

Origins

Backing into Glass Art

Baker O'Brien was the only apprentice glass master Dominick Labino ever had, but in the beginning, at least, her focus was metal

By Lee Lawrence

While a student at Antioch, Baker O'Brien wended her way to the small town of Grand Rapids, Ohio, in 1975 and succeeded where countless glass devotees had failed: she found room at the Labino Studio. By this time, Dominick Labino was already legendary as the chemist and engineer who had helped Harvey Littleton launch the studio glass movement by developing a formula for glass for use in artists' private studios.

Labino was also besieged by would-be acolytes eager to dust, sweep, mop, you name it, just to watch him work glass. Until O'Brien came along, he had consistently refused. What made him say yes to her? Unlike the others, O'Brien had no interest in glass. A jeweler by training, she was looking for a place to do metal-

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Originally trained as a jeweler, Baker O'Brien honors her mentor Dominick Labino through glass works rich in color and depth. She created "The Conversation," left, in 1987, the year Labino died.

work. In time, O'Brien became Labino's only apprentice.

When I arrive, I expect to see shelves sporting replicas of Labino's famous Emergence series and wall posters featuring the master. Instead, the hot shop

thrums with the roar of three furnaces, shelves brim with powders and minerals, blowpipes and wooden forms, a CD player—in short, everything you expect to see in a working hot shop.

Behind it and off to the side I find a small, light-filled showroom, and this is where I meet O'Brien. She does not walk, she strides. She does not talk, she



enthus. Her way of honoring Labino is not to enshrine him but to move forward. The only form she borrows from her teacher is a small clip-handled pitcher. But that, explains O'Brien, is because she discovered that a West Virginia company was replicating it. "At that point, I thought, 'This is fair game,'" she says.

All other designs are entirely hers, and her experiments go in whatever direction catches her fancy, from sculptural commissions to cast tiles for a fireplace. The showroom is filled with handblown goblets, bowls and vases. Larger vessels perch on pedestals, while a hot-sculpted horse with a cobalt blue tail and mane gallops across a windowsill. Works on commission only pass through: recently, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani received a sculptural hot-worked piece the local

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Junior League had commissioned and Toledo-based actress Katie Holmes (of *Dawson's Creek* fame) presented First Lady Laura Bush with an O'Brien perfume bottle she had purchased here.

"The heart of the Labino Studio is the glass itself," O'Brien explains, picking up a bowl in which reds wash through the glass like plant life undulating under water, "and I feel strongly about preserving the integrity of it." While most



O'Brien's work has remained true to Labino's vision. Clockwise from right are "Yellow Feathers on Blue," 1997; an untitled iridized vase, 1998; and an untitled hot glass sculpture, 1993.

glass artists apply a veneer of color to a gather of hot, clear glass, Labino made glass in color by mixing various metallic oxides directly into sand, soda ash, zinc oxide, feldspar and other ingredients. This is the technique O'Brien learned, more through experimentation and observation than direct instruction. Labino "knew so many things by osmosis that it didn't occur to him to verbalize it," she notes.

"I would say things like, 'Can you make this batch more burgundy?' And he'd look at me over his glasses and say, 'You think I have a dial on the color.'"

It was only once O'Brien started mixing and melting glass herself that she figured out why Labino had been so noncommittal. "It was," she says, "the big 'Aha! I get it! You can't control this, can you?'"

She would not have to cope with so much uncertainty if she applied color to clear glass rather than incorporate it. Switching techniques would also be a lot cheaper, because she could run one furnace instead of three, each with a different color glass. But accounting does not interest her. "I'm spoiled," she says. "By the color, yes, but also by the excitement." No matter how well she understands the chemistry involved, there are always surprises.

"And that," she enthuses, "is both the agony and the ecstasy. The ecstasy is opening the annealing oven and it's 'wow, look at that red, this is a knockout.' The agony is when you're trying to make three things that are the same color."

After Labino's death in 1987, O'Brien inherited his studio and could think of no better place to keep his glass alive. So she bought the hot shop along with a large tract of land from the Labino estate, eventually creating discrete, interconnected spaces where she and her husband, Lukas Novotny, go about the business of what can only be called "multi-aring." In a corner of the hot shop, Novotny crafts high-performance bows, some out of fiberglass, others out of the traditional horn, wood and sinew that ancient makers used. This explains the mound of buffalo horns and the quiver of arrows propped against a workbench.

When O'Brien is not at the furnaces, she is in a closed-off studio where, during the day, she sits under a skylight, making rings, brooches and pendants. At night, however, the phone is off and the door shuts out even Novotny. This is when she works on prints. To her, this is far more than setting down colors and designs; this is tapping into and releasing something deeply personal. Blown vessels, pieces of jewelry, even sculptural cast pieces with which she feels an emotional connection, are, in her view, "dimensional objects that speak for themselves."

"I don't feel like they carry an inner voice. But somehow when you start putting stuff on paper, it's much more personal and for me, much more emotional."

Part of this stems from the process of glass monotypes, which she and Novotny discovered in 1994, the first time they taught at Pilchuck. "You get an empty glass plate and you're basically painting like a little kid," she explains. "Then you run the plate through the press and what you painted gets embedded in the paper. Lukas and I both flipped." Here, too, O'Brien's work is color rich, but the medium also allows her to be more whimsical and playful. For a commission, she created absurdly giant carrots. Stuck with a gray Ohio winter several years ago, she filled the studio with pop-off-the-wall-green palm trees.

It is a short stroll along a covered walkway from the print and jewelry studio to the house, which O'Brien—in her spare time—designed. "I wanted a space to entertain between one and 30 friends, a place to sleep and a place for the stuff we've inherited and collected," she says. Keeping in mind that she and her husband might someday want to build a larger house

at the other end of the property, she designed a 50-by-25-foot space, half of which is lofted while the other half is topped by a soaring cathedral ceiling—the kind of space that would make a "kick-ass studio."

In the meantime, it is an inviting, color-saturated home, where O'Brien and Novotny surround themselves with works by other artists. The obelisk-shaped lamp by the couch is the work of a nearby sculptor, while prints on the wall include a David Hockney, whom O'Brien cites as a great influence. Filling one wall is a large painting of a sleek dog, white gesso on a background of blue, green and orange. It is a Novotny-O'Brien collaboration on a Saluki, an ancient breed of dog for which Novotny's bow company is named.

Flanking the high counter around the kitchen area, two columns rise to meet the loft above. They are carved trunks of palm that O'Brien brought back from Indonesia when she ran an import business with a friend. On the back wall, a section of the bookcase is devoted to yet another of O'Brien's artistic outlets: cooking. "I found a new recipe," she says, enticing you not to leave quite yet.

So starts a new round of conversation and a new palette of colors: tomatoes bloom on the cutting board, ruby red wine splashes into blue-streaked goblets, and an orange house cat hops onto a purple chair. ☒



One of O'Brien's latest passions is glass monotypes, "basically painting like a little kid" on glass, she explains. From top are "Enchanted Forest," "First Home" and "Maui View."

