

Stochastic

An interview between Brett Littman and Jeff Zimmerman

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*The artist Jeff Zimmerman has been working with glass since the age of nineteen. He studied with some of the greatest living glassblowers from around the world and the US and was able to absorb all of their classic techniques and apply them to whatever he was working on. When I first met Jeff at UrbanGlass in the 1990s, he was someone who could make almost anything, from vessels to thin-walled goblets to complicated mold-blown objects. As a member of the B Team, one of the more freewheeling group of glassblowers on the scene, he also knew how to break the rules. He was one of a small group of fabricators and master craftsmen in great demand, consistently working with designers, architects, and contemporary artists. And Jeff was beginning to chart his own path in the medium, attempting to define his aesthetic and build a body of work that would challenge his knowledge of glass and his hand skills in new and interesting ways.*

*Three decades later, his commitment to his craft remains unparalleled. Five days a week, Jeff is in his studios in Portland, Oregon, or in Red Hook, Brooklyn, blowing and cutting glass. He continues to experiment to try and find the limits of the material he has chosen to work with. His explorations into how forces of nature like gravity, heat, time, and patterns generate or complicate form have given his work purpose and energy. They have also allowed him to create a singular style of non-reproducible forms to populate his groupings and wall installations that highlight the endless variability and kinetic potential of glass itself.*

*Over the intervening years, Jeff has become one of the best-known and renowned artists working with glass. His chandeliers, which are all custom one-of-a-kind objects based on the specific architecture of his clients' spaces, are probably his best known and most reproduced works. The brass finials on which his crumpled, bubbled, and cut organic lighting fixtures are attached to resemble quickly sketched lines in space or a Jackson Pollock paint drip. They have serious presence in space while at the same time are respectful and complementary to the art, furniture, and views of each collector's home. They are masterworks of subtle intervention.*

Brett Littman: Jeff, we've known each other since the mid-nineties when we both were at UrbanGlass in Brooklyn, and it's been interesting to watch your development over all these years from afar. So I wanted to ask you, how you see your development from that time to now?

Jeff Zimmerman: Well, I love thinking about those days at UrbanGlass. You know it was such a unique time when we were there, and I think there should be a book about it as it was so different from the rest of the glass craft movement. It was more about contemporary visual artists making and using glass rather than the traditional approach of trying to develop a craft from, you know, a more decorative standpoint.

BL: A lot of that came from the director, John Perreault, who was an art world veteran who had landed himself in the craft world, and who I think really changed the direction of that place in terms of what its focus could be and what kinds of artists could be working there.

JZ: Yes, definitely. I was still pretty deeply invested in the technical aspects of glassblowing, but UrbanGlass was a place where I could kind of let that go a bit. Of course, the other thing that happened to me at that time, which you know because you were there, was joining the B Team. Working with them was a huge personal breakthrough. I got to see and explore how glass breaks, falls, and flies. It was so punk rock – all of the other glassblowers were like, “We’ve been trying so hard not to let the bubble get too hot and collapse and make perfect cylinders or spheres,” and our approach was, “If you want to see a perfect cylinder or sphere just have a machine make it, we want to play and explore what happens when these ‘perfection’ limits are erased.”

Pilchuck, in Seattle, was an important place for me as well. When I worked there, I would always go to where the visiting artists were staying and working to talk to them, artists like Kiki Smith or Maya Lin, when they were in residence. Of course, I found it funny that they had no idea how hard it is to blow a Venetian goblet. They were like, “I have no interest in those things, I would never make such a baroque thing – it is something you find in a thrift store!” For me however, I was still learning and had great technical teachers like Lino Tagliapietra and Pino Signoretto, so at that same time I was able to absorb what all these artists were telling me about their thought processes, which helped me continue to refine how I could merge skill and concept.

So over time, even though I was making more difficult forms like vessels with long necks, I didn’t really know what to do with them. They were more like practice sketches. I wanted to have proficiency in all of the traditional glass techniques, but after seeing how contemporary artists were approaching the material I started to move towards a more sculptural approach.

BL: So the impetus to make sculpture rather than vessels was really driven by what contemporary artists were doing with the material?

JZ: Yes, that was important. Also, our generation of glass artists was interested in forms and objects that weren’t marketable to the glass collector community. What they wanted seemed all too traditional and a bit stodgy. We were more interested in looking at great glass design from the 1950s made in Murano or Scandinavia and figuring out ways to make those kinds of things relevant today.

So, I started to make biomorphic forms. I would lay them on their sides on the floor, make a lot of them and think about them as a kind of drawing in space. I didn’t want to see them on bases or on a table. That caught the attention of the gallerist Sean Kelly in New York, who normally didn’t show glass, and that encouraged me to continue. Then, Zesty Meyers and Evan Snyderman, who owned R & Company, and had been a part of the B Team with me, encouraged me to continue down this path. And their love of modern design really influenced me to look more closely at these families of objects to understand their simplicity and their forms and find ways to incorporate that into my work.

BL: Why did you start to make chandeliers?

JZ: I got a commission from a major art dealer to make one. It seemed like a natural progression to try and make sculpture on the ceiling because, in an art collector's apartment, there is never much wall space left. It also was interesting to me to think about the relationships between light and glass.

BL: Do you draw?

JZ: Actually, I don't draw or sketch much on paper – it seems too much like homework to me. But I have begun to think of my work more like drawing in three dimensions.

BL: That's interesting to me. I have been thinking that your chandeliers, when they are installed, remind me a lot of the imagery from Japanese or Chinese scroll paintings.

JZ: Maybe more like Jackson Pollock. The chandeliers are like quick lines in space that bisect a room, which is usually modern and rectangular - that is how I envision them. The *Snake* candle holders, for me, are drawing in hot glass – they are forms made by giving up control and searching for a natural line. Even my *Galaxy Clusters* are made by laying the plates on the floor and contemplating how to draw overlapping circles.

BL: I want to ask you why, in your working process, you are always trying to harness the inherent chaos of the material you have chosen to work with – glass – as a compositional tool. I want to introduce a term to you – stochastic – which is a mathematical term that refers to a variable process where the outcome involves some randomness and has some uncertainty. The reason why I'm familiar with this term is because I did an exhibition about the Greek composer Iannis Xenakis, who was a mathematician and engineer before becoming a composer. He was very interested in disrupting the writing of a score by inviting chance and variability through math. I have also worked with other artists, like the poet Jackson Mac Low, who were interested in using chance, games, or rules to attempt to remove their own ego and intention from the work.

Since you have a lot of hand, muscle, and technical knowledge of your medium, do you push glass to its limit and to a place where you can kind of lose control to try and reduce your own agency and pre-determination in the work?

JZ: Well, stochastic is a great term and very relevant to me. When you mentioned it ahead of this talk, I looked it up and saw that it comes from the Greek word for “to aim” at or “to target.” In some ways, the infinite variability of hot glass and its potential helps to remove my reliance on technique and my own ego.

For example, if I am making a vase, I will start by blowing a perfect sphere, and then I will overheat the glass so that the surface tension of the material will start to collaborate with its natural surroundings and gravity, which I cannot control. This allows me to participate in the same processes that Mother Nature uses to build different patterns in nature by harnessing the physical influences

on our planet. If I tried to draw the resulting shape ahead of time, I think I would find it too contrived, but being in the moment and letting things happen opens up so many possibilities.

BL: Yes, in your work it never seems like you are going for seriality or mimesis – each thing you make is unique and very specific to the moment you are in. Maybe the technical aspects are similar in terms of what you're doing, literally in terms of physics and sequences of movement, but you are not necessarily looking to make something exactly the same again.

JZ: That's intentional. I don't produce a lot of work every year. I limit what I do – I mean at this point I could have a team of 10 people making my work for me, but I like doing things myself. By keeping my production limited, everything I make is different. There are surely similar forms, but for anything I sell to a collector I want it to be unique and I find value in that approach.

BL: Do you go to the hot shop every day to experiment?

JZ: I am in my studio five days a week in Portland, Oregon, or when I am in New York in the studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn. I have hot shops and cold shops in both locations. These days, most of the experimentation is happening in the cold shop. The pieces coming out of the hot shop are a reflection of discipline, but I treat them like parts of a bigger whole. When I am in the cold shop, it is more like a laboratory. I can really inspect the pieces there, hold them up to the light and think about cutting them or treating their surface in a different way, which opens up a lot more experimentation.

BL: Well, one of my greatest experiences was when Lino Tagliapietra took me to his cold shop in Murano. His smooth beautiful vessels were going to be battutoed by this master craftsman. I spent the whole day watching this guy work his wheel and transform these things into something absolutely magical.

JZ: I think what is limiting a lot of young glass artists today is that they just want to make things in the hot shop and call it a day. They hate coldworking. I love coldworking, but maybe it is an age thing – I mean, I like playing golf now but didn't like that when I was younger!

BL: Are you familiar with the ecologist Suzanne Simard's writing? She is the author of the book *Finding the Mother Tree*, in which she elaborates on her theory that trees and fungi in a forest are all in communication with each other and work together to promote a healthy symbiotic relationship. I know you often talk about the deep relationship of your work to the natural world. Personally, since I spent a lot of time in Japan over the last decade, I have become more interested in Shintoism and the idea of how humans communicate, influence, and affect the biodiversity of the world around us. It seems to me that we need to take more care in how we approach the world, and we need to better understand what it is telling us. For you, what is it that nature communicates about design, life, and knowledge?

JZ: I am not familiar with that book, but the owner of the house we bought here in Portland left a book for us called *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben, which I imagine is similar.

Interestingly, our house is surrounded by trees, so when I look out the window, I am always seeing them and thus I am always thinking about them.

I guess Mother Nature and natural processes are more my religion than something like Shintoism. I believe that life has a lot of randomness, is more phenomenal, and more mystical than what we can apprehend. I am amazed by how nature communicates among different species, but I don't need to know exactly how that works. As a glassblower, I can directly relate to the patterns in nature and can participate in the same process. For me, this has been revelatory and always pushes me forward when I am in the hot shop in the summer and am getting bored with what I am doing. It has been a great inspiration.

My bookcases are filled with books on natural patterns, cosmic imagery, and the work of Buckminster Fuller, which were given to me by my dad, who is a ceramicist. I am always learning from my library and building my reserve of images.

One example of how I “collaborated” with nature that I can think of right now is the series of works I called *Soft Explosions* that I made for Steuben Glass in 2006. These works were based on my exploration of explosive patterns in nature. I looked at Harold Edgerton's photos of milk splashes and I realized that glass, due to its liquidity, can perfectly capture and freeze that moment of explosive energy.

My chandeliers refer to the branching of rivers, tree limbs, the veins on a leaf, or blood vessels—and by adopting these forms, I can participate in that generative “natural” moment. The building blocks of the chandeliers are those kinds of almost asymmetrical mathematical repeating natural forms I just mentioned and they allow me to feel that I as an artist and human being I am playing an active part in a forest, a landscape or writ large, the universe.

Another part of nature that intrigues me is time. We still haven't figured out how time works. When my glass pieces collapse from overheating or tool manipulation or when my mirrored works capture and reflect and refract the space that they are in, I feel like I am searching in unknown areas of human knowledge and linking up to the vast continuum of time.

In the end, I guess the purpose of my work is for it to be enjoyed and to bring beauty into the world. It also should be a daily reminder that we should be paying closer attention to the building blocks of our universe, and that these forms exist inside and outside of us. Recognizing that might make us treat the planet and other human beings better.

BL: Jeff, thanks, this definitely helps elucidate for me what you mean when you talk about the influence of nature on your work. This will be my final question. Is there something you've been dreaming about doing? Is there a project you've always wanted to do but you just haven't been able to do it yet?

JZ: I have been really fortunate to have done a lot already in my career. I have worked small scale to large scale and my work is installed in many great spaces. But one thing I have been dreaming of is to

go to Hawaii and blow objects from molten lava. I think I am going to apply to the Hawaii Ministry of Culture to get a grant to do this.

BL: OK, I wasn't expecting that, but I wish you good luck with that project!