

An Appreciation of Clinton Roman

By Paul Stankard
Photos by Clinton Roman

In many ways, Clinton Roman is archetypal of the new-wave borosilicate flameworker whose innovative skill astonishes me. Clinton, an American original, is reclusive, spending most of his waking hours alone in his studio. He finds inspiration and solace on a 23-acre compound in Oregon's coastal wilderness, about two hours outside Eugene, 35 minutes from the nearest convenience store and an hour from doctors, banking, and other necessities of modern life. Clinton and his supportive wife, Laura Roman, who administers to the day-to-day details of an artist's active career, are New Age spiritual people. Their lifestyle affords Clinton the freedom to work like a monk in his studio. His skill and commitment to flameworking borosilicate glass is evidenced by a remarkably varied body of work, from complex, one-of-a-kind glass pipes to free standing sculptural objects and ambitious dioramas that are advancing an 18th-century French lampworking glass tradition.

In spite of early difficulties with traditional education, Clinton Roman's intellectual curiosity and artistic hunger is nourished by hours of research that inform his artwork. His personal vision and commitment to quality translate into and reinforce his artistic integrity.

I've been working at the torch for half a century and, for the most part, have been oblivious and now amazed at the impact of scientific glassblowing technology on the creative glass



Head



The Core

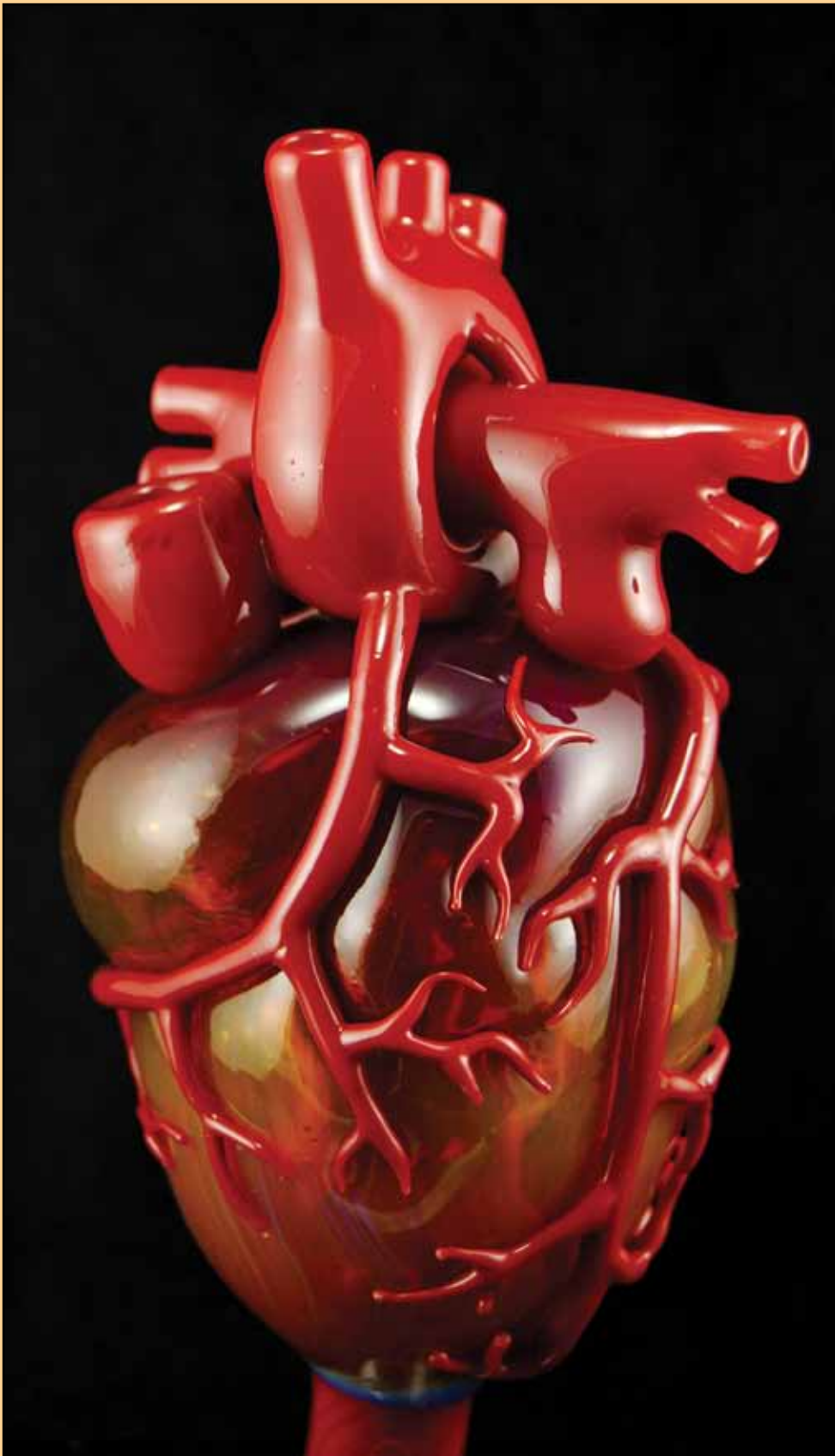
landscape. Because I work exclusively with soda-lime glasses, the hundreds of talented borosilicate lampworkers have been off my radar screen, which is an interesting statement in itself. In conversations with Matt Eskuke and Gateson Recko and through my involvement with the Salem Community College International Flameworking Conference (IFC), however, I've been introduced to the counter-culture borosilicate flameworking community. This fascinating school of activity has an expanding palette of colored Borosilicate glasses, improved torch technology, and a market that has a seemingly insatiable appetite for flame-worked glass pipes.

It was during Salem's eighth annual IFC three-day conference that I first met Clinton Roman, a serious person with an easy smile. Clinton, with Scott Deppe and Matt Eskuke, gave a brilliant concurrent demonstration that I moderated. What astounded me were three masters with high-energy hot-glass skill using specialized equipment with which I was unfamiliar. I realized that I knew very little about this tight-knit creative community, with its hundreds of boro lampworkers, as they call themselves, eager to advance their glass pipe esthetic in the broader world of glass art.

A few months later, I was invited to lecture and give a demonstration at the Eugene School of Glass's annual

fundraiser. I asked Clinton to assist me during of the demonstrations. The next day, he and Laura took me to a large outdoor market and the Cornerstone Glass Studio. I was astonished to witness the size and vitality of the borosilicate flameworking community and was personally touched by the collective graciousness of its members. Clinton and Laura introduced me to a subculture within the greater flameworking world that has inspired me to be a resource to them.

Clinton, like so many of his contemporaries, grew up in California. His father's involvement with buying, restoring, and selling real estate kept the family moving throughout his childhood and early teenage years.



Heart and Soul

Throughout his youth, Clinton loved being creative and working with his hands. He spent a great deal of time drawing. His formal education ended with an act of rebellion in seventh grade, when he followed his inclination to work with his hands and make things. When recalling time in school, he describes difficulties that many makers can relate to—he struggled with traditional subjects but excelled in school's arts and crafts activities.

While he may have doubted himself in terms of reading and writing, he relished opportunities to work with his hands. Early evidence of his potential genius was restoring a '64 Mustang at age 13 and a '57 Chevy Bel-Aire at age 15. These activities soon blossomed into lead castings, for which he used tire weights. Even though he left the traditional educational system early, Clinton was clearly seeking ways to challenge himself through creative problem-solving, which is one of the most effective paths to independent learning.

At age 16, Clinton attended his first Grateful Dead concert, which he describes as a life-transforming experience. More than just listening to the music, Clinton connected to a community of creative people: musicians, craftspeople, textile artists, dancers, and visual artists, all surviving on their creative talents and sense of community. By age 20, Clinton was fully integrated into Dead Head community. He travelled from show to show in a Volkswagen van, making a living from sandstone carvings, which would later evolve into glass pipes.

In 1993, Clinton traveled to Oregon, for what he thought was going to be a short trip to Cougar Hot Springs. However, he felt such a strong connection to the landscape and people that he has lived there ever since. The people, mainly members of the Eugene glass pipe scene, introduced him to the creative possibilities ofameworking. Eventually, Clinton met Laura Cassidy, and they felt an immediate creative and spiritual connection. It's easy to see the significance of place, particularly the Greater Eugene area, in Clinton's life and artistic development.

Today, Clinton is surrounded by inspiration. First, there is the natural beauty around his cabin and studio: The forest, birds, and animals all fuel his spirituality and find their ways into his work. There is also plenty of creative inspiration in his home. He and Laura have established a creative magnet, attracting thinkers, musicians, and artists. Laura divides her time between being a mother, singer-songwriter, and, according to Clinton, Renaissance woman who manages his studio. She has acclimated her life to Clinton's "night shift" creative schedule. Above all, she shares Clinton's passion for independent studies, to the extent that she has recorded books on tape for Clinton and shares his enthusiasm for contemporary glass art and art history.

Clinton was introduced to glass in 1993 in Eugene, Oregon. By the time he encountered glass in Eugene's pipe scene, he had been working with stone, wood, and shells for about eight years. This background allowed him to immediately see the creative possibilities of hot glass. Clinton describes the challenge of working with stone as "finding a form inside an object"—his creative energies were restricted by the size and shape of the raw material. In glass, Clinton found a material that was both almost "overwhelming." After melting down rods and tubes, he felt his only limitations were those of his imagination, which he said is a wonderfully "liberating" creative experience.

Once he discovered glass, Clinton's personality was such that he made a commitment to mastering his craft by dedicating long hours, often morning through night, working in his studio. He did this through production work and experimentation. For about a five-year period, Clinton focused on producing glass pipes, all the while experimenting on the side. Although much of Clinton's pipe work is market-driven, he began to attract attention and slowly transitioned into creating one-of-a-kind pieces. These pipes distinguished him in the borosilicate world and served as a creative platform for his later design work.

Like his most ambitious pipes, Clinton's goblets represent a fusion of



Totem pole bubbler



Glass Scarab Chalice

pre-glass sculptural techniques with recent advances in borosilicate colored glasses and equipment. What's exciting about his goblets are the themes and how much passionate visual information they convey to the viewer. This work represents Clinton's transition to sculptural work; they celebrate his

ideas and interests. Three recurring themes developed in the goblets, now common to Clinton's work, are: appreciation for nature, particularly animals; openness to the spirituality and myths of world religions; and celebration of human creativity.

These themes find their way into a wide range of objects. Clinton has worked in non referential and non-functional sculpture, figurative sculptural, and masks. Ironically, a small-scale sculpture represents one of his most ambitious efforts. After being introduced to the 18th-century flame-worked Nevers figurines, Clinton was inspired to revive the spirit of that work. He did this with a St. Francis of Assisi diorama that took six months of planning, experimentation, and execution to create. The diorama represents a breakthrough in Clinton's career. This small work articulates volumes of visual information while taking advantage of 20th-century material and techniques.

Clinton's goblets are comparable to his pipes, in that both categories are designed to be functional. Although they are functional in purpose, they offer viewers insights into Clinton's world of spirituality, myth, and nature. At this stage in his career, Clinton's work represents Whitman-esque openness to images and references from world cultures and religions. His glass work also evidences esthetic carryovers from his early days as a wood- and stone-carver. This can be seen in his Totem Pole bubbler, which not only references Northwest Native American spirituality but also mimics carved wood. I find it interesting to see how the borosilicate colored glasses can, in this piece, suggest painted wood. Another pipe, Shiva, articulates a Hindu deity. Clinton's color choices are pleasing to the eye and respectful of the deity's status. The hands and arms are thoughtfully executed, adding a higher level of feeling composition. Another interesting example of Clinton's overview of world images is his interpretation of Egyptian symbols in the Egyptian Scarab Chalice.

Other personal favorites of Clinton's work demonstrate his interest in sculpting the essence of humanity. The first, Head, presents a human head in regal form. The glow emanating from the eye and the poetic nature of the hair allude to the mystical power inherent in the human spirit. The second, Heart and Soul, is an intelligent articulation of the fragility of human



Shiva

to have him there with me and enjoyed exploring and discussing Corning's collection, particularly the Nevers figurines.

It soon became clear that Clinton is a natural teacher. He spent many hours working with the beginner students, sometimes staying at the studio late into the night, helping them realize their visions. This also demonstrated his rigorous work ethic and respect for the process. I found it fascinating how quickly Clinton, primarily a borosilicate flameworker, adapted to the soda-lime glass program he was assisting me with. By the end of the week, Clinton reinforced my belief that his life and work represent the best of a new wave of glass artists, which will most likely crest in the next 10 to 15 years. This community of tough creative people will affect the legacy of glass in a truly 21st-century way with their scientific glassblowing foundation and use of the most recent breakthroughs in glass technology and equipment.



life and how dependent we are on this complex organ. However, there is a romanticism to its presentation: the heart as both essential to life and the emotional center of our being.

Beyond these direct references, Clinton can also work in more abstract modes. One of his most accomplished sculptures, titled *Core*, is a 12-inch spherical form that mystifies the viewer with its high level of organic intelligence and adds to our collective understanding of nature's mysteries. Although it represents a high level of technical skill, the unity of the result overrides the viewer's curiosity about the process.

From a dinosaur skull to a human head, and from a ceremonial Egyptian chalice to a shaman mask, Clinton's aesthetic parameters are unusually wide. It's an easy prediction to make, however, that as Clinton journeys

through a very diverse artistic landscape, his path will narrow to celebrate a more succinct interpretation of his vision.

What I see in Clinton is a person with a tremendous need to be creative and the courage to pursue his ideas and visions. He is totally committed to the lifestyle of sharing what is important to him with the world and does this through glass—a physically and technically demanding craft.

On a personal note, my friendship was strengthened this past July when Clinton assisted me for one week at the Corning Museum of Glass's studio school. I learned a lot about Clinton during the course of the week. As an intellectually curious person, he thrived on the demands of the compressed, high-energy workshop and the visually overwhelming breadth of the museum's collection. I was proud



St. Francis Diorama

(Cover image)
Photo by Ron Farina photography