: Minhi's been able to take classes here as well, which is great. We are both interested in making of all kinds. We are glass artists, but we also work with metal, wood, and other materials. Pratt is very special because you get this cross-pollination of artists in all mediums.

What do you most enjoy about this work?

Minhi: We were surprised how much this work allows us to fulfill our creative side. We get to work with material that we are passionate about. As artists, you are getting to hone your skills and find ways to combine your passion with our client's personal wishes. It's a feeling that is hard to re-create elsewhere. It's harder to get people to connect to your art sometimes when you're doing it on your own.

Jesse: I have a thing I like to say a lot. I see an artist as someone that tries to put their sentiment out there through their art, and they hope the world connects to it. With Artful Ashes, people send us their sentiment. We package their sentiment in our trade. It connects to that person every time. It's very fulfilling. I've never made a sculpture of my own artwork that has made anyone cry.

Yet....

Jesse: Yes, not yet. But with this, with Artful Ashes, the clients spend a lot of time selecting their colors, their shapes, and that is all priming them for this healing. Once they come and watch the memorial being made, they can often be healed when then leave here. Sometimes people cry, but often those are happy tears. This is the end of a journey for many people.

Tell me about the glass objects that you make—describe the process.

Minhi: Yes. Each memorial has an ID mark. We ID each piece with tape that goes onto the pipe and that carries through the whole process. Jesse will start by gathering the molten glass, and he will apply the color and ash and twist it so it's encased in glass, and then we form the chosen shape. Then we break the memorial off the end of the pipe, and we fire polish it, and then the ID mark is stamped into the glass. That way there is no confusion about the pieces. It takes four people to do this: one person shapes, one does color and ash, one fire polishes, and one oversees the whole process to keep it all organized.

As artists, what has been your most challenging project to date?

Minhi: Making collaborative work was initially very trying for us. It seems so obvious but the only way to be successful is to compromise. Sometimes it feels like you both compromise 50% of your ideas and then you're both half happy. But you get to a place where it works. When we understand what the other person wants it gets easier. We found a formula that worked for us. Most of these images show our collaborations.

What advice do you have for young people who want to become glass artists?

Minhi: It's a tough path to take, but you have to remember that there will always be obstacles, no matter what you decide to do. If it's something you feel passionate about, then there's no reason not to follow your dreams.

Artful Ashes is a company that turns ashes of deceased loved ones into glass art. Their artists capture the essence of your loved one's spirit in a swirl of color and ashes, sealed forever within beautiful glass art. Learn more about them at ArtfulAshes.com