

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Gene Koss

The following text is from a conversation with Tom Spleth, provided by the artist on behalf of the curator.

In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?

Gene works because the ideas are in his sketch book. He stands up for the blue collar sector of society, committed to the monumental and the effort to do it right. He funds the work out of his own pocket and no corners are cut.



Gene Koss- Amish View Two

What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?

He grew up in the Midwest and blue collar values are important to him. The history of craft is not really a part of his work but he respects the craftsmanship of a piece. As a sculptor who uses craft materials, he must have respect for those who came before. His art references a work ethic which is not honored today. In the past, it was, as evidenced by his childhood in an area that respected the blue collar worker. In New Orleans, especially, there is a need for workers to bring the city back from the destruction of the Hurricane. The blue collar viewpoint includes a respect for land and a respect for family. His *Current Silo* sculpture is reminiscent of spaces and structures he saw as a kid. It is important to not forget the people and what they stand for in the digital age.

How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?

Not really, but yes in metaphorical terms and in its implied movement. He came out a tradition of Midwest Potters and he has respect for the utilitarian craftsman.

To use a cup that is made by someone with 20 years experience is just as important as anything else.

Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, or in community?

Gene works with a team of people. While he has crews for casting glass and another crew to make the steel work, he is isolated when doing drawings and making plans for work and when finishing a piece. He has abiding respect for his assistants but he is the artist.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

Mastery is being able to use media to accomplish ideas. He is still learning after 30 years and a body of work of one-of-a-kind pieces. He learns about his materials each time he is in the studio. It is important to bring ideas to the forefront and not to rely on skill alone. In pursuit of his art, he has cast 30 tons of glass over the years.

Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South? If you moved to your current home from outside the South, what brought you to the South? Is your work influenced by the South in any way?

Gene has been in New Orleans for 31 years, ever since a job at Tulane brought him to the city. He has completed two short series on the Hurricane. The city influences the work; it is a very artistic place with musicians, writers, and visual artists in abundance.

Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?

An idea of rural blue collar people who are close to the land is present in his work. His works are site-specific and deal with the landscape; the influence of Christo, Serra, and Judd who very much consider the site in their work. This is especially true of Judd’s Marfa Texas operation because of the way it plays with both the site and the light.

In your opinion, are there features, factors, or conditions that distinguish contemporary craft being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country?

Not really. Some folk artists, perhaps. He has great respect for their work.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

Yes, he experimented with different glass casting processes, especially during the early days.

How is your work evolving?

His last two pieces were big and his work in general is becoming more kinetic. He is also interested in pushing the boundaries of the monumental, and is aware of not copying himself.

Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

He is very closely connected to his community and with the glass community. In New Orleans, sculptors, dancers and architects are all part of it.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would you like your legacy to be?

Yes. He speaks about keeping his sculpture “alive” and passing it on. He wants to raise money for an endowed chair in glass at Tulane. His legacy is to push glass into fine art having built it up in studio to that end.

How did you learn your craft?

He worked with teachers in the Midwest—Doug Johnson and Kurt Wildand—and with Jon Clark at Tyler School of Art. These men were really good craftsmen and gave him good training. A sense of the Midwest and what it means to craftsmanship is important to him. Technique is just hard work.

Do you share your knowledge/technique/experience with others—the next generation of artists/craftspeople?

Definitely. He was taught to share and grew up in a religious family which encouraged him to share. He does not hold back anything. Groups come down to his studio to see the tools and methods he employs. The studio is always open to everyone.

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? And, alternative places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, John C. Campbell Folk School?

There is art at Tulane University and other universities but the universities lack depth. There is too much theory. Students do not have any sense that acquiring this information may take time and effort. The emphasis is on hype and

immediate success. One of his teachers, Rudy Staffel received recognition in his 70's. Gene learned then that it takes a long time to pull something that is your own out of yourself and the material.