



Josh Simpson

Blown Glass Artist Extraordinaire

by Joe Samuelson III

Have you ever had a chat with a five-year-old who has fifty years of experience creating iconic glass imagery? Well, with five decades of knowledge, allegories, and invention behind him, Josh Simpson still manages to retain that pure joy and excitement of a little boy experimenting with all his favorite toys. It's like when you bring up the imagery of deep space . . . or the bluest blues of them all . . . or the middle schoolers who spurred a universe of new worlds. Josh relives each moment with the same wonder and awe as he did when it all happened a lifetime ago.

Not That Hard If You Love It

Eternally grateful for each experience along his path, Simpson has the ability to pull the best from what another might call a dire situation. For example, during the winter of 1971, he found himself in Vermont living out of the bed of his Datsun pickup and sleeping on the floor of the impromptu glass studio at Goddard College. Josh can't help but remember how lucky he felt. "I woke up next to the scrap bucket full of colored shards from the blowpipe. I can remember the sunlight hitting them and thinking that even the garbage was being thrown out and that glass was such an amazing material!"



(Left) Josh Simpson, Renwick Gallery Megaplanet, hot-worked solid glass, 12-1/2" diameter, 2005. Photo by the artist.

(Top to Bottom) Josh Simpson, Corning Megaplanet at The Corning Museum of Glass beside a Tiffany window, hot-worked solid glass, 13-1/2" diameter, 2006. Photo by Sue Reed.

Josh Simpson's Vermont studio, 1972. Photo by the artist.
The earliest colorless glass goblets by Josh Simpson.



Thankful for the opportunity to learn his newfound medium, Simpson considered it absolutely necessary to take a leave of absence from college only one class shy of graduation and move into a tipi on the 50 acres of land he had rented for a hefty \$22.50 a month. He paid very little mind to the austerity of harvesting river ice so he could boil the chickpeas he got by the sackload in trade for a few wonky goblets or living on chunks of cheap cheese scraps from a local creamery paired with cases of four-cent cans of tomato soup.

"I constructed that tipi, and together with a fellow Goddard student and two friends from Hamilton College, we built a tiny little studio that was 12 feet by 12 feet by 12 feet and started to blow glass. I wasn't thinking of it as being deprived. No matter how challenging things were, I felt like I was in heaven. I never once felt bad that I had to walk to a stream with an ax to cut out a block of ice for water. It never occurred to me that this was tough. I was blowing glass, so it was just simply, absolutely, fun. Of course, at first I was a terrible glassblower. I couldn't really do anything, but in my own delusional mind I thought, 'This is fantastic. I'm doing great.'"



Perfecting the Glass Gambit

Josh fondly remembers the earliest days of them figuring it all out on their own and doing their best to sell whatever they made, because that's how you got to make more. "At the time I thought the most impossibly difficult thing to make would be a wine goblet. It just was the most perfect shape. I'd never seen anybody make one so I didn't know how it was done, but that's what I set my sights on doing. I was like the Bobby Fischer of goblet making, blowing glass from four in the morning till the afternoon, making goblets over and over again. I'd make a set of wine goblets that were a set only because they were the same color, but they'd have wildly different heights and shapes."

Josh Simpson, three New Mexico Goblets, blown glass, approximately 8" to 9" tall, 1987. Photo by Tommy Olaf Elder.



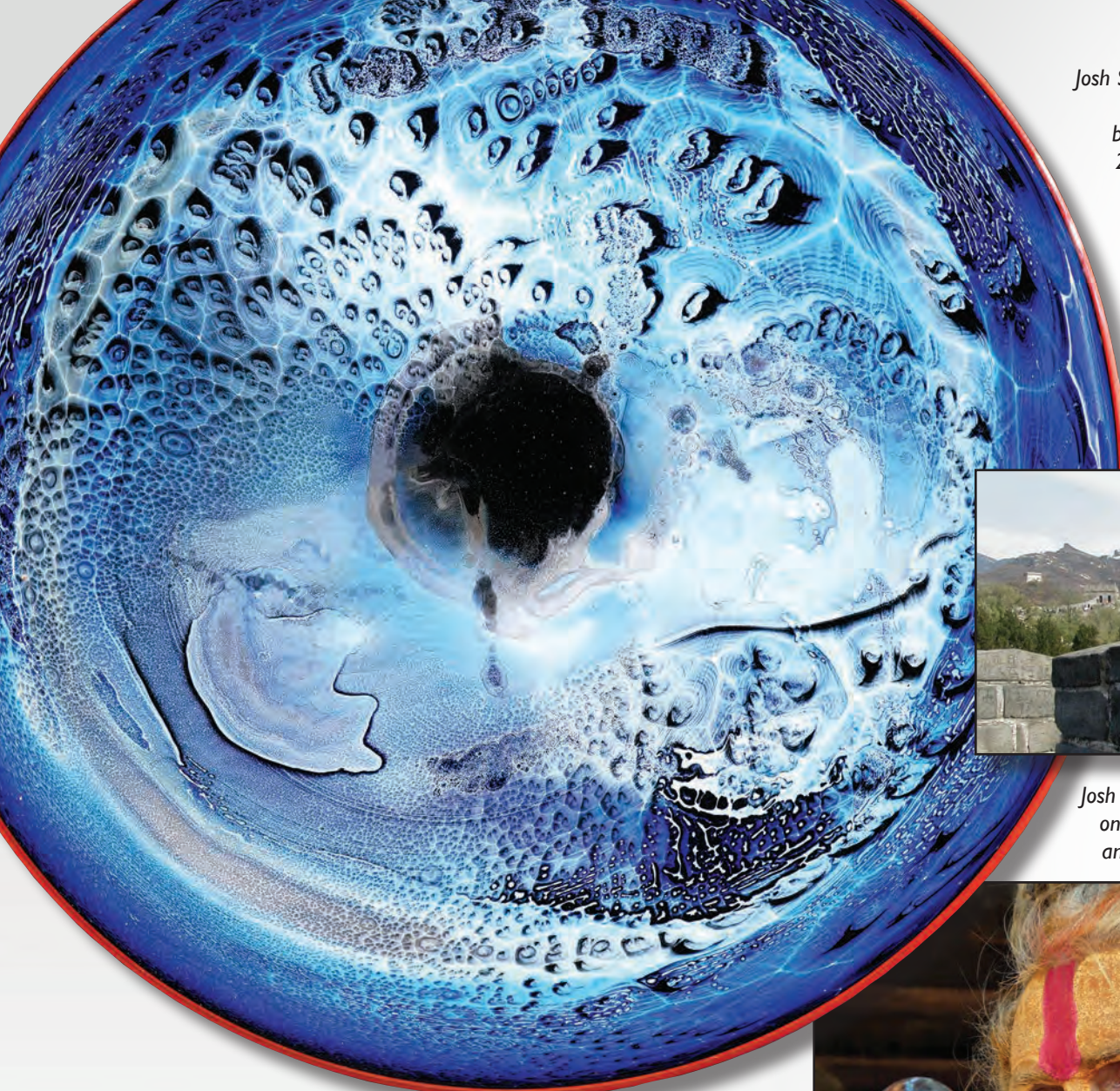
Fifty years later, while finally attacking the hoard of his life's history in the barn on his property, Josh unearthed a memory from some of those goblet-grinding days. On a shelf left to gather dust, an old crate contained the glass that is in part responsible for the notoriety Josh garnered in his early years. "I was living in my tipi, blowing glass, selling goblets when the social secretary to First Lady Rosalynn Carter contacted me. They wanted to use my wine goblets at a White House luncheon during the Carter administration, so I sent out a set of goblets and water tumblers. They came back in this gorgeous handmade wooden crate from the Smithsonian, which I had never opened until this past summer."

With a burst of confidence and his name becoming ubiquitous with blown glass goblets, Josh managed to wrangle enough orders to convince a bank to lend him the funds to build a small studio on his grandfather's land. Soon Simpson was pumping out as many as 200 pieces a week at a mere three bucks a pop. "Fifty goblets each day was me really cranking them out, and I was working alone. Then one day I discovered that one of the stores in New York City was selling my \$3 goblets for \$36 each. At the same time, I decided that I was getting tired of making goblets and was going to try to make fewer of them but charge more.

"I first went to \$6, then \$12, and they only seemed to sell better. Then I thought, 'I've had it. I don't want to do this anymore. I'm going to charge \$25 apiece.' That's when orders literally quintupled. At \$25 I was actually able to save money, and by 1976 I was able to purchase the old dairy farm where I live now in western Massachusetts."



Josh Simpson pulling cane, 2019. Photo by Sue Reed.



Josh Simpson, Subrahmanyam Chandrasekhar Disk, blown glass, 10" diameter, 2017. Photo by the artist.



Josh Simpson, Infinity Planet on the Great Wall of China, an Infinity Project Planet.



Josh Simpson Infinity Project Planet in Nepal. Photo by John Levine.

To Infinity and Beyond

Tying in his awe of the universe with his love of scuba diving and his time in the air as a licensed pilot, the *Planets* became a way for Simpson to share the perspectives of his real-world experiences below the water, above the clouds, and beyond into the unknown. Josh has created thousands of worlds over the years. Some of them, the size of a basketball, grace the halls of the museums, galleries, and even embassies around the world as part of the U.S. Art in Embassies program. Others range down to single-digit inch sizes and can be admired in the palm of your hand. As his worlds gained both notoriety and value, Josh ensured that the art, which started as an engaging gift for kids, would always stay that way too.

Not only does Simpson offer smaller *Planets* at prices that are almost universally accessible, but he has also hidden and given away perhaps as many as he has sold. The beautiful part is that unknown amounts of them are still out there—unclaimed and possibly hidden forever. “For years I hid them myself. When friends went somewhere like the North or South Pole or off to sail around the world, I’d ask them to also take some *Planets* and drop them somewhere, maybe at the equator or some interesting place along their way.”

Josh figured that the idea of hiding his glass for some unknown beneficiary to find not only fit his giving nature but was also kind of a cool way to mess with people. To really start giving on a large scale, Simpson started his now world-renowned Infinity Project for which people can write in with an idea of where they’d like to hide a marble. Those chosen receive two *Planets*, one for themselves and one to hide. “We have an archive of 20-plus years of letters from people. There are so many places, and there may be more than four thousand *Planets* already hidden around the world, ostensibly for archaeologists to find. More than that, they are meant to be a gift for someone who might never collect my work and also perhaps be a small treasure for someone in the future.”

Fifty Years and Counting

In his 50th year, Simpson is looking forward to not looking back. His newest book, *Josh Simpson: 50 Years of Visionary Glass*, a retrospective on his career, is taking care of looking back. So, too, is the 50-year retrospective exhibit, *Josh Simpson: Visionary Explorations in Glass* at the Springfield Museum opening in October 2022.

Josh states assuredly, "I am not really built to look back. I am built to think more about what I am going to work on this morning and decide what's the next thing."

G&A

Josh Simpson

30 Frank Williams Road
Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts
01370
(413) 625-6145
josh@megaplanet.com
joshsimpsonglass.com
Facebook@joshsimpsonglass
Instagram@joshsimpsonglass
YouTube.com@joshsimpsonglass
Pinterest @ jsimpsonglass

Photo by Wekku Ari Sääski

Joe Samuelson III has been a borosilicate lampworker intermittently for 20 years, both professionally and as a hobbyist. The focus of



his work has largely been on functional glass in which he enjoys taking his own style and collaborating with artists who have unique aesthetics. In addition to his functional work, he produces a wide variety of glass both lampworked and fused. For more than a decade, Joe has been an avid collector of murrine focusing largely on glass butterflies.

Originally from Buffalo, New York, Joe has been an expat living across East Asia and the Middle East for 15 years, both teaching and managing English language programs. He is proud to be utilizing his BA in Journalism and experience as a writing instructor to venture deeper into the world of glass and glass art through his work with *Glass Art*® magazine. A variety of his glass art can be found on Instagram @number3glass.

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