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PALM SPRINGS





INNOVATION IN

# Art

*Artists explore the frontiers  
of human culture* | BY TED FRY



COURTESY: ALAN FULLE (2)

*Optical Vision*, by Alan Fulle, is composed of paint and epoxy resins. He created the 6-foot-long panel in 2010.

Remember the craftsman in the booth at the county fair pulling strands of clear or colored glass through a concentrated propane flame? With a practiced touch he'd tease the molten material into mass produced gewgaws to be wrapped up in tissue for the journey home to the curio cabinet. It's called lampwork, and it's a classic North American folk art—thus its fair-ground habitat.

Seattle artist Ginny Ruffner remembers this craftsman, too. When she started experimenting with glass art in the late 1970s she encountered the technique, which was not really considered “art,” and had a revelatory moment. “I looked at lampwork and thought, ‘Wow, you can do a lot of things with this,’” she says. “So I began to make sculptures with it, rather than little trinkets.”

She didn't truly realize it then, but the work she created by applying the essential elements of lampwork marked a true innovation in what was then itself a relatively new form of art, glasswork. “Now there are schools that teach lampwork and exhibitions of it and many people doing it worldwide,” Ruffner marvels. “When I started, nobody I knew of was doing it. Except at county fairs, of course.”

Although our modern culture seems to think

innovation is the exclusive province of the high-tech industry, the art world has a unique claim on the idea which is far older and more universal than anything digital. An artist's innovation springs from personal expression and adapting existing ideas or forms that were once innovative themselves—one could argue that all art is innovative, as each artwork is a new creation. This distinction has lofted artists as cultural torchbearers throughout human history.

The art-world figures featured below not only demonstrate a history of innovation, they continue to push the boundaries of art in ways that help make our society more dynamic today.

## ALAN FULLE

An artist's studio is close to the most personal space a person can have, so it should be no surprise that Seattle's Allan Fulle gives his a distinct name: “an arena of events.” It's just a room in a ramshackle Craftsman house



Alan Fulle

in Seattle's Central District, but this is where Fulle pours hot resin onto vibrantly colored wood planks, collects the viscous overflow and renders the resultant mix of marine supplies and home-brewed pigments into the remarkably vivid pictures and sculptures for which he has become well-known.

Fulle's innovation is the use of industrial resin to mimic, enhance or replace the role of paint or sculptural mass. He pushes the resins and chemicals far beyond the traditional boundaries of the industrial applications for which they were developed. With a fondness for their nearly indestructible, sometimes toxic properties, he likens the material to “turbo-charged paint.”

Fulle says he came upon the process of pouring resin in the wake of much experimentation with other materials such as acrylic, varnish and polyurethane. After a fortuitous introduction to a new prod-





COURTESY: DA-KA-XEEN MEHNER

Da-ka-xeen Mehner's answer to an exhibition about British explorer James Cook is titled *I Was Not Discovered*. This composite photograph documents Mehner's July tableau in Anchorage.

uct developed for boat construction and wind energy farms he knew he'd found his medium. "I'm probably not the first guy to use resin," he says, "but I love the build. I love the strength of it."

Prime examples of his passion for the innovation of building with resin are his tower sculptures, which display agate-like color schemes and organic

forms based on silicon, not carbon, life. Reaching up to 15 feet, they're fabricated of leftover resin that has drizzled off his paintings into plastic bins. He cuts the large accumulated blocks of semi-opaque polymer into small cubes to create Jenga-like structures that glisten and undulate with auras that are sometimes primeval, sometimes markedly architectural.

## WHERE TO SEE ART

The many museums in the West that include art are far more than just buildings with objects hanging on the walls. Today's museums embrace roles as facilitators, even sponsors, of experimental art. But they also treasure their roles as guardians of our artistic heritage.

- The **Anchorage Museum** has galleries devoted to classic Alaska art, typified by Sydney Laurence's massive landscapes; as well as a hallway devoted to Native art and artifacts; anchorage-museum.org.
- The **Seattle Art Museum** is noted for its collection of Northwest School artists such as Morris

- Graves and Mark Tobey; seattleartmuseum.org.
- The **Museum of the North** at University of Alaska Fairbanks has a memorable gallery in which modern, traditional and Native works are displayed side by side; uaf.edu/museum.
- The **Portland Art Museum** is known for its



COURTESY: CHRIS AREND PHOTOGRAPHY / ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

holdings of American Impressionist Childe Hassam; portlandartmuseum.org.

The Anchorage Museum exhibits both modern and traditional art depicting Alaska.

The alchemical abstractions of Fulle's builds are what he describes as an attempt to elicit psychic resonance. "I want something that looks like I chopped it out of a Martian landscape," he says bluntly. "The layers and chunks of otherworldly resin certainly help with that.

"When artists explore innovative content, only time will tell if the ideas are just gimmicks or truly innovative," says Fulle about the long process of finding his way to a signature form—a comment that almost any creative professional would endorse. As for his use of resin and penchant for wearing a respirator while he's working, he intends to continue pushing envelopes. The prospects are good with newer, more interesting materials coming all the time from every quarter. "It's not just a gimmick. It's what you do with it that counts."

Seattle gallery owner William Traver, who exhibits and sells Fulle's work, observes that artists have always been drawn to new materials. "In Alan's case he's definitely done that with resins and the ability to create depth, to create an illusion of space, to create energy fields with colors that couldn't have been done otherwise," he says.

As Fulle's work demonstrates, artists don't necessarily stock their larders at the art supply store anymore. These days they're shopping at the hardware store or the marine supply store, a newish trend in which products developed for industry move into the artists' studios.

"Artists are often invited to workshops in large factories and plants where new materials are being created," says William Traver. "Only through their new creative applications do industries become aware of all the possibilities." Thus the innovations continue—an apt illustration of the role art has long played in civilization.

## GINNY RUFFNER

Ginny Ruffner's original adoption and continuing use of lampwork in her glass art shows that a process or material developed for a particular use can offer an array of applications for an artist. She recently received affirmation that the tech industry is well aware of opportunities to expand their own actual innovation within the galaxy of art when a tech company invited her to join the

*How Spring Feels 2015* illustrates glass artist Ginny Ruffner's fanciful approach to conveying sensations.

## "It's not just a gimmick. It's what you do with it that counts."

field of augmented reality.

The company brought Ruffner to its campus to advise its engineers on how an artist might use their developing technology, which is a giant leap forward from virtual reality. In simple terms, augmented or cinematic reality uses clear glasses that stream digital light fields directly onto the retina to fuse actual space with ethereal holographic effigies.

Ruffner is steering this new technology to places the company hadn't imagined with a project she's dubbed "Aesthetic Engineered Poetic Hybrids." She began by interviewing geneticists to discover what they find beautiful and motivating in their work. She's randomly connecting concepts from those responses into hybridized drawings that are then rendered into 3D animation.

Late next year, exhibition spaces will come alive with Ruffner's augmented reality of fanciful science-meets-art. "For example, there'll be this little bitty tornado laughing uncontrollably, running around the room doing nothing, having no purpose whatsoever except to make you laugh," Ruffner explains.



Ginny Ruffner



COURTESY: AMBODHA



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Speaking about the innovations that have rippled throughout her work as a painter, sculptor, glass artist and conceptual designer, she believes that important art is innovative by nature. "Innovation in art is kind of a redundant term," she observes. "True innovation lies in allowing people to see things differently."

Whether it's a blowtorch and a palette of glass or an abstract sculpture amid a stream of digital bits, her only imperative is to continue to evolve. "I usually choose the material based on the idea, not the other way around," she says, declaring an approach almost exactly opposite Fulle's. "For me what's most important is what's happening now and in the future."

### JULIE DECKER

A development happening right now and well into the future at the Anchorage Museum in Alaska is a regular series of innovative interpretations on the nature of museum exhibits. "Interventions," initiated by museum director Julie Decker, challenge and support the perception of art, its role in our broader society, and the way art is regarded by both artists and the public.



Julie Decker

COURTESY: CHRIS AREND PHOTOGRAPHY / ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

Decker launched the "Artist Intervention Program" several years ago when she was the museum's chief curator. The series grew out of the Polar Lab, an area of the museum that exposes visitors to the confluence of science, culture, history, art and environment that's woven into the circumpolar Arctic and subarctic regions—often thought of more poetically.





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**“When you invite experimentation you don’t know what the most important result will be.”**

cally in culture and society as the North—among which Alaska is a key component, along with Scandinavia, northern Canada and Siberia.

The museum describes the Polar Lab as “a conversation” in connecting art, science and the environment, and “a place of active investigation and dialogue.” Based on that mission, Decker’s belief that “things need to be iterative and unfold through conversation” sparked her to create events that would highlight the North’s diversity, and spotlight an array of perspectives on the land and tradition of the North in innovative ways. They have since expanded into a means for artists to respond to particular exhibitions throughout the museum in ways that would have been considered quite radical not long ago.

As a longtime curator, the daughter of an artist and an artist herself, Decker believes that impatience and curiosity are the core drivers of any artistic innovation. “And I mean impatience in a good way,” she adds. “Artists are obsessive thinkers, in a good way. Their job is to be present in a way that a lot of us aren’t or can’t be.”

For some intervention participants, impatience and intellectual curiosity become two sides of a coin; being present can take on many meanings. Such was the case when Tlingit/N’ishga artist and photographer Da-ka-keen Mehner countered a recent showcase exhibit about British explorer Captain James Cook, who sailed into what is now called Cook Inlet in 1778 and “discovered” it—despite the fact the region had been inhabited by Den’aina Athabascan people



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for many centuries before then.

Mehner's intervention was a conceptual undertaking titled *I Was Not Discovered*, in which he set an installation of his large steel sculptures based on Tlingit warrior knives around a landmark statue of Cook in downtown Anchorage, thus "trapping" Cook. He then photographed himself within this tableau for a multiple exposure composite rich with metaphor. Occasionally he would hold up a sign displaying his intervention's title, and observe reactions from Anchorage residents and visitors.

For Decker, the innovation was using the photo as a counterpoint to illustrate how an artist can change the way someone thinks and feels about a place. The ongoing interventions at the Anchorage Museum present new ways of thinking about a community, she says. "It's not about permanence, but about creating experiences that become memorable to people. How do you change the way somebody thinks and feels about place?"

Promoting a museum as a huge, dynamic institution with myriad resources, rather than just a building with objects hanging on the walls, is another way to engage artists in innovative processes. It's also a boon to visitors who can discover new ways to regard art. "If you bring an artist in they look at the whole facility as a space filled with tools that invites a whole different experience," says Decker.

It's a little like Ginny Ruffner's ethereal digital sculptures that will soon be soaring through the empty space of a gallery or laboratory—without question a new experience for the viewer.

"When you invite experimentation you don't know what the most important result will be," says Decker. "But if you present the opportunity, there's going to be something meaningful. I love that. That's what art is all about." ▲

*Ted Fry is a Seattle-based arts and culture writer.*

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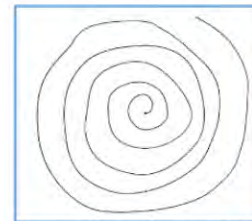
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