



## GEORGE AVERBECK WILL BLOW YOU AWAY

BY JEN TURRELL

Everybody knows George. I was told this several times as I tracked down glassblower and gallery owner, **George Averbeck**, to write this article. He's been in the Flagstaff arts community for over 25 years, was one of the original founders of **The Artists' Gallery** co-operative and currently owns and operates both **Fire On The Mountain**, his glassblowing studio, and **Arizona Handmade Gallery**, along with his wife, **Holly Gramm**.

I caught up with Mr. Averbeck at the **Arizona Handmade Gallery** on North San Francisco Street in downtown Flagstaff. Gazing at a few examples from his "Grand Canyon Vase" collection, I wondered aloud how he could have so much control over not only the gorgeous, organic shapes, but particularly, the colors. Truly stunning. The bottom of each vase represents the canyon rock, with blue sky kissed by wispy clouds above. I've never seen anything quite like it.

When asked how he is able to have such precise control in order to be able to create such distinctly stratified layers of earth and sky, he at first kind of shrugged it off, telling me that he has great tools. When I insisted that I wanted to know, he told me he has a pair of scissors that can cut hot glass. He uses the scissors to get the shapes of the rocks, then stacks the colors, one atop another, as he works the glass. I try to visualize what he means, but can't.

"Come on over to my studio tomorrow. I'll show you how it works."

When I walked out of the cold, spitting rain, into Mr. Averbeck's studio the following day, it felt like stepping into a sauna. The heat washed over me in a wave from the furnaces.

Mr. Averbeck pours crystals of pigment out onto a metal surface with a swish. The small piles look like shards of shattered gem stones, sparkling in the light. He shapes the blue pile into a small circle and spreads the orange out in a thick line.

"See those pillows over there?" I look where he points, and look back confused. "They look like ice cubes." Now I see what he means. They do look like slightly melted ice cubes. I touch one. It isn't cold. They are rectangles of clear glass.

Every day he shovels in several scoops, topping up the cistern so he always has clear glass on hand. He keeps the clear glass furnace heated to 2000° Fahrenheit. Beside it is another furnace, the working furnace where he continues to heat the glass as he works in colors and shapes it.

Mr. Averbeck explains, "I never go back into the first furnace. I don't want to contaminate the clear glass." He picks up a long metal pipe and thrusts it into the pool of clear, molten glass. When he pulls the pipe out, the end is coated in a thick, glowing mass. He turns the pipe gingerly, like someone turning honey on a honey wand to keep it from dripping. His motions are smooth and fast as he moves between the working furnace, the metal topped table where he rolls out the glass to straighten the sides, the table with the pigment laid

out and a sort of throne-like chair with long, extended, metal-topped arms. In the chair he is able to set the blowing pipe across the arm rests, rolling it along the metal with one hand while using the other to operate tools to twist, open and shape the glass.

Hanging down from his headband is a rubber tube. He attaches one end of the rubber tube to the end of the long metal blowing pipe and the other end he puts in his mouth. This way, he can blow air into the glass while still having both of his hands free to twirl and work the glass.

Watching him shape and manipulate the glass reminds me of a potter spinning clay on a wheel. Except that his wheel is the blowing pipe and the raw material is unimaginably hot. I feel like my face is crisping up just standing near the furnaces to get a good view.

The glory hole (the reheat oven) is kept at 1800°F. Mr. Averbeck lifts the pipe high, touches the end of the molten glass blob, known as a "gather," down on the blue pigment crystals, then rolls the side of the glass through the orange crystals so the outside is coated in orange. Then it goes back into the working furnace to heat up the color crystals. After that, it's over to the throne where he takes out a pair of enormous tweezers. With the tweezers he grabs a bit of the glass gather at the point where the two colors meet and twists it. He does it again, three more times all around the gather. After another trip to the working furnace, he puts the pipe into his mouth and starts to blow shape into the molten glass gather.

"See the bubble in there?" he asks. Yes, there it is. An ellipse of air forced in at one end. He blows more and the twisted areas bulge out. Soon they flatten out completely and all that remains are the two colors, blue and orange, twisting together like two halves of a galaxy of stars, four galaxies around the edge of the glass ball. Next he shifts the ball of glass from one pipe to another, leaving an opening at the end where the air was blown in. He uses more tools to stretch and shape this opening into the wide mouth of a stemless wine glass. When he is done he gently removes it from the pipe and uses special tongs to place it into a hot box, which over the course of 15 hours cools the glass from the 900°F the box is at when he puts the hot glass inside, to room temperature when he takes it out the next day.

The whole process of making this glass took approximately 12 minutes. 3-4 pop songs passed by on the radio in the time it took to create a unique and delicate work of art.

Mr. Averbeck hosts his annual **Pumpkin Blow** at **Fire On The Mountain Studio** First Friday October 7th. His annual **Christmas Ball Blow** rolls around in November; if you want the chance to try out glass blowing for yourself, call 928-779-3790 to register, or visit **Arizona Handmade Gallery** at 13 North San Francisco Street, Flagstaff. 🍂

at left: A step-by-step montage of George Averbeck's methods in creating a one-of-a-kind glowing glass pumpkin.

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