

[Context: This artist's profile was written for a local arts and events magazine.]

The Motion of Glass: Artist Michael DeLeon Describes His Craft

By Lisa Chontos

Michael DeLeon has probably always been a glass artist.

But he didn't know it until one day in UTSA's art building, when he happened to see an ad for a glass-making intern. Although DeLeon had been painting since he was a child and was pursuing a BFA in painting, he was curious. He responded to the ad and got the position at the glass factory. Because glass-blowing is very painterly, he was able to channel his painting abilities into making the glass, but there was still a learning curve.

"It looks a lot easier than it is," he smiles. "It's really about rhythm. You have to get the motion of the glass down. It's always falling toward the earth, and you dance with it. It's like a performance piece—I love it."

Now it's been 6½ years since DeLeon first started making glass. This past May, local studio Dragonfire Hot Glass hired him as a glass artist, and he's already flourishing under the new combination of freedom and support. "Here, it's really cool because they say, 'Okay, Mike, just go out there and make whatever you want to make.' I just love it. It's so much freedom—it took me a little while to get used to it."

The first thing DeLeon chose to make was globes of blue glass, roughly the size of grapefruits. After that came animals. "I started making little pigs, and then I tried making some dolphins. The dolphins didn't really work out," he laughs. Indeed, the dolphins are nowhere to be seen, but a small assortment of clear pigs and pink pigs are displayed on the table. Most eye-catching is a dark pink pig with dark silver wings, as whimsical as it is glamorous.

Inside the gallery, DeLeon's work lines two walls. One look proves that even his more traditional pieces are not your ordinary household objects—gleaming bowls in neutral colors for a sophisticated space, and bright orange vases that would warm up an entire room. Another bowl with crackle finish is transformed at every angle. The inside is like the sunlit, shallow part of the ocean, and the outside is like the night sky streaked with stars.

He doesn't normally name his work, but when pressed by galleries he responds with names just as diverse as the pieces themselves. A collection of retro vases? "Short and Stumpy." For a bright pink platter, he chose "Pink Paradise."

DeLeon's creativity is sparked by the glass-making process itself. Fellow artists he admires include local glass artist Aaron Gross, as well as his own former classmates. He also appreciates the work of Salvador Dali, among others. He says, "I like their passion and integrity, and the vision that they can produce."

DeLeon also enjoys introducing others to glassmaking, by teaching at Say Sí. This summer he's teaching 50 middle school students how to do "fusing and slumping," which is another way to make glass. His advice to beginning glass artists is simply, "Be patient and keep at it. It's an adventure, and it just takes time."

Describing his creative process, DeLeon says that he occasionally sketches his more advanced pieces first before picking up the blowpipe, but admits that sometimes his adrenaline takes over mid-sketch and he has to start working right away.

To watch DeLeon create is to watch someone completely in their element. Deciding to make a fish jumping out of the water, he selects his colors and goes to work. First, he dips the blowpipe into the furnace to gather the molten glass, which has the consistency of honey, and then blows air into the pipe, creating a bubble. Utterly absorbed in the moment, he sits at a bench, steadily rolling the rod between the rails and using the tongs to shape the bubble into the body of the fish. He concentrates without frowning, occasionally tucking in his lips at critical moments. Steady and self-assured, he is in constant motion without hurry. Over and over, he rises to place the rod in the oven, then sits again to shape the glass with the tongs. Another glass-blower heats more glass to add to the body, and DeLeon gradually pulls fins, a tail, and a mouth out of each super-heated mass. Finally, the fish is joined with what will become the water, and the merged result bends dramatically, as if about to fall off the rod.

As the glass dips to the earth and is buoyed back up into the air in one smooth motion, it seems as if DeLeon's future is rising with it.