

# Sunflower Glass Studio

## Re-evaluating a Distribution Strategy

by Colleen Bryan

A simple scheduling change may be the straw that makes glass artist Karen Caldwell step away from using wholesale trade-shows to release her mixed media windows and tabletop glass designs. The Stockton, New Jersey, artist traditionally has taken part in one wholesale trade show per year, the Buyers' Market of American Craft (BMAC). Her studio's annual production, teaching, and regional craft shows accommodated its usual February date. She taught weekend workshops in January to supplement her income and spent the rest of the month creating new product lines for the BMAC and making retail items for the American Crafts Council show in Baltimore, Maryland, in February. "Having time when you don't have high production pressure allows an artist to be open to new ideas. It was wonderful to have the month of January to develop fresh ideas for shows during the month of February."

In 2014, however, BMAC changed its date for the Philadelphia show from February to January, and in 2015 it will move the location to Washington, D.C. Caldwell says these changes profoundly affect her studio schedule and her calculation of whether future participation will continue to benefit her studio.

"I've had to start working on new lines for the BMAC before finishing my heavy Christmas retail schedule. Working through a punch list of things to be designed makes it hard to incorporate freshness in new products. The last time we had a lull in the studio was August, and it is hard to think about new products for January in late summer. Working so far ahead puts a drag on my creativity with the wholesale line."

The first-quarter schedule compression will continue to ripple throughout the year. Caldwell will leave April and June 2014 open with no craft shows so she can teach workshops. "I teach six concentrated two-day classes a year, with four to five people in each." During these months she will also be filling wholesale orders from the BMAC. "It will be interesting to get through 2014 and re-evaluate how well this schedule works for me. My decision about whether the BMAC continues to be valuable for my business is still in flux."



Karen Caldwell, Queen Anne's Lace and Ferns, fused glass flowers and ferns, beveled and stained glass borders, 12" x 14" 2013.

### More Local High-End Craft Shows

What seems more certain is that Caldwell will seek out more high-end craft shows with their increased exposure for both her retail lines and custom work. The American Craft Council show starts off 2014 in Baltimore in February, with Paradise City Fairs of Fine and Functional Art in Massachusetts in March and May. She will continue to do Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen's shows a couple of times during the year and will selectively travel to a few other high-quality local shows. "I aim for two shows a month except for April and June. I realize I am fortunate to live only one or two hours driving time from some of the top shows in the country. It usually takes me only one-half to three-quarters of a day to settle back into the flow of my life and work. That allows production to happen constantly during the week."

As Caldwell adds new shows to her annual calendar, she will take the advice she offers less seasoned artists: Choose the highest quality shows you can get into. "Having one's work juried by peers is both an honor and an education. It is daunting to walk the aisles of the American Crafts Council show and see 650 people doing mind-blowing work. It is an honor to be part of a show of that size and quality." Especially in a field that has no system of apprenticeship where emerging craftspeople can work behind an accomplished artist to develop skills over time, participating in high-quality craft shows can push an artist toward ever greater refinement and higher creativity.



Karen Caldwell, Peaches and Ferns, hand-painted and leaded glass, 21" x 27", 2007.





Karen Caldwell, Interlocking Beveled Curlicues, hand-beveled pencil point bevels with hand-pressed jewel borders, 24" x 30", 2006.

Karen Caldwell, Jersey Shore Favorites, fused glass botanicals, hand-painted insects and shells, hand-beveled textured glass, and jeweled confetti, 23" x 32", 2011.

## The Business of Art

Thirty years of experience in glass have reinforced for Caldwell the importance of emerging artists starting with a solid business plan. "Your business model needs to be as strong as your creative model. I approached it backwards in the late 1970s and early '80s and struggled needlessly, because I didn't realize that would be important. Post-hippie economics was so different from what we experience now."

Caldwell has good business instincts, but she thinks she would have benefited from more business training. "Business school is as important as art school for artistic success." She has also learned a lot from listening to savvy craft friends. "They would be great business people whatever they attempted. My mouth drops to hear how they think about their work. Good business sense about your bottom line allows you to evaluate taking new risks. One gets caught up in the whirlwind of making glass and raising kids and putting them through college. It is important to know your profit margin and cost in order to bring all those threads together."

Being an entrepreneur right now is both highly rewarding and quite scary for Caldwell. "I am approaching retirement age with the knowledge that I will continue to work for a long time. Even when you are doing what you love, it would be nice to be able to consider the future without as much worry. Younger people coming into the field will not be able to count on Social Security or pensions, and they have to hope they don't get sick." Having some business training and a good business plan are critical tools to help them succeed.

Her own evolving business plan, says Caldwell, is focused on staying small and lean. "I don't want to have to hire more people to do more jobs. That snowballs into generating more work but not doing the work I want to do." She hopes to add more teaching and expects that more craft shows will bring in more custom and retail sales. Continuing wholesale distribution through galleries, however, is still an open question. She hopes that a cold, clear eye to how different strategies affect her bottom line will help her keep Sunflower Glass Studio viable and growing into the future.

For all its twists and turns, Caldwell is confident about the future of the art glass industry. "There are lots of innovative artists making very different and edgy work. It is a privilege and an honor for me to work among them."

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*Read the March/April 2014 issue of Glass Art to find more about how Karen and Geoff Caldwell adapted their window business to address global competition, supply side shortages, and deal with economic cycles that challenge everyone in the glass art industry.*



**Karen & Geoff Caldwell, Owners  
Sunflower Glass Studio**  
877 Sergeantsville Road  
Stockton, New Jersey 08559  
(609) 397-1535 (Phone)  
(609) 397-0660 (Fax)  
Caldwell877@comcast.net  
sunflowerglassstudio.com