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CARLYN RAY DESIGNS

Unique • Handblown Glass • Custom Designs



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FEBRUARY 2021



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forged in fire

FORGED



ARTICLE CHRISTIANA NIELSON



DALLAS ARTIST CARLYN RAY BELIEVES IN THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF GLASS, AND SHE WANTS TO SHARE IT WITH THE WORLD.

CARLYN RAY BELIEVES THAT, MORE THAN ANY OTHER ARTFORM, GLASS CAN COMPLETELY TRANSFORM A SPACE. Looking at her work, it's easy to see why. Colorful wall-mounted weavings brighten a living room. Golden chandeliers breathe new life into a dining space. Backlit fusion panels bring dimension to their surroundings. Glass is an exceptional medium because it doesn't simply thrive in light — it becomes the light. And the Dallas artist knows how to harness, and enhance, its magic.

"Glass is one of the few materials that holds light," Ray says. "It really changes the energy of a space. Are you wanting it to feel very calming? Are you wanting it to be more energetic? Is it to be really elegant? I think that's what is so special about glass — and being able to customize a piece for a space. There's something just beautiful about the act of creation, and sharing that with people."



Cloud Chandelier with Design Group AKI & Catherine Albritton

A pillar of Dallas' glass community, Ray founded studio Dallas Glass Art and fine art line Carlyn Ray Designs seven years ago in the Design District, but her fascination with glass began decades ago. She first saw blown glass when she was eight years old and fell in love with it. A few years later, world-renowned glass artist Dale Chihuly signed her book when he visited the Dallas Museum of Art. When Ray told him she too wanted to become a glass blower, Chihuly replied that she should attend his school in Washington — a goal she intended to one day turn into reality.

After attending the Shelton School, Ray went to the Episcopal School of Dallas. As her high school graduation gift in 2000, her parents gifted Ray her first flame-working class. As athletic as Ray was creative, she attended the College of William & Mary on a full volleyball scholarship and studied sociology and psychology. While she continued to practice working with glass on her own, playing Division I volleyball didn't afford her much spare time. But feeling pulled to her art, she took a semester to study glassblowing abroad in New Zealand, which ignited her passion for glass.

She attended the country's oldest craft school in North Carolina after college and then worked as an apprentice under different glass artists in the Appalachian Mountains. She traveled around the U.S. as an assistant to the youngest European glass master, who led her back to Dale Chihuly. After working at his school, her dream of



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Ribbons with Kay Trout



being his student took shape. "I assisted in teaching [Chihuly's] son how to blow glass on Sundays," Ray says. "So I got to know Dale well. I saw how he looked at glass and how he thought about art and its relationship to the environment. It was really pivotal for me."

Ray took her newfound perspective to the Corning Museum of Glass in New York before sailing around the world on a cruise ship doing educational glass demonstrations. It was then that she started developing her own signature style of glass blowing. Soon after, she received a commission for something she sketched but had never created before: a weaving. A Carlyn Ray weaving consists of numerous straight glass rods bound together and mounted on a wall so that it creates a 3-D effect. Fast-forward to today, and it's been her signature piece for 12 years now.

"I think that's what really sets me apart," Ray says. "I haven't seen anything like that elsewhere. There's something about a weaving or a sculptural element that is intimate because it changes as you walk around it. You're living with the art."

After her work on the cruise ship, Ray, who traveled around the country participating in different artist residencies, decided it was time to open her own space. She launched a Kickstarter campaign, which led to the now-flourishing Dallas Glass Art studio and Carlyn Ray Designs, which, she says, are growing and expanding.

Over the past several years, Ray and her team have taught many workshops and classes to the public through the studio, and they've designed and created countless glass artworks for residential, commercial, hospitality, and community purposes through her design line. The glass-making process, from conception to installation, is long — but rewarding.

Often, a client gives Ray a photograph of a wall or place in their home where they'd like to install a piece. For weavings, Ray then draws sketches, talks

Carlyn Ray working in the studio.



to the client about sizing and color palate, creates a paper template of the piece, and begins bending the metal framing in place. After the frame is welded, she gets to work creating and bending the glass rods using a 2,300-degree furnace. The client comes to the studio to check the colors — and even pick out certain elements that Ray will incorporate into the piece. She then wires the final glass pieces to the frame and sands the glass edges.

To achieve bright blues, Ray would use the metal cobalt. For greens, she'd use iron. Fluorine creates the color white. Whether she's creating weavings, ribbons, fusion panels, clouds, bowls, vases, or other pieces, her ability to customize for clients and help their vision come to life makes her unique among artists.

"The process is a dance," Ray says. "That's why I love bringing clients in to see the process, which to me is as beautiful as the finished product. I like making something for a specific space that's really going to be perfect for that room. Seeing it in its environment and how it changes and elevates that space — that is so comforting to me."

Her extensive portfolio of work ranges from delicately suspended butterflies at the Ronald McDonald House to the stunning chandelier above the bar at Bowen House to vibrant weavings,

LOCAL'S CHOICE (CONTINUED)

fluid ribbons, and delicate pendants illuminating many homes in Dallas and beyond.

Ray created a black, red, and gold weaving and a breathtakingly asymmetric chandelier for one such home, and the homeowner was blown away by her creativity and determination. "Carlyn is one of the few artists we have worked with that has been willing to be pushed outside of her comfort zone," the owner says. "We had asked her for a movement and color scheme she hadn't created before. She listened, interpreted our desires for the piece, and then just did what makes her special."

Regarding the chandelier, the owner went on to say that "the most wonderful part of the process was Carlyn's unrelenting enthusiasm to dream of something great for our space. Countless pieces of glass were brought to our home, and it was as much fun looking at the glass beams as it was watching her react to how they interacted in our home. The educational process for us was equally as enriching."

Ray acknowledges that making custom pieces is difficult. It would be much easier for her to simply sell finished pieces off a shelf. Acute attention to detail — like matching an exact throw pillow color or ensuring a chandelier is the same shape as the table below — adds layers of complexity. But for the artist, the outcome is always worth it.

"It's amazing to elevate and bring a new energy into their space, to transform it into their ideal living area," Ray says. "There's pride and joy and connection that comes with that. It's a true act of creation, as we're blowing life into dust or sand. It's a very spiritual, meditative, and physical creative process that is really unlike anything else."

Her clients aren't the only ones who are able to actively participate in this creative process. Through her nonprofit, Art Reaching Out (ARO), Ray works with at-risk and underprivileged kids and young women to help them understand the art of glass blowing through the lenses of a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, math) curriculum. "I really like to share that connection with glass as a material," Ray says. "For the kid who wants to be a doctor, it's going to be in the medical field."

When Ray worked with the Boys & Girls Club of Dallas, they helped her with a large display at Love Field and were able to keep their creations. "The idea behind my personal business model is, as my company grows, our outreach grows," Ray says.

As her studio and production indeed continue to grow and expand, Ray hopes to unleash even more of the magic she knows glass possesses.

"We've only scratched the surface as to where we can really take glass," she says. "To be aware of glass is to be more aware of your present surroundings — because glass is everywhere."



*Weaving with Designer
Richard Gordon*