

# HOME

AUSTIN

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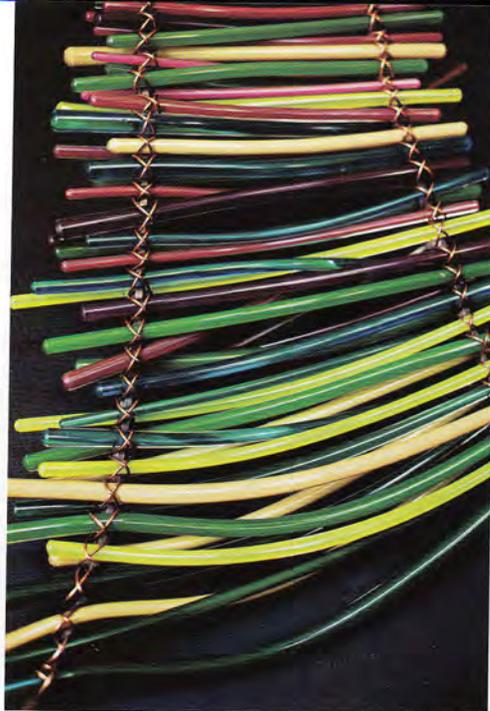
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Artist Carlyn Ray, center, creates vivid glass bowls and sculptures in her studio just west of Wimberley.

# Unbreakable

Up-and-coming glassblower Carlyn Ray blazes through burns and scars to coax fragile works of art BY AMY GABRIEL

**I**n an industrial-chic studio space west of Wimberley, local newcomer artist and glassblower Carlyn Ray is feeling the heat. But the outside temperature has nothing to do with it. Inside her workshop, Ray huddles near three giant, roaring furnaces that top 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit. Steady streams of smoke rise from the newspaper pads and blocks used to shape cooling, pliable mounds of colored glass, which she manipulates into eye-catching vases and sculptures.

As she deftly spins a stainless-steel rod attached to a glowing-red molten orb, one can't help but notice what looks like artwork covering her bare arms. Upon closer inspection, the patterns reveal not intricate art, but blisters, burns and puffy scars from her battles with coaxing the scorching-hot glass into home-decor objects.

"Most all glass blowers have some burns, but it's like a chef in a kitchen. We all have our battle scars," says Ray, 30, who also suffers from heat-induced nerve damage to her fingertips, dust-clogged lungs from breathing in a raw

mixture of silica sand, soda ash and limestone, and a sore back. But the five-foot-eleven-inch former competitive volleyball player, whose fresh-faced complexion and delicate features could easily make her a model, takes these professional pains in stride.

Equal parts adrenaline and adventure junkie, she embarked on her glassblowing career with gusto at age 22, taking a semester abroad to study techniques in New Zealand and later took on apprenticeships under world-renowned glass masters like Dale Chihuly. She even worked a stint on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean, where she created sea-inspired glass sculptures in front of a live audience. "I love to travel, and it was a great way to see the world while practicing my technique," she says.

Now with her own business, Carlyn Ray Designs, and future plans to create a fine-arts center for children, the Austin resident commutes to her 1,600-square-foot studio weekly to make everything from small vases and chandelier parts to a client-requested, 55-foot multicolored weaved glass sculpture. She recently completed an

awe-inspiring commissioned piece for the Ron King salon—a 10-foot array of jewel-toned circular egg-like shapes, an interpretation of inner and outer beauty. The showpiece is positioned on the main wall in the washroom.

"My love, sweat and breath goes into each piece that I make," the artist says. "When creating a piece, I think about the feeling of the environment, who is the viewer and what feeling do I want the piece to have."

Her craft is an expensive one that costs at minimum \$100,000 in start-up fees, and only gets more expensive in equipment. Tools like jacks ring up at \$1,000 apiece, and importing color options from Germany is even costlier. But Ray, back pain aside, celebrates the fact that she is shaping a successful career in a primarily male-dominated field.

"Toxic chemicals, heavy lifting and scorching temperatures create an environment like in a factory setting, which many women are not attracted to and whom many feel is unsuitable for women," says Ray. "But I'm attracted to the physical aspect of glassblowing. I look at it as an athletic form of art." ■

# Homegrown

WHO'S WHO, WHAT'S NEW, RIGHT NOW



## GLASS ACT

Artist Carlyn Ray turns these spindly rods of colored glass into bright, hand-blown, flawlessly beautiful home pieces.

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