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TOOTS ZYNSKY

Fused and formed

Toots Zynsky wondered if she wanted to be an artist or a doctor. A series of fortunate events led her to art and to glass in particular. Tina Oldknow, curator of modern glass at the Corning Museum of Glass, remarks that Zynsky “is one of a small, core group of pioneering artists who made contemporary glass a worldwide phenomenon.”

Zynsky worked hard in high school to get into Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), but still debated with herself about going to medical school. She wondered if art would be something she could get involved in or if it was just an infatuation. She gave herself a semester to make a decision. Wandering the halls of RISD, poking her head into studios, she began to feel that traditional art media was too staid for her. She opened one last door and was greeted by the roar of a kiln and students drawing glass through the air. “Everyone was having a very lively time,” she recalls. “I was very taken by it.” The next day one of the students, who had seen

her peering in, invited her back to blow some glass herself. The fledgling glass program at RISD was taught by Dale Chihuly.

When she returned home from her RISD tour, her parents took her to Maine where they surprised her by having enrolled her in a glass workshop at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts...taught by Chihuly.

The following year, Chihuly invited her to be part of the team that built Pilchuck Glass School. After returning to RISD, she tired of blowing glass and began experimenting with large plate glass sculpture and happened upon a supply of plate glass at a building that was about to be torn down in Providence.

There was a period of time when she worked in fiber; there was a three-week trip to Europe that turned into a 16-year stay; and there was a trip to Ghana to document the country’s living music. “In Ghana, there was the landscape and how people dressed with amazing things in amazing ways, putting different patterns



1
Varcare, filet-de-verre,
15¾ x 20½ x 14½".
Private collection.
Photo by Toots Zynsky.

2
Caparbio, filet-de-verre,
13¾ x 31¼ x 11¾".
Photo by Toots Zynsky.

3
Doratura, filet-de-verre,
12½ x 29¾ x 14".
Photo by Toots Zynsky.

4
Cortina, filet-de-verre,
9¾ x 18¾ x 10⅞".
Photo by Toots Zynsky.

Artist photo courtesy
Embee Studio.





2



3



4

together,” she remembers. “There’s a kind of spirit you don’t find in the Western world. My love for color finally kicked in. My grade school teacher had taught us that we shouldn’t put certain colors together because they clash. It wasn’t until Africa that all that baggage got chucked away. I began really exploring color and enjoying it.”

Oldknow comments, “...her distinctive kiln-formed vessels enjoy widespread popularity for their often magnificent, and always unique, explorations in color.”

Zynsky forms her pieces from glass threads made of glass that has been made in Murano for centuries. She and a partner developed a now-sophisticated machine for pulling the glass thread, replacing the medieval process she began with, having people dash in opposite

directions to stretch the glass canes into thinner and thinner strands. “When I was working with slump glass in 1971 to ’72, there was very little in the literature about it,” she says. “I wasn’t interested in just letting it happen.” She experimented and developed new techniques, not the least of which was beginning to work with the glass threads that she lays out and fuses and then slumps over various forms. “There are very few accidents in my work,” she explains. “I had to solve the technical part in order to make what I wanted to make.” Today she uses her knowledge and her skill and also allows her fingertips and her unconscious mind to form work of seemingly effortless beauty.

Zynsky’s first solo exhibition in Canada will take place at Sandra Ainsley Gallery in Toronto, March 28 through May 12. ●