



Tim Tate

Creating a Legacy in Glass

by Sara Sally LaGrand

Photography by Pete Duvall

This is a warm glass story about how art can speak a language. Tim Tate is a warm glass artist. I have interviewed him before along with other artists when covering glass exhibitions, but this time it is just about him. Tim co-founded Glass Secessionism with the art critic William Warmus. It's now called 21st Century Glass. Tim is a prolific poster for the art glass community for Instagram/Facebook groups. Every day there is something new. Every day he posts about the glasswork of another gifted artist from somewhere in the world.

Tim is also somewhat of an enigma. His bio will tell you that he was born in 1960 in Washington, D.C., then jumps to 1989 when he was diagnosed as HIV positive with one year left to live. He decided at that moment, during a workshop at his beloved Penland School of Art and Craft in North Carolina, that he was going to spend his last year creating a legacy in glass. Tim was 29 years old at that point. He began that journey in glass, and his story jumps to 2001, when he co-founded the Washington Glass School, the second largest warm glass studio in the U.S., with fellow artist Michael Janis.

Tim Tate, *Dockside Boys*, steel, mirror, cast figures, and LEDs, 32" x 14" x 14".

"When at the Whitney several years ago, I saw two Paul Cadmus paintings depicting the underground gay life in the 1940s. I suddenly realized that much of gay life in the past has been lost to us. So few paintings or photos exist. I wanted to memorialize a past that might be lost as well. This piece refers to the Christopher Street piers from 1985, a place where gay men met clandestinely due to society's lack of open acceptance. I used two old friends as models."

There was also that black-and-white photo of him sporting the eight-year-old summer fashion staple of 1968, plaid shorts, standing next to his sweet looking "June Cleaveresque" mom in front of The Corning Museum of Glass sign. Tim is beaming in that photo during his first glassblowing experience in his young life. It made an impression—not enough to make him want to blow glass, but to rather to sculpt glass instead. But wait a minute, you say. Tim only had one year to live. So much for diagnostic predictions. Tim is still here.



Tim Tate,
Sacred Heart of Chance,

Blown glass and found objects,
18" x 10" x 4". Investigating the
role of chance in one's life.

Tim Tate, Isolation and Liberation of the Boy Who was All
Thumbs, blown glass, wood, and cast objects, 38" x 10" x 10".

"As a young boy, I felt awkward and tended to isolate myself in books. Sports eluded me, and I wasn't comfortable talking to others. So there I sat in my isolation till one day I thought that I would just pretend to be confident, and that has made all the difference. The world outside my dome was now open to me."

Turning Experiences and Feelings into Glass Art

It was a hot summer evening in June 2023, and Tim was headed to a residency at Tacoma Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington. Add this experience to the myriad of experiences, honors, and awards on his resume, and it's a gigantic laundry list of accomplishments. Tim knows how to get things done because he is excellent at time management. On top of that, he has no fear of picking up the phone, calling an art critic, and suggesting a meeting. "I have two hours to kill," he said to me before he boarded the plane to the West Coast. "Let's talk."





NOW (detail)





Tim Tate and Joyce Scott, NOW, 9' x 6'.

Tim speaks a certain language. It's a language on two levels. He told an audience at his artist talk and live demonstration at the Tacoma Museum of Glass hot shop during his residency to turn their experiences into glass art—to jump in and do it! Then he ran through a slide show including images of pieces he has used to express his feelings about living his life. Tim uses glass to express the vestiges of living the life of a gay man.

All of the pieces the artist shows in his presentation are about what he calls "Queer Glass." His cast glass pieces are full of symbolism. In a 2003 review of his first solo show in Washington, D.C., art critic Michael O'Sullivan observed that Tate's symbolic vocabulary, at least to O'Sullivan, suggested the iconography of martyrdom. I could not agree more. For me, as a big fan of the Italian Renaissance, I know these symbols well. Tim will quickly tell you that on the sacred heart image, the cruciform, is a plus sign for HIV positive. It looks remarkably like the logo for the Red Cross, the nonprofit organization that sends medical help to disaster areas all over the world.

Maybe the double meaning is important. In the early days of HIV, the gay community needed help. People died alone because of a variety of reasons—everything from being rejected by their own families to laws prohibiting non-family members from being present in the hospital room. It was a dark time indeed, with little hope for a cure. No one could envision living with HIV. It was an automatic death sentence in 1989. Yet, Tim is still here, still speaking up and still speaking his language.

A Tim Tate and Joyce Scott collaboration. In July of 2022, Tim and Joyce entered into a seven-month project to capture what was happening "Now" as they were casting each glass panel. The context of the wall encompassed Racial Equality, Women's Rights, and LGBTQIA+ issues, all of which were happening around them. The final composition was a nine-foot-wide by six-foot-high wall entitled simply, NOW. Not only did it capture some challenging topics such as the war in Ukraine, marriage rights, police brutality, and reproductive rights, but it also captured the love of two great artists working together.

"For ten years I was told that I had one year left to live. It was like there was a blowtorch behind me, pushing me to make work. Every year was to be my last. Every piece was to be my final legacy." That diagnosis no longer carries the same finality, but for Tim, the blowtorch is still there. He is still creating work at the same pace, but back to that heart image.



Tim Tate, *We Rose Up*, cast objects, aluminum, and LEDs, 32" x 32" x 4".

"This piece was made for the first LGBTQ glass show in history at the National Liberty Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The show was called *Transparency*, and all the work in the show was made by openly LGBTQ artists. This piece, because it is an endless mirror, creates a space that has never existed before and is not a real space in this dimension. That means I can claim this space as my own with its own set of physics and logic. Only the viewer creates this space. I hope anyone who views this with its countless images of positive souls will see those they lost peering out at them, finally visible again in this imagined space. Seen and not forgotten . . . alive again for this brief moment."

Tim's mom was his advocate for making art. She encouraged his interest in making glass bowls, which he did for himself without showing anyone else in the world. When she passed away, he made a heart-shaped vessel for his mom's ashes with the image of the eternal flame in the center, just like the one on the grave of assassinated President John F. Kennedy. After the homage to his mom ended up in the *Washington Post*, it launched his art career. To Tim, she got her wish and in a way facilitated it.

Commentaries on Current Events

Tim's work also covers present-day issues, like the shooting at the Pulse night club in Florida. As Tim was rolling through the work in his presentation, he was apologizing for the dark images but was also encouraging those listening. He must have been reading the faces of his audience that I couldn't see on the livestream from the museum. Tim promises there is hope. The gaffers in the hot shop continue to fashion the sacred heart image, a heart with flames shooting out of the center between the two lobes.

The sacred heart, which is a Catholic icon, figures into Tim's works a lot. According to the internet, the Sacred Heart of Jesus was inspired by the apparition of Jesus to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647–1690). In 1673, on the Feast of St. John the Evangelist, our Lord came to St. Margaret Mary while she was in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. But, Tim is not Catholic. He did not grow up Catholic or even Catholic-adjacent. He just likes the image.



For his *Utopian Gay Future* series, he has an image of Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg on a heart vessel as he envisions a day when Buttigieg may be President of the United States. The next heart is of a nonbinary woman originally from Somalia, now from Oklahoma, currently serving in the House of Representatives. His wish for her is to serve on the Supreme Court. Then he doubles back to Marsha P. Johnson, a favored model of Andy Warhol, who was also a gay rights activist, major player in the Stonewall uprising, and cofounder of the Gay Liberation Front. Tim admires Marsha P. Johnson very much. And the list goes on. In a piece entitled *Three Cups*, he says he has hidden an image of the portal to the death chambers at Auschwitz, Hitler's death camp in World War II, because to him, the world was watching the gay community wither and die and doing nothing about it, much like the officers at the camp. The pieces are well done—blown, cast, etched, and sculpted. Sometimes he uses other objects, like magnifying glasses or infinity mirrors.

Opposite page bottom; Tim Tate, Betrayal of the 20th Century.

"This panel is to honor Alan Turing, the man who cracked the Enigma code during World War II, which resulted in the war ending much more quickly than it would have, saving countless lives. In doing that, he invented the beginnings of the computer as we know it. The honor was brief, however, because soon after they discovered he was gay. Not only did they jail him, but they chemically castrated him as well. He ultimately killed himself by taking a bite from a cyanide-laced apple. That is why the logo of Apple computers is an apple with a bite out of it to honor the inventor of modern computers. Britain just started printing his face on the 50-pound note as a way of apologizing to his memory."

Discovering Beadwork

Recently, having felt like he had lost his way, Tim spent seven months working with a bead artist, the award-winning Joyce Scott. This 75-year-old African American woman uses seed beads for the most part to express her own vision of being black in America. She was also a highly celebrated and prolific artist. Tim feels the association was productive and helped him get back on track. "The Joyce Scott wall led me back to my original foundations of social justice and healing," Tate shared. "I think I had strayed away toward decorative artwork, but with Joyce I found my path back. It was a seven-month project, and I wouldn't change a second of it."

Tim Tate and Joyce created a six-foot by nine-foot piece entitled NOW. Tate plans on building from the inspiration of that collaboration to create his own wall discussing a queer welcoming future in America. It's titled, "Imaging Utopia: A Journey Towards Acceptance". My suggestion to you is to watch his website and seek out 21st-century glass on both Facebook and Instagram. You will be pleasantly surprised at what Tim has found to show you.

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Sara Sally LaGrand, award-winning artist and author, started her journey in life as a broadcaster and journalism major. After a 30-year career in radio and newspaper, she began to wander into the creativity of the art world once she realized that she could no longer be grounded by her mother for doing so. However, she has never lost her love for words.



LaGrand has had the great fortune to study glass with many gifted teachers both in America and Italy. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Glass Formation from Park University in Parkville, Missouri, and has been writing feature articles and interviewing her fellow artists for both The Flow and Glass Art since 2014. It is the perfect combination of reporting and art.

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