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## Playing with fire

By Sky Barnhart, For The Maui News

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It's hot in here. Deep inside Pauwela Cannery, the heat fills every corner of DaFactory—not a passive, stuffy heat; but the raging, vibrant heat of working fire. A blowtorch shoots flame into the air next to a workbench; a small kiln smolders off to one side; a huge furnace bakes in the center of the room.

Right now, the action is focused on the "glory hole" at one side of the room. From within its raw orange circle of heat, something is emerging.

A cluster of onlookers steps back in anticipation as glass artist-in-residence Charles Lowrie, his T-shirt and ponytail soaked with sweat, pulls a long, heavy iron blowpipe out of the glory hole. At the end of the pipe is a glowing ball of molten glass.

Moving quickly, Lowrie carries the pipe over to the workbench, where he uses iron tongs to stretch the soft glass, tugging and shaping it as it begins to sag. Glass artist Rignon Foltz steadily turns the pipe so the glob won't collapse.

Glass artist-in-residence Jason Harris, co-owner of DaFactory, claps his hands and shouts encouragement. "The glass is like honey in this stage," Harris tells me. "If it falls, it's done, it's over; this thing hits the floor."

The glass darkens, changing from glowing yellow to deep red. Its variable nature gives the glassblowers a very short window of time—an average of 60 seconds—to manipulate it. After that, it must go back into the glory hole, or reheating chamber, which is kept at 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Any hotter, and the glass "soups"; any colder, and it cracks.

Everyone lets out a stored breath as Lowrie returns the pipe to the chamber. Someone comes back from a store run with a sack of Gatorades, and they are quickly dispensed around the studio. "Drink up!" Harris shouts. "We need to stay hydrated."

The energy level in the room is enough to fuel a reality television show—a feeling that's accentuated by the camerapeople and crew who circle the action. They're filming a TV pilot on "Maui's imagination in glass"—the relationship of diverse artists in different mediums who come together to collaborate on one-of-a-kind art pieces.

It's all part of the vision of DaFactory, the new Haiku gallery and studio inspired by Andy Warhol's infamous "Factory" of the 1960s—a gathering place of artists and musicians, famed for its groundbreaking artwork.

"We're a multimedia factory, not just a glass studio," says co-owner Bobby Smith. He and Harris are the founders and creative minds behind DaFactory. "We want everything we do to be an experience and an event. We'll be bringing in artists from all over the world. We'll be hosting parties and live glassblowing events, and even world-class chefs who will demonstrate cooking techniques using the glassworking equipment! You can come here and be part of art being made."

Harris and Smith met years ago at the University of Oregon in Eugene and soon realized their common fascination with the 4,000-year-old art of glassblowing—heating sand at a very high temperature until it melts, then blowing into a metal pipe to expand the glass, and shaping it using a variety of time-honored tools and techniques.

After receiving his bachelor of fine arts degree at UO in 1995, Harris furthered his glass education by studying under masters of the craft in Murano, Italy; Germany; and the Czech Republic. His love of the medium led him into projects like co-founding the Eugene Glass School; building a glass factory with native artists in New Delhi, India; and designing and building a full-scale glass art facility at the UO Craft Center, where he also taught glassblowing.

At 36 years old, Harris already has a string of commissioned works under his belt that include large-scale pieces for buildings in Eugene and St. Louis, Mo.; independent artwork for celebrities like Snoop Dog, Adam Sandler, Drew Barrymore and Annie Lennox; and pieces for private collections.

Now, with the combination of Harris' artistic talents and Smith's background in international event planning (developed during years of working with New Orleans-based Spyboy Productions)—DaFactory is ready to take on the world. The bigger the better—literally.

"Our main focus will be creating large-scale glass works," Smith says. "Sculptures, chandeliers, public art—you name it, we can do it here."

Previously a dusty cabinet-making shop, the 1,400 square-foot "ultra shop" at Pauwela Cannery now features four glory holes of varying sizes and a 600-pound furnace, which burns constantly at 2,100 degrees.

"Every piece of equipment in here, we made from scratch," Harris says. "These are the most energy-efficient machines on the market. We built it all in Oregon and shipped over 10,000 pounds of raw material to Maui. I called it the Noah's Ark of Glass!"

### Article Photos

The 4,000-year-old art of glassblowing is all about teamwork: here, Paris Birdwell and Charles Lowrie work together using the blowtorch.  
Sky Barnhart photo

Why Maui? "Maui has a base of clients to support this kind of large-scale work," Harris says. "You can really only find that kind of demand in Verona, Italy; and Seattle. Maui is an epicenter for culture, and it has the inspiration of natural beauty."

Smith and Harris financed the venture with their own savings. "We put everything we had into this," Harris says.

Now they're counting on the passion of glass to ignite other like-minded artists. One such creator is Oahu's Solomon Enos, an accomplished contemporary Native Hawaiian artist whose vivid illustrations have graced "Maui," Hapa's Hoku Award-winning CD; "Na Ahua Hawai'i," a children's book about Hawaiian gods published by Bishop Museum Press; and countless other murals and commissions.

In the midst of DaFactory's heat and drama, Enos is seated peacefully against the wall, just a few feet from the glory hole. The wall behind him is papered with his sketches: a head, an arm, a fin, a whale tail. What is emerging today is "He Kupua Kohola Au" ("I am the Whale Hero"), based on a Native Hawaiian myth of a man who transforms himself into a whale.

Enos knows virtually nothing about glassblowing, and he had never met the guys from DaFactory before today. He simply handed over his sketches to Lowrie, and now is watching his idea come to life.

Gesturing to the fiery glory hole, Enos says, "This reminds me of the womb of the earth, the Kumulipo (creation chant) . . . taking these raw elements and giving them life."

Enos is a proponent of "translating old ideas into new media" to give people a deeper understanding of their surroundings. Glass provides a new, exciting outlet to illustrate Hawaiian culture.

"Living in Hawai'i, we're sitting on an island of intellectual culture . . . the stories and the legends from thousands of years ago," Enos says. "There's no end of ideas once you start looking back!"

He's intrigued by what he's learning about glassblowing, seeing it as a metaphor for change and rebirth. "If you can shape a piece of glass, then you can shape a room, you can shape a community, you can shape a world," Enos says. "It's that process of transformation. You can apply change in every direction."

A whirl of action at the glory hole again. Glass artist Paris Birdwell pulls out the glowing glass, and Lowrie uses a chisel to quickly cut deep grooves in the sphere's hot surface, creating the whale's gills.

There is still much work to do on this piece—another six hours at least. Disembodied arms and legs are baking in the "garage," a 1,000-degree kiln where separately made components are "parked" until they are fused to a larger piece. Once completed, the artwork will go into an annealing oven, where the temperature will be steadily evened out to room temperature—hopefully without cracking. After that, there's usually the "cold work": polishing and perfecting.

"When you look at the number of steps, it makes me feel grateful I just have a pencil and an eraser!" Enos laughs, wiping sweat from his face.

For Harris—watching Lowrie coax a new dimension from the emerging form—every step of the process becomes an integral facet of the completed work. He thrives on the "performance art" aspect of his craft.

"When I look at a finished piece of glass, I don't just see the form," he says. "I see the whole experience—the chaos, the action, the teamwork."

And, of course, the heat.

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