

# The Beginner's Process

By Jonny Mae Sturtevant

As a beginning glass artist, I have learned the creative process can be a mysterious and fragile one. At some level, I already knew this, because I am also a counselor and have been privileged in my work to help other artists kindle, and rekindle, their own creative journeys.

When I finally took the plunge and set up my glass shop as a 50th birthday present to myself, I was surprised to brush against some of the same internal obstacles to creativity that have frustrated, discouraged and even stopped some of my clients.

These obstacles can suck the fun out of the creative process, rob us of our curiosity, and make us forget why we found glass such a wondrous medium in the first place. We all want to make beautiful, interesting, inspiring art from glass. But it is easy to become too focused on the *product* and forget that it is in the *process* where the magic happens.

When we are in the creative process, a shift happens. We lose track of time, our minds become very focused, our senses are heightened and, most of all, the ego fades. Suddenly, we find we have become one with what we are doing. The product, or outcome, becomes secondary to what we are experiencing and discovering in the moment.

Below are some of the ways we can get 'stuck' in the creative process, and strategies my clients and I have used to keep ourselves moving forward.

## Catastrophic Thinking

Catastrophic thinking goes something like this: 'If I switch on my kiln, it will become hotter than the surface of the sun, nuclear fission will result, my house will explode, and I won't be covered by my homeowner's policy. Plus, it will really scare the dog.'

For several months this was me. With supplies in hand and the knowledge of three workshops swirling around in my head, I waited for the nerve to burn my first piece of glass.

Eventually it came but not before my recognition that my thinking was not rational. After several loved ones snickered and rolled their eyes when I

told them my concern, I began to realize my fear might be a bit exaggerated.

Catastrophizing is usually based in reality. One does need to exercise proper precautions when using a kiln. The trick is to recognize where one's worries step outside the realm of likelihood and take on a life of their own.



I also realized the workshops I had taken hadn't taught me much about using a kiln. Add to this the fact that I couldn't decipher my kiln's written instructions and it wasn't long before I was on a quest for more information.

This led me to Carmen Reynolds at Fusion Headquarters, who said that fusing glass was a lot like baking cookies, only hotter. I found her homey analogy reassuring. She then walked me through the program-

ming of the timer and held my hand, metaphorically, as the kiln followed the algorithm of heating up by making the mysterious clicking sounds of turning itself on and off.

After that first time, my fear abruptly disappeared. The result? I have become addicted to putting glass in the kiln and coming back twelve hours later to see what magic has transpired.

## Unfair Comparisons

I have a client whose father had been an accomplished painter. He had also been very critical of her as a child, especially of her creativity. Nevertheless, at age 60, she longed to pick up a brush and try her hand at painting. It took several weeks for her to



push beyond the obstacles her father's words had lodged in her mind and put paint to canvas.

When she shyly showed me her first painting, I asked what she was thinking and feeling. 'Well, it isn't very good,' she said. Surprised, I asked, 'Compared to what?' 'Compared to my dad,' she replied. 'He was really good.' I asked if she thought it fair to judge a first attempt to the work of a seasoned artist. She conceded it was not. We then looked for strategies to help her stop making unfair comparisons of her work.

Indeed, when we beginners look at examples of astonishing pieces by master glass artists, we can be tempted, as was my client, to make comparisons and then feel discouraged. A more productive approach is to remind ourselves that 'staying in the process' means allowing our skills and products to thrive within that stage of our development that speaks to where we are at that given moment. Only then will we be ready to move forward, take risks, push the envelope and step outside our comfort zones.

If I *am* tempted to compare, say my current work, I do so with the very first piece I ever made. It's the only fair way I know to do it and I am invariably pleased with my progress. This encourages me to continue to explore without having to worry about the unrealistic expectations that I be further along than I am.

## Shoulds and Oughts

I am discovering that glass is a very interactive medium. In other words, the glass itself gets a vote on how it will turn out.

For a beginner, this is especially true.

I once capped green opaque glass with a piece of blue cathedral, anticipating the same gorgeous, sparkly blue-green effect the glass had going into the kiln.

To my surprise, it came out a muddy blue-green. On closer examination, I discovered a thin brown layer sandwiched between the two pieces of glass. Once again, Fusion Headquarters came to the rescue, telling me the brown layers had been caused by a reaction between the chemicals in the different glasses.

Now, instead of telling myself a piece *should* or *ought* to turn out a certain way, I think of everything I make as an *experiment*. I tell myself that, as a beginner, I have no business thinking I know enough to predict a specific outcome. This takes the

pressure out of the process and keeps me in a state of continual discovery.

Sometimes unexpected outcomes can be positive, as when I capped a piece of mica-painted black glass with gold cathedral instead of clear, hoping to brighten the mica. The gold cap deepened and enriched the color of the mica far beyond my expectations. I was thrilled!



When a piece emerges from the kiln with an unwanted outcome, I allow myself approximately two seconds of disappointment, then ask what happened, why it happened, and how I might desirably incorporate this outcome into a future piece.

Take bubbles, for example. I once fired a piece using black enamel sandwiched between two layers of glass, but was disappointed to see the enamel had bubbled. Realizing what had happened, I have since used the bubble effect in a piece patterned after the textural, organic look of West African mud cloth.



## Minimizing and Maximizing

Commenting on a beautiful scarf a friend was wearing, she revealed that she had recently taken up weaving and had woven it herself.

I started asking her all sorts of questions about how she had made it. Instead of enjoying my compliment, she pointed out the flaws in the weaving and said she didn't think the scarf was anything special, except that it kept her neck warm.

Inflating errors and minimizing accomplishments can be a real creativity killer. When we hold ourselves to unrealistic expectations, and don't allow ourselves to enjoy what we have created, it can sap the pleasure and joy from the creative process. I try to remind myself that there is value in the things I make beyond the flaws I see, and that the flaws are opportunities to learn. Isn't this, after all, the primary goal of the beginner?

I also know that, as I become more familiar with this medium, my expectations will inevitably increase, but I must take time to really enjoy the pieces I make and feel proud of myself for my efforts.

## Overgeneralization

I admire my friend, Betty. She had taken a jewelry fusing workshop, and all the pieces she made came out with a mysterious, murky film over them, which dulled the color and shrouded the sheen of the glass. 'I don't know what happened,' she said, 'but maybe we can fix them. If not, I'll just try again.' We then took my grinder to the surface of the glass, re-fired them, and they came out beautifully bright and shiny.

Had Betty over-generalized, she would have extrap-



olated that, based on this outcome, all future efforts would probably bear disappointment, enough to where she would not want to continue working with glass.

When I am tempted to make future predictions based on past unwanted outcomes, I think of Betty, who is able to relax and take her relationship with glass one day, and one experience, at a time.

## The Negative What If?

I recently had a wonderful experience at my local glass shop. As I approached the counter to pay for my items, a man asked me what I was doing with glass.

As I described to him the fun I was having with mica, I tried to sound experienced and not say or do anything that would give away that I'm really a beginner.

He appeared quite interested, asked lots of detailed questions. He was clearly very experienced and revealed that he even taught classes. Then it occurred to me, 'What if he finds out I'm a rank amateur? He



probably won't want to talk to me anymore.'

I was tempted to freeze up and shut up. But I didn't. In a moment of pathological honesty, I blurted out, 'You probably already know all this but I'm just a beginner. I've only been working with glass for a little while.'

Lo and behold, instead of looking down his nose at me and losing interest, he opened up and spent the next forty minutes teaching me how to cut glass, the different types of saws, his methods for making jewelry, what different kilns do, and much more.

As I walked out of the shop, my head full of new information, I thought about my *What If. What If*

I hadn't told him I was a beginner? Think of all the knowledge that would have remained in his mind and not been conveyed to mine.

In the glass shop, we can Negative What If ourselves into a state of paralysis. What if it turns out bad? What if I don't fire it at the right temperature? What if I am using the wrong enamel? The list goes on and on. I have found it helpful to turn my What Ifs into 'I wonder what will happen if...' and then go ahead and try it. I remind myself that it is only a piece of glass. The world will not come to an end if I make a mistake.

## Perfectionism

Perfectionism is one of life's most powerful creativity-discouraging thinking errors. It goes something like this: If it isn't perfect, it's worthless and horrible. There is no in-between.

In my experience with clients, perfectionism can cause people to quit before they try. After all, what, and who, can be perfect? And who wants to create something worthless? Better to just sit on the sidelines and stay out of the creative arena altogether.

A dear friend of mine is a West African author who has written several novels, histories and textbooks. It is his goal to create African literature for the African voice and experience. He is without editors, or even many African friends who can critique his work before he takes it to print, which he often funds himself. I am in awe of how he sits down at his computer and dives into virgin territory, pioneering a literary tradition for his people who, until recently, had a non-literate tradition.

If he were to expect perfection, rather than staying focused on his greater mission, his books would

never be written, much less published, and his wonderful stories would never be told.

Likewise, as beginning glass artists, we must remind ourselves why we became interested in working with glass in the first place, and not fall prey to unrealistic expectations of ourselves. We can balance our tendency to expect perfection by keeping the greater goal in mind rather than getting ensnared by the minutiae. As we progress in our craft, our standards will naturally become more exacting, as will our ability to balance our pursuit of excellence with the realism of how and why we create our art.

Why did you start fusing glass? For me, it was a way of saying yes to the next 50 years of my life, and of embracing and nurturing aspects of my creativity that I previously had not allowed sufficient expression. Glass is a very relational medium and interacting with it requires that I remain flexible as I stretch beyond my comfort zone, both in terms of creativity and skills.

There is a mutability, a strength and a fragility to glass that echoes the nature of people. Working with glass exercises my mind and engages my soul in ways that other aspects of my life don't. If I bear this in mind, I remain undaunted by my beginner's mistakes and can continue to learn and grow as I progress in this shining, fluid process.

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