

CREATING ART FOR SCHOOLS

MICHAEL DUPILLE'S PUBLIC COMMISSIONS

by Shawn Waggoner

As a pioneer of the Northwest fusing movement, Michael Dupille has contributed not only personal work for private collectors, but large public art projects for a variety of clients including the Washington and Oregon State Arts Commissions. Some of his largest and most challenging artwork touches the lives of hundreds of teachers and students in the public school environment every day.

Although the process of creating art for schools is not significantly different from producing other large-scale work, Dupille's question becomes this: "How do I take this opportunity and use it to inspire the audience—the children? I want it to be *art*, but also want the imagery to be relatable to them and further their imaginative process and fill them with wonder at the possibilities." Sometimes Dupille mirrors the locale, using elements from nature or a credo familiar to the children. "Glass has such unique and beautiful properties, and the students, parents, and faculty are drawn to it for that as well as the process of making the work."

Safety is also a primary factor in creating commissions for schools. Dupille lives and works in an area of the country that is very prone to earthquakes, so he has to engineer and install accordingly. There are a number of checkpoints along the way to insure that proper procedures and materials are utilized.

Valley Elementary and Middle School

Installed in April 2013, *Blue Ribbon Livin'* was created for Valley Elementary and Middle School in Valley, Washington. Dupille was selected out of more than 100 artists to create this Washington State Percent for Art Program commission, his first in that part of the state. Working closely with the school's local art selection committee, Dupille created artwork that represents the ideas and images important to the community using his signature process called Fritography that employs glass frit as the basis for frit paintings that are kiln fired in multiple layers.

A large, colorful, and engaging glass blue ribbon now greets children at Valley School, reminding them daily of their potential for success. "I am very impressed by the artwork Michael created," said Valley School Principal, Todd Smith. "He also did a great job with his presentation to the students, staff, and community members who attended the unveiling." During an assembly, Dupille shared a slide show of the lengthy and complicated process he used to create the artwork and talked about the significance behind the imagery he incorporated into *Blue Ribbon Livin'*, which measures 14 feet wide by 10 feet high.



Michael Dupille, *Blue Ribbon Livin'*, Percent for Art Program, Washington State Arts Commission, Valley School K-8, 14' x 10', kiln formed glass and etched copper, Valley, Washington, 2013.

His work references the county fair and also the natural beauty and wildlife of this eastern part of the state through its symbolic red tail hawk feather, stars, and snowflakes. This rural area is 4-H proud and a pioneer community originally settled by hearty folk in covered wagons. The wagon wheel and engraved barn swallows both incorporate copper elements glued to the surface. The weather vane, a common sight in the area, was used as a symbol of direction.

Each grade level at Valley, a kindergarten through 8th grade school, learned about the processes and concepts associated with *Blue Ribbon Livin'* through tailored lessons produced through a new pilot project designed to integrate new public art installations with arts learning opportunities.

Last fall, as part of the dedication, Dupille helped the school's students create a massive sand mandala in the shape of a blue ribbon covering the school's softball field under the direction of Gail Churape, the art teacher. Each student was given his or her own space to work within, and by the end of the day, they had created a colorful temporary artwork within view of the Lane Mountain Sand plant, which donated the sand for the project. Lane Mountain Sand also supplies sand to Uroboros and Bullseye for the manufacturing of the very glasses Dupille uses in his work. The mandala helped the students feel even more connected to *Blue Ribbon Livin'* and helped them experience firsthand the value and joy of creativity. In true Buddhist tradition, the mandala was destroyed after ceremonial photos were taken.





Michael Dupille working on the mural project with Ruth Brockmann for the Oregon State Commission at her studio in Portland, Oregon. Photo by Ruth Brockmann.

Daybreak Elementary and Middle School

In 2009, Dupille created a tour de force of kiln worked glass for Daybreak Elementary and Middle School in Battle Ground, Washington. A Washington State Percent for Art Program, the project required work for four separate locations in the school, each requiring a novel approach to aesthetic.

Boomerangs, which measures 42 inches high by 12 feet wide, is located in the media center. A great example of how Fritography can achieve detail and color similar to painting on canvas, this piece features birds shaped like boomerangs on their migratory path. The ash from Mount St. Helen's returns to and replenishes the earth, allowing things to grow. The community's flora and fauna are reflected in the work, including the rhododendron, the state flower. "This was a rewarding project, because the school was open to the idea of my incorporating soft surrealism into the work."

Dupille considers his titles deeply—how they relate to the imagery and how the work itself relates to its environment. The Valley piece that garnered the most response was *Encycleafpedia*, which measures 47 inches high by 78 inches wide and is located in the foyer. *Attention Distraction* and *Reflecting Rainbow/Trout* each measure 2 feet high by 7 feet wide. "*Reflecting Rainbow/Trout* forces you to take a second look. Then you start to see the layers, depth, and what's happening with the piece."

Public Work versus Private Commission

Most artists either love or hate the commission process and working with committees to produce artwork. Lack of artistic freedom can make the process frustrating, but it can also inspire new directions and solutions. "You feel a bit like a tightrope walker, but having a knowledgeable arts advocate can make all the difference in the world."

Dupille is on constant watch for public art projects that fit his technique and aesthetic approach. For now, he has begun designing a significant private commission for a client in Hawaii utilizing suspended cast indigenous birds—some current, some extinct. "I'm very excited about this work, as birds are some of my favorite subjects."

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See the March/April 2014 issue of *Glass Art* for more information about the evolution of Michael Dupille's new work and products.



Michael Dupille working on Blue Ribbon Livin' at Valley Elementary and Middle School. Photo by Bob Wilken.

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