



Julia Reimer and Tyler Rock

## Independence, Innovation and Collaboration: Firebrand Glass Studio

by Jillian Von Sprecken • Photos by John Dean & Caroline Connelly

Amid the rolling foothills of Alberta's Rocky Mountains lies the small town of Black Diamond, home to internationally recognized glassblowers Tyler Rock and Julia Reimer of Firebrand Glass. "Where we live is really beautiful," says Reimer, "by the Rockies and a provincial park. We try to translate that into the work we're doing." This small town, only a half-hour's drive from Calgary, becomes the ideal setting for the couple who enjoy the space the prairies provide, the beauty of the Rockies and the convenience of a nearby urban centre.

Glass-blowing is, strangely enough, exactly what it sounds like. Heated to 1500 degrees Celsius, molten liquid glass comes out of a furnace ready to be shaped. The glass-blower uses a hollow steel rod, blowing into it in order to inflate the glass, which is then shaped using various tools, centrifugal force and gravity. "Glass has become ordinary in the modern world," Reimer explains. "We're used to seeing window glass and drinking from glass vessels. But when people see the process of glass-blowing, it is quite magical and they get really curious and excited about it." Turning the ordinary into something extraordinary is exactly what they do, and they do it with spectacular finesse.

The Firebrand Glass studio itself was built in 2003, and is a combination of three shops that house the furnace and tools needed to create and shape the molten glass. For most of the week the studio functions as a quiet space where Rock and Reimer create their work, but the studio itself is open to the public, through workshops, studio tours and other events. The private and public balance of the Firebrand Glass studio is



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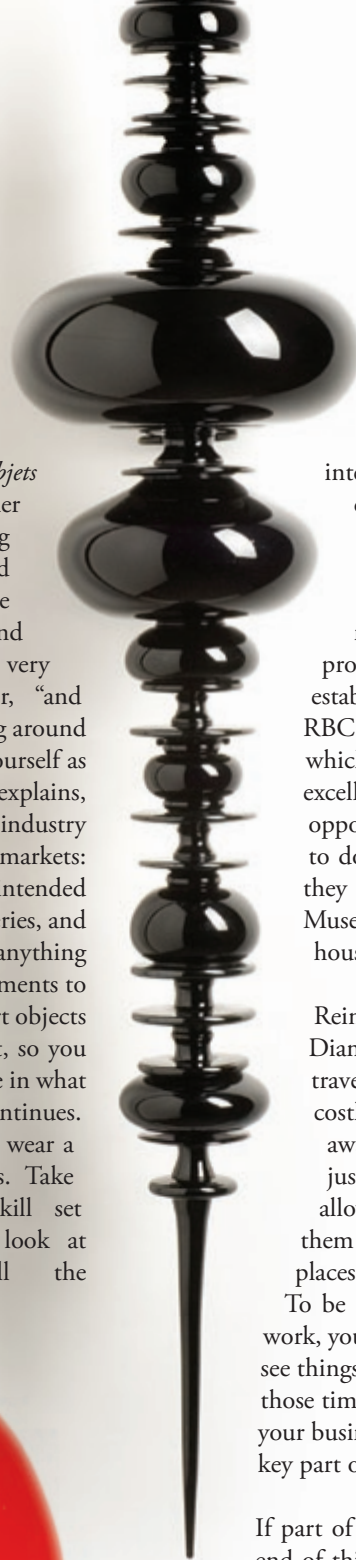


an integral part of how it functions for the artists and their patrons. "It's a place where we can focus to do our work and be creative, and not have the distractions of a lot of people in the space," says Reimer, "but also allowing it to be a place where our clients and customers can see the process of glass-blowing being done. We like to give that opportunity to our customers and our community. It is quite fascinating."

The husband and wife met when Reimer began taking evening classes in glass-blowing at the Alberta College of Art and Design, where Rock was one of her instructors. "I had studied economics and political science in university and worked with an oil company in Calgary," she explains. "And Tyler, I guess he was one of those lucky people who at 18 knew what he wanted to do, and discovered glass." Reimer's prior career has proven beneficial for the studio, as her business organizational skills complement Rock's broad working knowledge of glass and the technical equipment used in their studio. "If Tyler is in the studio working with an assistant, I'll be inside, getting in touch with galleries or clients. And vice versa:

when I'm in the studio working, he might be repairing equipment, and he has a teaching position at the art college as well, so he might be teaching."

Firebrand Glass itself is unique, for Rock and Reimer work independently as artists to create their unique *objets d'art*, and also work together under the Firebrand name crafting commissioned pieces and corporate awards. "We've found doing awards and commissions to be very gratifying," says Reimer, "and there is a lot of marketing around the award to promote yourself as an artist, as well." As she explains, in the art and craft industry there are two principal markets: one-of-a-kind work intended for collectors and galleries, and giftware that can be anything from Christmas ornaments to lighting fixtures. "Art objects are a small market, so you have to be flexible in what you do," she continues. "You have to wear a lot of hats. Take your skill set and look at all the



different ways you can apply it in the market." Small market perhaps, but nevertheless, Rock and Reimer's art has garnered attention not only throughout Canada, but also on an international scale, for these artists not only create awards, they also receive them. Both Rock and Reimer, among many other accolades, were again recently recognized for their artistic contributions. Rock most recently by the Alberta Craft Awards, a provincial organization that recognizes an established craftsman, and Reimer by the RBC and Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, which presented her with a national award for excellence in glass art, affording the couple the opportunity to travel to Japan this past spring to do research and teach workshops. In 2002, they were artists-in-residence at the Corning Museum of Glass in upstate New York, which houses glass artists from around the world.

Reimer credits the community of Black Diamond for affording them the flexibility to travel the globe. "Running a glass studio is quite costly," she says. "We wanted to be able to go away, turn off our studio, lock the door and just leave," and living in a smaller community allows them to afford the cost of living, letting them do just that. "The ability to go to other places is just something that an artist needs to do.

To be constantly creating new work, innovative work, you need to be able to get away and be able to see things with new eyes," she continues. "You need those time periods to just step away a little bit from your business and your practice, and we see that as a key part of our job of being artists."

If part of the business plan is to leave the business end of things behind for a while, you know you've found something unique. So let's hope that they continue to travel, if that's what it takes for them to continue creating. •

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