

Coming to Our Senses Ruth Brockmann's Last Public Art Project

by Shawn Waggoner

The last message Ruth Brockmann shared with future generations is to love one another and Mother Earth as life itself is loved. She wrote: “Live wisely upon her all your days and pass this message along to the generations that will follow you.”

Brockmann died on July 9, 2013, and is survived by three siblings and her partner, Hal Bond. A leader in the Northwest kiln formed glass movement, her fused glass masks put her on the map. But she also designed and produced a number of sizeable architectural glass commissions including *Coming to Our Senses*, installed in June 2013 a month before she passed away.

Exploring the Realm Between Art and Architecture

Selected by the Washington State Arts Commission, Brockmann collaborated with Stan Zielinski on a storyboard of fused glass framed in hand carved wood for the Sun Valley Elementary School, in Sunnyside, Washington. Measuring 64 inches by 64 inches, the work features 26 animals, each representing a letter of the alphabet fused in glass and surrounded by Zielinski's wooden tree of life.

“A glass menagerie of animals from A to Z invites the viewer to feel empowered to enter the most sacred paradise from within—the limitless, childlike, creative imagination. Migratory animals such as butterflies, whales, turtles, penguins, and salmon were chosen as metaphors connecting viewers to their own epic journey through life,” wrote Brockmann and Zielinski in their description of content and imagery. “An archetypal tree of life covers a doorway to a secret passage, beyond the door, representing our personal passages and connection to all of nature as a source of life. As it branches out, yearning for light and life, it connects cosmos and Earth, providing a thriving habitat for life, all life.”

Always keenly interested in exploring the realm between art, architecture, and nature, Zielinski had collaborated early in his career with sculptor Buster Simpson and conceptual artist Dan Corson for his Master's Thesis at the University of Washington. An architect who designs schools, Zielinski met Brockmann in 2006 when the state of Washington selected her for a commission at Ridgeline Middle School, in Yelm, Washington. Brockmann's storyboard, *Roots and Wings*, depicted past, present, and future scenes of the local area with images of Pacific salmon interspersed throughout. The final section shows salmon smolts heading off to sea, metaphorically representing the eighth-graders moving on to high school.

“When she showed me her portfolio, I immediately fell in love with her salmon. We both loved salmon, having been raised in the Pacific Northwest where they are abundant. We also shared a love of Native American culture, the volcanoes that dominate our landscape, and especially the rivers of life that flowed from them,” says Zielinski.

“Ruth combined a mystical aspect of glassmaking with shamanism. She expressed a connection with nature through her glass and gave deep meaning and truth to beautiful forms. To me, she is the Emily Dickinson of the glass world.” — Stan Zielinski



Embodiment of Brockmann's Passions

Brockmann and Zielinski remained friends over the years and reunited for their first collaboration on the Sun Valley project. The school for 632 kindergarteners serves an 85 percent Hispanic population in the immigrant community of Yakima County, a fruit-producing region of the state. Brockmann's glass focused on the theme of the monarch butterfly and its migration, and Zielinski's frame referenced an existing papier-mâché tree that extended up one wall and across the ceiling in the school. “The monarch butterfly travels thousands of miles into Canada from Mexico and after four generations, returns. We felt this was a metaphor for the immigrant children who come to a brand new place from Mexico. We wanted something that would make them feel at home and provide a connection to their school. The piece also references the tree of life, a common theme in Ruth's work.”

Appealing to children as well as adults was their common goal. “We are wiping out great numbers of species each day, and we can't keep that up. That inspired our title, *Coming to Our Senses*.” The work also features many of the artists' favorite animals including herons, whales, and turtles.

During the project, Brockmann's health declined. “I came to realize this was going to be Ruth's last commission. It became the embodiment of everything that was meaningful to her—an expression of life and the love of life. Ruth never focused on the pain she was in. She never focused on the fact that she had cancer. She never focused on the fact that she was going to die. She focused on love, art, beauty, and truth. Completing her work meant she was being the person she was put on this earth to be.”

Zielinski represented Brockmann at the dedication in June, and many in attendance commented how you could *feel* Brockmann's spirit in the work. “When I took the video and pictures of the dedication back to her, she was really emotional. She said, ‘Now those kids will feel my love for them every day they walk by the work.’”

Ruth Brockmann and Stan Zielinski, Coming To Our Senses, Sun Valley Elementary School in Sunnyside, Washington, 64" x 64". This work features 26 of Brockmann's kiln worked animals, each representing a letter of the alphabet fused in glass and surrounded by Zielinski's wooden tree of life.

Brockmann’s Friends Share Their Memories

Hal Bond

Ruth and I shared large studio spaces for 21 of the 24 years we were together. Although we worked full time on our own glass paths, we still collaborated on mutual projects and continuously shared information and ideas. However, even though Ruth was an artist 24/7, it was not working on our glass art that drew us together and kept us there. Our mutual love for the natural world was the glue in our shared lives.

Our first “date” was a backpacking trip to Mildred Lake on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula. The wall piece that she made commemorating this trip ended up being the first of 18 acquisitions by the Washington State Arts Commission. (She didn’t realize it was in the bank of slides being reviewed.) Luckily it ended up in the Media Center of a nearby primary school, so we could still visit it periodically. This trip to the Olympics was the first of many sojourns into beautiful, unspoiled areas by the two of us.

Ruth also loved to experience other cultures. We shared four wonderful trips to Mexico, taking public transportation, exploring marketplaces, ancient indigenous sites, and interacting with the locals as much as possible. Each of our trips happened to overlap Valentine’s Day, and Ruth loved to see the starry-eyed young couples strolling the zocalo with their bouquets of roses and helium heart balloons. We also returned from these trips with handmade goods and good memories. These trips also often inspired fresh directions in her artwork.

Finally, we shared for many years a very large organic vegetable garden. She was always researching and experimenting with new varieties. Our salads always had two or three colors of tomatoes. We also put up quite a bit of food, and visitors always left with canned goodies. Ruth was a truly gifted and dedicated artist, but I remember her by these qualities in addition to her incredible artwork.

Richard La Londe

“Little Ruthie” was what we all called Ruth Brockmann when she was in junior high school and I was in college. It wasn’t until the autumn of 1975, after returning from a summer season of fishing salmon in Alaska, that I really noticed her, and she looked pretty good. She was just about to turn 21, and I was 25. We got together and were married in 1977, honeymooning in Mexico.

Those were exciting times. She and I commercial-fished salmon on 58-foot seine boats. She was cook and deckhand on the *Pacific Maid*, and I fished on the *Ocean Queen*. A couple of years before, I had purchased 10 acres of forest land near Gig Harbor, Washington, and we used our fish money to build a studio and a very nice “hippie house.” We grew a garden, raised rabbits and chickens, chopped wood, foraged mushrooms, picked huckleberries, and created art. I did stained glass and metal sculpture, and she made leatherwork. We merged our talents and created stained glass commissions, showed our glass at craft shows, and had great Christmas sales in our home, which included the painter Michael Dupille, who a few years later became a well-known fuser too.

Our kiln experiments and association with Boyce Lundstrom at the Bullseye Fusing Ranch during 1982 launched us into glass fusing. Along with David Ruth and Gil Reynolds, Ruth and I became the four original instructors who traveled around the USA and Canada to teach the new art form of fused glass using “tested compatible” Bullseye glass, thus launching glass fusing as we know it today.



Ruth Brockmann, Indian basket castings, 20”.



The studio of Ruth Brockmann and Hal Bond

Ruth Brockmann, Roots and Wings, storyboard for Ridgeline Middle School in Yelm, Washington, 2006.



Ruth’s Alaska experiences, building a home and living on the land, and travel in Mexico inspired her glass masks, kiln castings, and glass murals. In 1984, both Ruth and I attended Pilchuck Glass School as teaching assistants, she for Klaus Moje and I for Toots Zynsky. The next year, in 1985, Ruth and I co-taught a glass fusing class at Pilchuck, and Gil Reynolds was our teaching assistant. That autumn we parted ways. In 1986, we both taught the first session at the newly founded and now defunct Camp Colton that Boyce Lundstrom opened. A few years later, Ruth moved to Portland, and I moved to Seattle.

Ruth’s masks were featured on the cover of the first edition of *Glass Fusing: Book One* by Boyce Lundstrom and Daniel Schwoerer. Her early masks emanate raw energy. As they evolved over the years, her artwork incorporated more and more aspects of nature and our relationship to our home, Mother Earth. Ruth was an early pioneer in glass fusing. I remember the good times.

Stan Zielinski

Ruth loved trees and rivers. We would often walk along the river in the shade of her favorite trees and watch all the beautiful wild animals, especially our favorite birds—herons and egrets, swans, eagles, ospreys, hawks, and owls. I promised her I would bring her back here, walking in the woods, when she got better. She’s better now, and she’s here in my heart and in my mind.

When Ruth was at her sickest on her deathbed, I’d sit by her, hold her hand, and tell her how beautiful she was. I told her that every time I saw her, I saw all her beautiful artwork, which I fell in love with long ago. Ruth inspired me to rekindle my childhood dreams until they became raging fires that will never die. She connected her genius with the source, the energy of the universe—with her mother, Nature. She fulfilled her purpose—to create beauty and to speak truth.

She lived her life openly, without apologies or regret, full of love, family, friends, gardening, good food, music, color, kids, and art. She especially loved to inspire kids to remain artists as they grew up, like she had. Nobody ever told her, “Ruthie, you can’t be an artist.” All she ever heard from her father was, “Ruthie, you can be whatever you want to be.”

Ruthie realized the outcome of her vision, her conviction, that Nature is what matters—real nature, her own authentic nature. I will always remember her out here, in nature, our favorite place, on the river, sitting on the roots of our favorite trees below the animals we loved.

She lived a good life. Now it’s over, but the memory of her good and noble life lives on, not only in the hearts and minds of her loved ones, like me, but also in the hearts and minds of 631 kindergartners who walk through the doors of Sun Valley Elementary in Sunnyside, Washington, every day. Her last words to me were, “Those kids will feel our love for them every day they walk through those doors.”

As surely as day follows night, love survives death. Ars longa, vita brevis, my friend. Until we meet again, beneath our favorite tree, beside the river that flows on, forever true and beautiful. Thank you for finding me here, in the shade of this cosmic tree.

Ruth’s favorite poem held the last words written by our favorite poet, John O’Donohue in his *Unfinished Poem*: “I would love to live like a river flows, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding.” That is how she lived her life to the very last moment—an inspiration to all. **GA**



Find out more about the life and work of Ruth Brockmann in the January/February 2014 issue of Glass Art.



Ruth Brockmann, Painter/Perceiver,
18" x 16", 2004.



Ruth Brockmann, Serenade with Butterflies,
18" x 18", 2006.