Classroom

Playing with Fire

CFA students turn to molten matters at Diablo Glass School

Jaki Doyka stands next to a furnace cranked up to 2,100 degrees and watches as Sean Clarke dips a metal rod into a shimmering orange pool. When he lifts the rod — called a blowpipe — molten glass drips to the floor in spirals and curlicues.

“See how it looks like honey?” asks Clarke, the owner of Diablo Glass School in Roxbury, Massachusetts, as he twists the blowpipe in the furnace. “If you don’t keep moving and shaping it at this stage, it just drips right off.”

Doyka (CFA’11), fitted with safety goggles, begins to mold her own piece, twisting the pipe and shaping the base with bench tools before slowly blowing air through the pipe to form a glass bubble at the end. Nearby, a few of her completed glass balls sit inside a kiln, set at 960 degrees, to slowly even out the temperature of her work overnight. When she finishes forty of the fragile globes, she plans to fuse them together to make what she calls “a prototype of a glass wall, using the balls as bricks.”

Doyka and her project partner, Andrew Collins (CAS’10), are among the ten students who make their way from Comm. Ave. to Roxbury each week to learn the art of glassmaking through the College of Fine Arts glassblowing course. Now in its fourth semester, the class provides some CFA students with an introduction to the Venice study-abroad program, where they work on the island of Murano, famous for its glass artisans. For others, it’s simply another opportunity to explore the visual arts and add a new tool to their creative repertoire.

“These are techniques that can’t be perfected in one semester,” says Lynne Allen, director of CFA’s school of visual arts. “But for any creative person, working with glass is a treat. This is a class that shows all walks of life are interested in learning other forms of art.”

“The students at Diablo come from everywhere,” says Clarke, pointing to shelves full of necklaces and bracelets of glass beads, paperweights with swirling colors, and screen-printed glass plates — all made by BU students. “What’s really amazing is that you can teach a thousand people exactly the same thing, and almost every one of them will do something different. That’s the amazing thing about glass.”

The visual arts students, under the watchful eye of Diablo instructor Chris Watts, learn a range of techniques over the semester, from glassblowing in the hot shop with the large furnaces to fusing glass in the flat shop to create stained-glass pieces. In the flame shop, students use a stationary propane-oxygen torch to create tiny details and beadwork; the cold shop is where they practice finished cut-glass techniques, such as carving, grinding, polishing, and sandblasting.

Once they learn the basics, the students are free to use any shop to work on individual projects during weekly studio time. The Diablo staff is on site, but there’s no hovering.

“Diablo really emphasizes creativity over learning technique,” says Kaylee Dombrowski (CFA’11). “It kind of threw us, since we spend a lot of time in visual arts learning about structure in our classes. The only problem is that I wanted more time.”

“We don’t have our own glass studio at CFA,” says Doyka, who finishes her project by dipping the piece into a tub of water, where it cools with a hiss. “This has been a great experience, and not really what I expected. The nature of this art is that it’s complex — art and science coming together.”

KIMBERLY CORNUELLE

WEB EXTRA. Sean Clarke, owner of Diablo Glass School, and Kaylee Dombrowski (CFA’11) talk about working with glass at www.bu.edu/bostonia.

FOR ANY CREATIVE PERSON, WORKING WITH GLASS IS A TREAT.” —LYNNE ALLEN