

Who's **Hot** in the COLD Shop: Artists to Watch



April Surgent

"By engraving we leave traces. Traces of ourselves."
— Jiri Harcuba

Stand close to an April Surgent work of art and you see shades of white and dark glass with wheel-cut marks. Then slowly back away from the work and an image magically appears. By engraving on fused glass, April creates cityscapes, landscapes, scenes

from everyday life, and now reflected images, the theme of her new show opening in February at Bullseye Gallery.

Cameo engraving is the method April employs. Cameo is defined in the dictionary as a small piece of sculpture on a stone or shell cut in relief in one layer with another contrasting layer serving as background. The art of cameo engraving can be traced back to the second and first centuries B.C. During the Renaissance cameos became a medium for jewelry. But for April, it is a means to make art from glass.

The Process

The process April uses is a complicated one that begins with photographs. For her current series, she spent a week taking hundreds of digital photos. She says the most time consuming part of making a piece is taking the photographs and composing the work.

April downloads her photographs to her computer and then can spend another week or two sifting through the images to find what she is interested in making. "I have to feel really connected to the image," she says about choosing a subject. She starts composing a work using Photoshop. Because she uses multiple panels in each work of art, she must break down the composition into the various panels. She sometimes adds things that aren't in the photographs, such as people. Or she will draw on the photographs or blur things out.

"It's a little bit of Photoshop, a little bit of collage and a little bit of drawing things in to make the composition," she explains.

April then prints the compositions out on paper. "It's really important that I get everything figured out on paper before I go to glass; otherwise the tiniest thing can change



April figures out the composition on paper before starting to work on glass.

the composition and make it not work. I need to know that the scale is going to work. I live with the drawings for awhile before I fuse the glass," April says.

Next, she measures the size for the glass and cuts it. She fuses three layers of thin Bullseye sheet glass: white on top, a light transparent color in the middle, and a dark transparent color in the back. "While I'm doing something contemporary with cameo engraving, I'm really interested in the heritage of the history of engraving, and that's one of the reasons for using the white," she explains. "Another reason is a lot of my work is kind of ephemeral and memory-related, and I think paring down the colors is important for that."

Once the glass is fused, April cuts up the paper composition. She makes two sets: one to cut up and the other as reference. She then roughly marks out the composition on the glass. The more complex the composition, the more marks she puts on the glass. She then begins by removing larger areas of the glass first, then goes back and makes smaller cuts.

Because she works so close to the glass during cutting, she has to step back frequently to see what she's done. "That's really important and especially because I'm working with multiple panels. I need to make sure that the tone is the same where the panels carry over one to the other, and I want to make sure proportions are right. I'll rough cut all the panels, then do a little bit of detail on each of the panels. I don't start and finish one panel at a time," she notes.



April working with one of her engraving lathes.

Her early work was done on one panel. Now that her finished art has increased in size, she is using multiple panels due to the weight of the glass. April holds the panels up to the carving wheel sometimes as long as eight hours at a stretch. While they might not look large to the average person, each panel gets pretty heavy to hold that long.

April completes the process by fire polishing the work in the kiln. She usually works on several pieces at once and says it typically takes three to four weeks to complete one piece.

April's new work is about reflective images. "Since I started making glass and doing the engraving, I've been really interested in the idea of *place*, having power over the identity of a person and the inherent link between person and place. I think that people, including myself, only see what they want to see sometimes and don't really pay attention to what's happening in their environments. I feel like the reflective images relate to that," she explains.

Her first work in the reflective series, "Window Shopper," was on exhibit at the Tacoma Museum as part of April's nomination for the 2009 Neddy Artist Fellowship, which she eventually won. "It's an open discussion of window shopping for food, and the significance of that in this economic time," April explains. "It presents the idea that in our times, people are losing a lot, and being able to buy something in a fancy pastry shop might not be happening."



Window Shopper by April Surgent

"I feel like I've really been figuring things out and feel the more I grow up and the more I experience things and look at things, I need to say things that are a little more powerful than I've said," she reveals, "so I'm really excited about this new show. I want to make art people can live with and think about."

Starting Young

April discovered glassblowing at age 14 while visiting Vancouver, Canada, where she was awed by what she saw in a glassblowing studio. Returning home to Seattle, she found a studio in the phonebook where glassblowing courses were offered. As a 15th birthday present from her parents, April began to learn glassblowing there. As a high school junior, April was an exchange student in Bornholm, Denmark, where she continued her adventures in glassblowing.

In her senior year, she decided she didn't want to attend a university. Among the glass blowers she had met in Seattle was Martin Blank. She asked Martin whether she should apply to art school, and she says Martin told her, "April, you don't want to be a production glassblower in Seattle, because that's what will happen if you stay here." She took his advice and attended the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. But after realizing the school was geared to industrial design and was not the place for her, she left for Canberra, Australia, to attend the National University School of Art.

April studied in Canberra for four years, starting in 2001. In her first year, she was doing glass fusing, cold working, blowing, casting – "everything you can think of," she says. She also learned to use engraving tools. Glassblowing, however, bored her. She spent a lot of time drawing and printing and says she was hanging out in the print shop more than the glass studio. "I really couldn't translate my ideas into the object," April explains. Then came the experience that changed her life.

In 2003, April received a scholarship to Pilchuck Glass School where she spent two and a half weeks studying traditional cameo engraving techniques from Czech master engraver Jiri Harcuba. "Taking that course with Jiri really was a huge pivotal point," she reveals. "I had enough understanding of how to use the (engraving) machines before

I went there, but I didn't have any understanding of how to get realistic imagery into the glass." Jiri said that April was the only student he ever had in 50 years of teaching who learned to engrave from the point of view of a painter.

When she returned to Canberra, April had new focus. "I started to take my drawings and translate them onto glass," she says. After graduating, while the lure to remain in Australia was strong, April returned to Seattle.

April's relationship with Bullseye began when Bullseye Gallery Executive Director Lani McGregor bought a work by April at the 2003 Glass Art Society conference. On April's return to the U.S., Bullseye asked her to make work they could take to SOFA Chicago and offered her a five-week residency in the Bullseye factory since she had no studio. "I can't say enough about Bullseye," April notes. "They've been really, really supportive and I feel really lucky and grateful."

After her residency, back in Seattle, April worked for awhile from her parents' woodworking shop. Then she met glass artist Ethan Stern, and three years ago they went in together to share the cost of renting studio space. She says she really likes sharing studio space, because her work is so solitary. She and Ethan offer each other input but don't get in each other's way, April says.

April has a boyfriend who is a bronze fabricator and works for a well-known Seattle sculptor. He makes all of April's metal brackets. April met him because his mother is a glass artist who worked for Dale Chihuly for 15 years.

April is trying to limit her traveling and teaching, because she says she was so busy she was hardly in her studio. She wants to focus on her work. However, she does have one exciting trip planned next summer – her first to the Czech Republic. Jiri Harcuba, who is still a large part of April's life, lives in Prague. "He's been out here numerous times, but I feel like it's really important to go see him and see where all his heritage is coming from," April says. "He's got this big plan of where we should go." April admits that she has a hard time keeping up with Jiri, who is a young 81 years old!

That's not the only exciting event coming up for April. She is being

honored by Urban Glass on April 16 when she receives the award for new talent at the Urban Glass Fete de Verre. And her next big project will be a large installation at the Bellevue Museum in



Recollection by April Surgent

Washington, due to open in October or November of 2010.

April is only 27 years old. It will be exciting to see where her art will take her in the coming years, and what traces of herself she leaves in her wake.