

In the studio with Rachel Escoe
By Sylvia Randall-Muñoz

Portland based artist Rachel Escoe's striking glasswork evokes the dreamy colors of the Pacific Northwest's lush landscape. The glassblower's heightened awareness of the natural world and the complexities of the human spirit produce an array of intricately etched vignettes on glass plates and milky, mountainous sculptures in smoky purples, greens, and blues. She describes glass blowing as her therapy, and says she'll never stop making art. Escoe and her sweet cat sat down with me in her cozy studio to chat about her work and her new show "Outlook: The Mizpah Energy of People and Nature" at J. Pepin Art Gallery through April.

How would you describe your relationship with glass as an artistic medium?

For me, making art is an emotional thing. It's like therapy for me, so I'll never stop making glass. It's something I've fallen in love with. It involves a lot of teamwork – it's more of a social medium where you're working with other people to make a larger scale piece. You can also work alone. I like that idea. When I was in college I tried many different mediums, but they weren't enough for me. I like the idea of collaborating with glass.

How does collaboration play into glass blowing?

My medium involves Venetian style glass blowing – it's a bigger scale and you work with a long steel pipe. You go into a furnace with glass and clear glass sits in a crucible, and you have glass on the end of the pipe. The bigger you work the harder it is, so you usually need an assistant with you depending on the scale. They can also bring bits of glass to you to make different design elements or add different color elements.

Can you talk about the intersection of style and function present in your work?

Yes, in the past 25 years there's been a revolution with studio glass, which has given artists more range. Now you can make something that is emotional and abstract while also being functional.

In your artist statement you talk about the challenge, process and therapy involved in glass blowing. Can you expand upon those themes?

Challenge: I get bored easily. With mediums like painting you have to spend a long period of time thinking about your painting. I do plan my projects, but with glass you are forced to work fast because it's so hot. That's the challenge that I enjoy about the medium. You are forced to think fast and improvise. The planning process is very important before hand but when you are working with the piece you have to work very quickly. I am always challenged in the glass shop – which keeps me going. I'm never bored with it. I don't have the patience to do tedious work like drawing. It's something I admire in other artists.

Process: The process for me is very important. A lot of people view glass as this otherworldly medium. Before I took a glass class I couldn't fathom how glass pieces were made with human hands. I like explaining the process so that people understand how difficult it is. It's physical, it's hot, the furnace gets to about 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. I have an emotional bond with the process.

Therapy: Personally, I have struggled with anger problems and PTSD. Glass blowing has a therapeutic aspect. I can take my emotions out on the glass and work through them while working with the glass. It's similar to pottery, where you're working with something that's constantly moving, but you're changing it as it's moving. In glass blowing, you are rolling the pipe, and you're using different tools and wet newspaper to shape it. When I'm having a bad day in the shop it runs through me through the tools and the glass. If I'm angry, I can still get it out into the air. My body tells me when I need to deal with things, and I deal with things through art.

Can you talk about your early journey as an artist?

I grew up in Portland and I left when I was eighteen. I went to Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, Alberta. I took a range of different classes. I chose a lot of mediums that you don't generally see people using like intaglio, metalworking, sculpture and fiber arts. I took glass blowing my first year there and I loved it. The idea of working with someone else really intrigued me.

Being away from the mountains was hard for me - it's prairie land there. After graduating I worked for a local puppet artist, Xtine Cook. She focuses her work around native women, and how many go missing or are murdered in the Alberta area. That was an eye opening experience. About a year later I got back into glass and started renting space. I applied for residency in Canada but it was denied, so I came home to Portland. It was a blessing in disguise; I wasn't happy about coming home but there's something about the Pacific Northwest. You come home and you look up and see the trees and mountains and go, "Wow" it was a blessing to come home.

What is the theme behind your new show "Outlook: The Mizpah Energy of People and Nature"?

A lot of my work in the show is about things that have happened to me over the past few years. Leaving Calgary, being here, and going through depression. I was raised with Judaism, my dad's Jewish and my mom's not. Mizpah is a Hebrew word – it has several meanings. It means watchtower, it also describes the emotional bond between two people who are far apart from each other through distance or death. A lot of the drawings on these plates have to do with mourning losses and dreams that I've had.

When I first started dating Chris his father had passed away about a year prior. It was an amazing experience getting to know someone through people telling stories about him. After the memorial we thought we should have a barbeque with the rest of the keg. We were staring at a huge sequoia tree in my neighbor's yard, and my dad said, "What if someone just took the top off that tree?" Which was so random. That night, there was a thunderstorm. A lightning strike ended up hitting that tree and taking the top off it! We both started thinking about energy after the trip to the memorial, and some of it came home with us. So, Mizpah came to me through those experiences that I've had with people either through death or distance.

Can you talk about some of the pieces in your show?

The plates are about experiences I've had, and dreams that I've had. The dusk mountain series is a visual interpretation of the things that comfort me. The crispness of the mountains during twilight time is my favorite time of the day. Even if I'm having a bad day, if I'm near the mountains and I see that crisp line of the mountains' silhouette and the lit up sky, I immediately calm down.