

Robert R Adamson

Pioneering Hot Glass in the Pacific Northwest

by Shawn Waggoner

In the 1991 book, *Out of the Fire*, author Bonnie J. Miller chronicled the development of the Pacific Northwest into a glass center that rivaled that of Venice and Murano, Italy. Miller's story is rife with unforgettable characters, defining events, and essential qualities such as the region's early public art programs, the founding of Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington, and the creative influence of Seattle's light, climate, and unmatched natural beauty.

Miller writes: "Pilchuck, as important as it is, has not been the only force behind the continued expansion of the Northwest glass community. One of the major factors in encouraging artists to stay in the Northwest after coming to Pilchuck was the availability of employment in private studios and production glass factories, which frequently allowed artists to do their own work during off hours. The person who made the biggest impact for artists who were trying to make a living while following their artistic passion was Rob Adamson through his Seattle company, the Glass Eye Studio."

Adamson has been pursuing his love of glass since 1969. Pilchuck hired him as the school's first technical and assistant director in 1974. Four years later, he turned his vision of glassmaking into a highly successful studio and training ground for artists called Glass Eye Studio. His dream was to provide studio access for emerging glassblowers who could learn, graduate, and go on to do their own work. For the first three years, Adamson lost money on the studio. But a dedication to providing employment for glassworkers inspired him to develop the business acumen responsible for the studio's eventual success.

Having sold the business in 1990, Adamson continued to direct the design of over 120 products annually for the studio. In 2000, he left the Glass Eye entirely and established Island Art Glass with wife Janis Swalwell. From their studio on Whidbey Island, the husband-and-wife team produces art glass for the American craft market including giftware, custom art glass lighting, and glass forms for the garden.

Robert Adamson, handblown vessel from his Broken Fence Series made at Island Art Glass, 18" x 8" x 8", 2015.





Island Art Glass, Koi, handblown sculpted glass, 14" x 3", 2015.

Early History

Born in 1945, Adamson grew up in Spokane, Washington, spending summers working on family farms. He left eastern Washington to study political science and languages at the University of Washington in Seattle. In 1964 while living on Guemes Island, Adamson worked with sculptor Phillip McCracken and began to explore both ceramics and sculpture.

Selected for the Peace Corps his junior year in college, he embarked upon a two-year training program in Spanish. In 1967, while living in Mexico with a Tarascan Indian potter, Adamson and his host visited a glassblowing studio, and he fell in love with the material. Following his language training, the Peace Corps sent Adamson to Colombia, South America, where he worked in agricultural seed test plots and gained valuable experience establishing farming co-ops—the early version of farm-to-market economies.

Upon his return from Colombia to Seattle in 1969, Adamson was employed as an art teacher in the city's first alternative elementary school. Though he eventually became the principal of that school, his love of glass coaxed him down a different path. By 1971 Adamson, neighbor Steve Beasley, Roger Vines, and Bob Spielholtz formed a multimedia artist co-op, which eventually changed to become a glass only studio.

In 1974, Adamson became Pilchuck Glass School's first technical director and subsequently its assistant director. His responsibilities included ordering supplies, building equipment, and setting up the furnaces. During summer sessions, he kept the studio running and worked with the team of teaching assistants.

Interviewed by Tina Oldknow for the 1996 book, *Pilchuck: A Glass School*, Adamson said, "Pilchuck's influence in bringing a lot of artists to the Northwest was a key factor in our success and the force that first brought us together as a local, national, and ultimately international community of glass artists. The Glass Art Society has largely sustained the collaboration and support we gave each other in the growth of the Studio Glass movement over the last 50 years."

Before his first summer session, Adamson contacted Pilchuck faculty member and now close friend, Fritz Dreisbach. At that point the two artists had not yet met. "Fritz gave me a list of ingredients to buy to make glass, and this long list included something called 'cordsaway' and 'seedsbegone.' I had never heard of those so I called him, and he started laughing. That was my introduction to Fritz and the first in a long line of jokes between us."

During Pilchuck's off-seasons, Adamson worked for stained glass manufacturer Spectrum Glass, and in the winter of 1976 managed Genesis Glass, a stained glass studio in Portland, Oregon. He thrived when working with teams, bringing people together to accomplish goals in a creative, egalitarian way. Wife and partner of 46 years, Swalwell, says: "From education to co-operative farming to the glass arts, Rob has always loved two things—the discovery and challenge of the artistic process itself and the unpredictable and lively interactions of people coming together in a working team. He is a very skillful orchestrator of the workplace and deeply cares about the people he works with."



(Top left) Glass Eye Studio & Gallery, Pike Place Market, Seattle, Washington, 1978, with, left to right, Mark Graham, Robert Adamson, Sonja Bloomdahl, Walt Lieberman, and Charles Parriott. (Center) Early handblown glass from the Glass Eye Studio MSH Persians 1970s collection. (Bottom left) Lino Tagliapietra creates at Glass Eye Studio in the 1970s.

The Glass Eye Studio

In 1978, Adamson opened the modest Glass Eye Studio & Gallery in Seattle's Pike Place Market near the very first Starbucks coffee shop. "At Pilchuck I was employed six months of the year. Obviously you can't make a living from just six months of employment, so I wanted to start a factory where professional and emerging glassblowers could make and sell work." Adamson made glass there with artists Sonja Blomdahl, Walter Lieberman, Charles Parriott, musician Mark Graham, and then 15-year-old Dante Marioni, primarily producing Art Nouveau lamp shades. Gradually a line of paperweights and vases evolved, and eventually a market for the "C ball," also known as a Christmas ornament, was cultivated. The gallery also exhibited artwork by local and regional glass artists.

In 1980, Mount St. Helens erupted in south central Washington and spewed forth what is commonly thought of as ash, but is really 200-mesh sand—perfect for making glass. Intrigued by the history of volcanic glass, Adamson built a 50-pound pot furnace in the shape of a volcano, and with Dreisbach started making beer steins that when filled would foam over. "People saw the black cullet we were making on the floor and started offering to pay \$10 for a broken shard of volcanic glass. Out of this hybrid soda-lime/volcanic glass, we made little ancient-looking black bottles, work playfully named *Persians* by Fritz. Paul Marioni saw the work and suggested that a pearlescent fume be used on the vessels' surface, and "Mount St. Helen's Glass (MSH)" was born."

Adamson participated in the American Craft Council and other highly successful national shows with his emerging line of handblown glass products, including the MSH souvenir line. "Mount St. Helens glass chased me for many years. But it caught the imagination of the public, and we made a lot of money with it, which helped the Glass Eye Studio become economically feasible. Even today, it's very difficult to make a small studio pay. Most of the time I was spending money rather than making it, trying to keep people employed."

Participating in these national shows afforded Adamson significant growth. As the buying public began to embrace "made by hand" ideology, the Glass Eye Studio grew from five glassblowers plus staff to 15 employees to 50 employees in just three years. They produced more than 50 different product designs, including paperweights, vases, platters, bowls, and ornaments.

Needing a larger facility, in 1979 Adamson bought a vacant building in the International District—a former church referred to as the Private Eye. The original Pike Place Market location was renamed the Glass Eye Gallery and playfully referred to as the Public Eye. Outgrowing the Private Eye, in 1985 Adamson sold the property to Benjamin Moore and purchased the former site of Seattle's Frango Mint chocolate factory, building a 20,000-square-foot studio. Two years later they were forced out of that space by eminent domain, the result of an expanding school district, and Adamson moved his operations to the Ballard/Fremont neighborhood.



Robert Adamson, carved and gilded handblown vessels, (left) 8" x 10" x 10" and (right) 14" x 16" x 6". Both made at Glass Eye Studio.



While at the helm of the Glass Eye Studio, Adamson hired students and also blew glass with established artists including Moore and Rich Royal, both of whom he met at Pilchuck. Ahead of the times, Adamson developed and marketed a limited edition designer series in glass by Moore, Lieberman, Parriott, and Blomdahl. Paul Cunningham, Joe DeCamp, Eric Lieberman, Dante Marioni, and Preston Singletary all came to work at the Glass Eye Studio straight from high school. "The 1980s is what I call the Golden Era. It was a fluid time of exploration and aspiration for those of us in the glass medium. Many of today's well-known glass artists were working with me during those years."

Adamson also invited and sponsored other artists to design or teach, including a memorable visit from Lino Tagliapietra from Venice. "All of our jaws dropped in amazement watching Lino work. Dale Chihuly hired him, and today Lino is acknowledged as the best glassblower in the world. I remember drawing an image on the floor for Lino to blow, and he made it that exact same size. He said, 'If you sketch something, that's the way I make it.' He was a great teacher for all of us. That was one of the purposes of the Glass Eye Studio. I was a teacher before I started blowing glass, so I was always interested in helping people learn and expand their skills."



*Robert Adamson and Janis Swalwell,
Walton Lofts Installation, sculpted glass,
10' x 9' x 14", 2015.*

Island Inspired Glass

In moving to Whidbey Island and selling the Glass Eye Studio, Adamson went from a client base of 3,000-plus retailers to zero. Positioning himself for retirement, initially he wasn't interested in selling the glass he made. But collectors and former retailers eventually located Adamson, and showrooms were built. A participant in Whidbey Island's year-round Art Trail, people from all over now visit Island Art Glass.

For the past eight years, in addition to their giftware and custom lighting products, Adamson and Swalwell have created a line of nature inspired art for the garden, referred to by Adamson as "the rice and tea. It pays a lot of the bills and pays the 'boys.'" The boys presently include Eric Lieberman, who first worked with Adamson at the Glass Eye Studio as a teenager; Don Singleton, a transplanted Virginian glassblower; and Steve Swalwell, Adamson's brother-in-law, who has worked with him off and on since the age of 15. "All of these guys are *really* good and make their own artwork independently."

Janis Swalwell has been designing glass for more than 30 years at Glass Eye Studio and Island Art Glass. Since moving to Whidbey, Adamson has mentored Swalwell's move into practicing the art of design directly on the glass floor, assisting her team of glassblowers as an active member. "Not every designer has that opportunity. I enjoy challenging the team and being challenged by their feedback. The creative process inspired by working with a team is wonderful," she says.

Adamson and Swalwell were recently selected for a design commission in Seattle. Working in collaboration with Whidbey Island metal artist David Gignac, they completed a large commercial installation for the lobby of Walton Lofts, a new 13-story Platinum LEEDS green residential building on Seattle's historic Vine Street, developed and owned by the Schuster Group. The installation design highlights native plants and waterways once native to this area. The 9-foot-long wall piece incorporates a 10-foot sculptured metal tree and a seasonal "meadow" of 179 pieces of sculptured glass grasses, flowers, and cattails, introducing Northwest nature to the interior space.

Adamson's independent work is an exploration of larger vessel forms. Color is layered like watercolors on the glass as a landscape backdrop for his *Broken Fence* series. This and other larger work is exhibited at regional venues such as Rob Schouten Gallery & Museo Gallery, Whidbey Island; Vetri Glass, Seattle; the Museum of Northwest Art, La Conner; and Whatcom Museum, Bellingham, Washington.



The Center of the Center

When Adamson began his career, he knew of only 12 artists working with glass around the country. The eventual influx of artists to the Pacific Northwest in the late 1970s and early 1980s marked the beginning of the region's transformation into a major center for glass. "A lot of the artists who came here didn't have a place to work. People would always tease me and ask, 'Rob, why are you hiring more people?' And I just responded, because it's a lot of fun. I wasn't too concerned about the bottom line."

Adamson was willful in those days and put into the universe the idea that the Studio Glass movement was inevitable and that Seattle and its surrounding areas would be its epicenter. "I could see it almost from the beginning. I remember that Harvey Littleton came up to Pilchuck in 1974 and said, 'Rob, you're going to have to move to the East Coast if you want to be at the center of what's happening in glass.' I laughed and said, Harvey, this *is* the center."

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Island Art Glass (left) Feather Leaves, 20" x 6", and (right) Birdbath, 12" diameter. Both hand sculpted in 2015. (Center) Robert Adamson, Handblown vessel blown and assembled at Island Art Glass, 32" x 22" x 22".

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Robert Adamson & Janis Swalwell
Island Art Glass
 islglass@whidbey.com

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