

Weaves of Glass

The art of Markow & Norris

BY WAYNE ALAN BRENNER

Glass breaks if it can't flow. Get it melting, you can conjure all manner of shapes and color-infused wonderments that will remain when cooled. Work it cold, there are sheets and shards, baubles and balls, for manipulating into leaded frames or arranging intricately sculpturewise. Still: Glass is either in its solid state or its liquid state or, if you're careful, briefly somewhere between. But, regardless, there's no way a person could, like, weave a sort of fabric from threads of the gorgeous stuff. That would be ... impossible, right?

Wrong.

Two men, Eric Markow and Thom Norris, have been doing just that for more than a decade now. The process of woven glass still seems beyond the possible, because the artists are keeping it a secret, and because, if you're a curious engineering sort who's pretty much figured out how it might be done and have attempted to work the stuff yourself, you'll likely call it quits after trying for weeks and weeks to get it right.

Markow and Norris have gotten it right consistently, to the point where they can, with months of preparation and planning and vigorous industry, indulge their creativity in ways never before seen in the world of glass art. It's the height of experimental craftsmanship, and, especially with their new large works – a series of life-size woven-glass kimonos, structured as if inhabited; and an anatomically precise (but 5-foot-long) crimson dragonfly – it's pure, unalloyed beauty.

Now halfway through the run of this latest exhibition, Haven Gallery won't be as crowded with people as it was during the posh opening reception. Even though Markow and Norris do only one show annually, the West Sixth Street venue – an emporium sparkling with glass art and rooted au naturel by sculptures of exotic wood and more, now in its fourth year of operation under the guidance of Mindi Partee – will by now be underpopulated enough for you to leisurely take in the art. We recommend such a treat for your eyes' pleasure, especially after your interest is piqued by this interview.

Austin Chronicle: This exhibition isn't only the new kimono and that huge dragonfly, right?

Eric Markow: This show is probably the biggest one we've done, and we've got – how many pieces, Thom? – a lot.

Thom Norris: We'll have more than 30 pieces on display; it's the biggest collection we've shown, and it seems like it just gets bigger every time we do a show.

AC: What brought you to Austin's Haven Gallery specifically?

Norris: We've known Mindi Partee since the opening of her gallery. She came to Philadelphia, as many galleries do, to purchase art. And we used to do a show every winter, in February, at the Buyers Market of

American Craft in downtown Philadelphia, and that's where we met Mindi. She really enjoyed the art, and she ordered several pieces and ordered a sculpture, and she's carried our work ever since. She's wanted to do a show with us in the past, but it just had to be the right time, the right fit. So we decided that, after our last show in Washington, we'd go to Austin and look at the gallery. And it's an enormous space, really big and airy, a perfect fit for our sculpture: They tend to require a lot of space. So we hammered out the details in the beginning of the year, and we've been working as hard as possible to get all the sculpture ready. We tend to put a lot of pressure on ourselves. The press release is usually written about what art's gonna be in the show – before we even finish it.

AC: Do you do that on purpose?

Norris: Well, it does push us. We know what we have planned, but new things – like our dragonfly – we didn't really have the structure set up, so we didn't know what complications we might run into. But it came together right at the end. We were working on it right up until the night the moving truck came. So, do we do it on purpose? There's sort of a necessity to say a little bit about the new art that's gonna be in the show, but ... I always wish we had another month.

Markow: One thing we knew we were going to do for this show was the *Winter Twilight Kimono*. What we're trying to do with the series is create four kimonos of woven glass that depict each of the four seasons at different times of day. So we did the *Autumn Sunset Kimono* for the Washington, D.C., show, and the one we're debuting at Haven Gallery is *Winter Twilight*.



Autumn Sunset Kimono

“We wanted to make [the kimono] three-dimensional, like it's actually being worn by someone. So we embarked on that impossible task. And, after we'd made all the glass colors, it took us six months solid to figure it out, to engineer and weave it and get it all put together so it fit nicely and actually look like it's a garment that's on a model.”

– Thom Norris

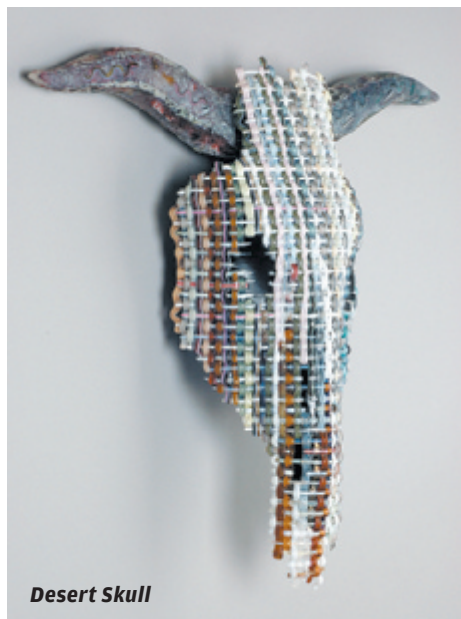
AC: So there's eventually going to be a Spring Day?

Markow: The next one in the series will be *Spring Dawn*. So it'll be moving from winter into spring and into the early morning hours. And then the last one will be *Summer Zenith*, and of course that'll be high noon, summertime. One thing that inspires us a lot is landscape and nature, and these kimonos are inspired by that. ... There are mountains represented in the kimonos, images that we've produced with the woven glass technique.

AC: What led you to choose kimonos in particular?

Norris: When we designed our origami series in 2008, it was because we wanted sculpture that varied from our more organic, undulating pieces. We wanted more corners and hard folds, making it look like it had been a folded piece of paper that had been unfolded and things like that. We did the *Peace Crane* at that time. And in our sketchbook for the different pieces we were doing, the last sketch was of a kimono. And we knew that it would be so

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Desert Skull



Eric Markow (l) and Thom Norris

complicated that we probably wouldn't be able to finish it that year; we were working on the *Peace Crane* for the show in Philadelphia. And we knew that, as soon as that show was over, we needed to get started on the kimono. And the way the sleeves hang down, as Eric said, it really gives you a great canvas to create scenery with. We thought, at first, that we could just make a woven-glass kimono that looked the way they traditionally display them: On a rod, where the kimono just hangs flat on the wall when not being worn. But we thought, we already work with glass, and we create our own fabric out of glass, and so we wanted to make it three-dimensional, like it's actually being worn by someone. So we embarked on that impossible task. And, after we'd made all the glass colors, it took us six months solid to figure it out, to engineer and weave it and get it all put together so it fit nicely and actually look like it's a garment that's on a model.

Markow: It's sort of personified in a way: You really feel a presence of this woman standing there. One thing I noticed from our last show is that a lot of people were very affected just by seeing it – for that reason. They could connect to it, because it does end up almost like a statue. And it's just interesting for us to always make things bigger, more intricate and challenging, to push ourselves and go a little further each year.

AC: *Y'all seem to have a habit of figuring out what's the most difficult thing you could possibly do next and then moving in that direction.*

Norris: [laughs] Well, when we did the kimono, we wanted to change the weave, we're always trying to do that, so that it stays fresh for our customers and for us. Our first weave was just a sort of perpendicular weave, you know, crisscrossing. And then we went into making the weave diagonal, and then a circular weave for our



Rainbow Peace Crane

flowers. And when we did the kimono last year, we wanted to put large pieces of glass *into* the weave, so we'd have bigger canvases for the landscape. So we used large pieces that we wove *into* it, although you can still see the perpendicular weave there. The large pieces were a new element for us,

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hearkening back to our stained-glass days, where you cut out the shape you want and integrate it into the window that you're making. We did the same thing with the kimono, but, with the weave, it's quite, ah, unusual to see pieces that big woven into the fabric. And now we've taken that into the dragonfly, and it's a new technique. You can see the perpendicular weave, and the diagonal weave, and the large pieces, all in the one sculpture.

Markow: You look up close on the kimono, you'll see we were able to produce a painterly effect. We used crushed glass, we used silver powder, different types of elements that react to give different types of effects on the glass. Having such a large canvas allows for a lot of experimentation.

AC: Does woven-glass work have a monopoly on your time, or do you still use other techniques by themselves?

Markow: We do casting as well.

Norris: Our *Texas Longhorn Skull* has a 4-foot-long cast for the horns. And we used a really difficult process with them, too, getting the front of the horns to look like they're sort of covered with, like, crystalized diamonds. It's actually glass, but when we cast it, we had to use some unusual techniques to keep the bottom of the cast from melting completely together ... but the weave is definitely our signature, and once we developed the actual fabric, we moved quickly beyond just a piece of fabric on a table to sculpture. And now they keep changing, keep getting bigger, but the weave is our signature. So, hopefully, no matter where our work is, people can recognize right away that it's *our* sculpture. ■

"Woven Glass" is on display through Dec. 11 at Haven Gallery, 1122 W. Sixth. For more information, call 477-2700 or visit www.havengalleryaustin.com.

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