



An Interview with Ralph McCaskey ★★★★★

I met lampwork artist Ralph McCaskey at Bead Expo in Oakland last spring. He had a long table full of beads, but honestly, the only ones that I remember are the monsters! Each monster bead has its own personality, which makes purchasing one more like an adoption than a mere financial transaction. Ralph also has the most unusual business cards I've ever seen—miniature glass bottles, not mere pieces of paper. Ralph makes a wide range of other, non-monster beads, including glass eyeballs for polymer clay artists (or rather, he creates eyeballs for something—maybe figures or dolls?—that polymer clay artists make.) Absolutely no polymer clay artists were harmed during this interview—enjoy!



Fright Wig, one of Ralph McCaskey's monster beads (not a picture of Ralph)

Michelle: How and when did you get started with lampworking?

Ralph: Around 1999 or so, my wife started to get into beadwork with some stringing. So I bought her a gift certificate at a really good bead store in town and when it was time for her to redeem it, I went along. After awhile, I sat down in a chair that was craftily placed near these books and I looked at a book by Cindy Jenkins called *Making Glass Beads*. And then faster than you can say "bankruptcy", I was drawn in. The staff referred me to a local art center in Oakland where the classes were taught by Harlan Simon. He's a really great teacher and best of all, he's calm.

Michelle: A good quality when you're setting things on fire.

Ralph: You've got a room full of people, 2,000 degree torches that you could melt a car with, and people who are easily spooked because they've never been around these things before. I love dropping in beginning beadmaking classes. Anyway, it was a two week class and after the second session, I realized, "I've got to have one of these things [a torch] at home." And I started making a lot of lousy beads, because that's how you learn.

Michelle: Tell me about your creative process—your studio, your hours, your day-to-day activities.

Ralph: My studio is at home. I spent a lot of time designing the work bench, the ventilation, the lighting. I found an old marble countertop in an alley behind an old meat market. (We later found an old photo that had the butchers, replete in their aprons, a wall calendar with a picture of FDR dated 1933 and that very countertop, covered with an array of chill-inducing knives.) It works quite well, though it still looks like the aftermath of a horrible accident. About one side of the garage is torch space. The back of the house has a greenhouse and that's where I do the cold work. It can get pretty hot out there in the summer, so sometimes I re-arrange my schedule according to the weather.

As far as how the studio looks, I have to admit that not every bead I make is a winner. I find a lot of comfort in Thomas Edison. Someone pointed out to him that he had thousands of failed attempts to make an electric lightbulb. And his reply was, "Yes, but I also know 10,000 ways how *not* to make a lightbulb." Each bead is an education, whether it works out the way I'd hoped or not. So these objects are hanging from the shelves or the rafters, piled up like snowdrifts. And from time to time, they just provide me with a fresh challenge. So inspiration-wise, I have volumes of reminders of things I could do.

Michelle: What's your process? Do you plan before you sit down at the torch?

Ralph: As far as process, I come into this rather backwards. A lot of what I do is the direct result of some kind of technical failure. Like with the monsters? Those were a direct result of trying to make hollow beads and failing. You know how people tell you to play to your strengths? I'm kind of doing what I do worst. It took me years to make a round bead, so I made un-round beads.

There's also cross-pollination. A lot of people I know started in other forms like stained glass. I played at ceramics for years. Sandblasting, tumbling . . . things you don't necessarily associate with glass. So sometimes you can take a left turn—what would that look like if I sandblasted it?

Michelle: Your studio is called "Nightside Studios." Do you work mostly at night?

Ralph: There is a reason we're called "Nightside Studios." Nightside, by the way, is an old newspaper term. We have a background in the newspaper business. My wife's been an editor for thirty years and I have a degree in journalism.

I find it easier for me to work uninterrupted after about 10 o'clock at night. And working at the torch, that's really important. Almost every torch mishap story I've heard involves some kind of unwelcome distraction . . . a cat, a phone, a spilled beverage . . . It always starts with, "I never, ever, do this, but . . ." and the next thing you know, you're looking at some interesting body modifications. Also, I'm just never at my best before the crack of noon.

I've had some really exceptional nights where I've worked until 3 o'clock in the morning. I tend to do the cold working stuff in the morning or early afternoon. With torch work, you're better off not stopping. I refer to it as "riding the tiger."

Michelle: What about music? Do you like music while you create?

Ralph: I absolutely, definitely listen to music. The music enhances the creative process and influences sometimes directly. I listen to mostly jazz, particularly the Latin jazz, old New Orleans stuff, old R&B, old piano rolls, mambo. Mambo's worth mentioning because it helped me work out an old technical problem with some beads that kept cracking. One day I turned on some mambo and I found myself moving to the music, almost dancing. The movement, the regularity of it. . . now I can keep the beads from cracking. If these guys were still alive, I'd write them a letter of thanks.

Now if I'm involved in something non-creative, like filler beads or glass eyeballs, audio books are much better. It keeps me from getting bored. With cold work, I end up listening to NPR.



Horned Flycatcher

Michelle: Do you plan your designs before you sit down with the torch?

Ralph: There are occasions when I sit down with a plan and work at it until it's done. But other times, I sit down with a plan and then halfway through, a light bulb goes on in my mind and the design goes somewhere else. Sometimes what I'm doing is picking up on a previous plan. Maybe I could sit down and stick with the plan, but that would take the fun out of it.

Michelle: Let's talk about your inspiration. You've mentioned a few things already—the failed beads, the music. What else?

Ralph: Inspiration finds me before I can go out looking for it. I've found a notebook to be enormously helpful. In the middle of a shower, I'll grab a bar of soap and write on the glass. It might be a word like "bleb" or "anti-flockulant" that will trigger something else. I'll write something down and months later, the result might not be what it was originally written down about. To get up, and think about something else besides beads, that's where the idea pops up.

I like to take the dogs for a walk—the dogs like to run along the beach and chase the birds. You find a lot of interesting flotsam out there. Objects that maybe you weren't sure what they were, but when they wash ashore, they are interesting forms, geometric or organic. Sometimes I'll copperplate them. A peach pit coated in copper after it has been rolling around the beach for a few months is a very interesting form.

I remember being at a horse show and seeing the ears of some odd mule and the next thing you know, I'm sketching it. The bead doesn't look like a mule ear, but it got me started down that path.



Scabrous Beaky

Michelle: You have quite a full show schedule. What advice do you have for someone new who's wondering about doing shows?

Ralph: My advice to someone starting out is to just go to shows. I've been to more venues where I've looked around and decided "this is not for me." If there are five glass beadmakers, is there room for one more? If there are no glass beadmakers, does that mean that there's room for you, or does that mean that everyone else has tried it and it doesn't work?

Michelle: You seem to do all sorts of shows—like farmer's markets—in addition to more traditional venues. How's that working for you?

Ralph: The upside of working the farmer's market is that you come home with lots of fresh produce. I've kind of backed out of doing farmer's markets, because in my experience, there's not a lot of money in that. I like doing street shows. It's a party in the street. You get to make some money and talk with people. And any time you talk to people, you're learning stuff. The bead shows are the best for actually selling beads. The beadmakers are more focused, more determined. They're more appreciative, too. They know the effort involved and understand the pricing a bit more. Plus, I don't know if I've ever been at a bead show where someone looked me point blank in the eye and said, "Yeah, but what do you do with it?"

Thanks, Ralph! To see more examples of Ralph McCaskey's beads, visit his website, www.nightsidestudios.com. You may also enjoy listening to a recent [podcast](#) with Ralph and other artists at the Maker Faire in San Francisco.

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