

The 2016 GAS Conference Glass Fashion Show

An Adrenaline Rush in Corning

by Sara Sally LaGrand

Photography by Heather Baigelman

It was the day before the highly anticipated Glass Art Society Glass Fashion Show (GFS) when I sat down in the open cafeteria at the Corning Museum of Glass with Laura Donefer. I knew it would be for a precious amount of time. “Just 15 minutes,” I promised her. It didn’t matter, because she loved talking about her GFS baby! The Glass Fashion Show, now in its 12th incarnation, is her brainchild, and Donefer, a glass artist from Canada, had no idea that it would practically take over her life.

“In 1989, I was the president of the Glass Art Association of Canada (GAAC), and the Glass Art Society (GAS) was coming to Canada for its very first international conference. I knew a big splash was needed to make a huge impression on the rest of the glass world. I wanted people to know that Canada could put on a really extraordinary show.”

Interesting Beginnings

Donefer rented the huge ballroom at the Royal York Hotel, convinced 40 glass artists to make costumes, and voilà! A legacy began. “We learned a lot at that first show,” the artist says as her husband snickers in the background. “I was very naïve back then, not realizing that it would be kind of dangerous. One example is a medusa helmet of snaking neon tubes that shorted out and really shocked the model wearing it, but she lived. There were, as well, all these barefoot models, because I had not realized that glass costumes are likely to break all over the stage. By the end of the very first Glass Fashion Show, the catwalk was covered in bloody footprints!” Regardless of those first pitfalls, that fashion show was a massive hit.

In 1991, the annual GAS conference was slated to return to Corning, New York, an ideal place to host Glass Fashion Show 2. There was only one possible impediment—Donefer was pregnant with her first and only child, Ana Matisse. That was no deterrent to her enthusiasm, however, or her determination to let the show go on. The big question on her mind was how they would top the first show.

At some point, Donefer turned the reigns over to her dear friend, Ginny Ruffner, because Ana Matisse decided to come a month early, right on the day of the actual show. Donefer kept close tabs on everything, phoning and faxing up to the last minute. Then in 2001, when the show was back in Corning and Ana Matisse, now 10 years old, the very baby who chose to be born during the ’91 Corning conference, opened the show to the music of 2001 A Space Odyssey.



(Clockwise from far left) Eunsuh Choi models the costume of her own creation. Cara DiMassimo models her kiln worked green and orange glass dress. Charlynnne Lafontaine created the purple glass coat modeled by Kurt Walther. Karina Guevin, a flamworking goddess from Quebec, Canada, in her costume, and artist/model Michael Mangiafico as the lizard man, with 2,000 pieces of flame-worked scales. Lucio Bubacco, Alessandro Bubacco, and Nichola created this costume, modeled by Alessandro.

Remembering New Orleans

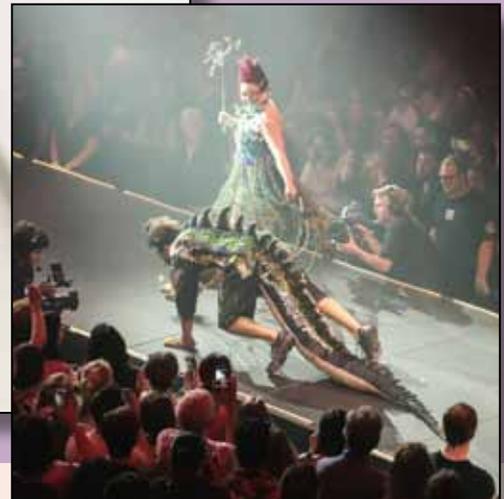
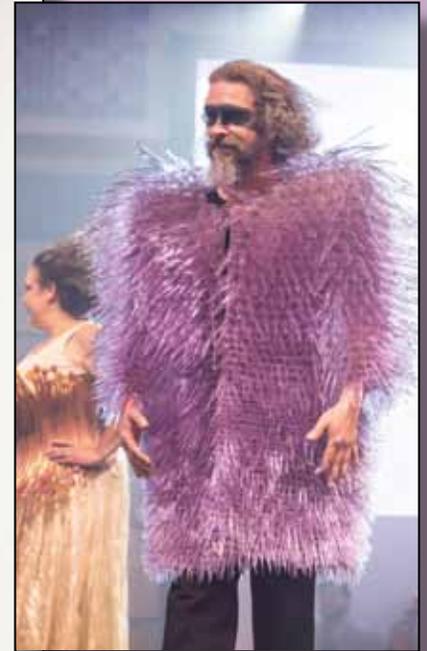
There have been 12 eventful shows, of which Donefer has a particular favorite. “Ah, New Orleans,” she says lovingly. There was a wild, live band right on the catwalk, and it resembled more of a burlesque show than a fashion show. Karen Willenbrink made a fabulous costume with glass feathers for a 7-foot-tall transgender model, and many professional strippers dressed in, well, not a lot, but what was on them was glass.

The atmosphere was wild! Beau Anderson was the “King of Mardi Gras,” bedecked in just the right amount of fantastic Beau Beads. Donefer had injured herself during the rehearsal and needed two hunky glass boys to carry her down the catwalk. It was unforgettable!



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An International Affair

Fast forward to 2016, and this year’s show promised to be the one to remember. Over 100 costumes were included, with many participants from the United States and Canada, but also from Italy, Turkey, Argentina, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, and Portugal. It has become a truly international affair.

“I started cajoling people right away, as soon as I had the actual date of the show from the folks at Corning and GAS,” Donefer says. “There were people that I absolutely had to have on that stage for my vision to come to fruition. One of those was California artist, Kathleen Elliot.”

Elliot explains: “I had never participated in the Glass Fashion Show or even seen one, so I had some things to overcome.” First off was how to attach Elliott’s signature botanical pieces to a dress. She made the dress by hand and started experimenting with dye and fabric paint to no avail. Her final solution was regular spray paint, which actually stiffened the dress, making it easier to attach the glass pieces to the finished garment. Experimenting with attachments was also a challenge. “Nature is my first love,” Elliot says, “and my fear of what we are doing to it. I fear for our future in the world.”

The beautiful pieces were a little heavy, however. To glue or Velcro? Eventually she opted for sewing them on. The result was an ethereal gown covered with healthy fish, frogs, lily pads, and a corsage of pods at the shoulder, as well as a six-pound headpiece. These all worked together to make Elliot look like a goddess of nature.

Collaborative Efforts

Italian artist, Lucio Bubacco, was a late entry to the event. Although he planned to attend the conference with his two nephews and his assistant Nicola Dona, he had not planned to enter the fashion show. Bubacco shared, “At first Laura said, ‘No, Lucio. It is so late, and the show is in a few months.’ But then she asked for my ideas.

“I faxed the drawings, and when she saw them, she said she loved it. I created the sketch and handed it to my nephew Alessandro and Nicola.” They designed the costume with Byzantine influences—little arches made of glass—and it took about three months. “I made the crown when I got to Corning,”

The costume, modeled by Alessandro, was a complete hit. "It gave them an additional purpose," Lucio explained. "They were attending the conference anyway. But having the costume to create let them feel more engaged, because they had this joint project that allowed them to be part of the show." If social media was any indicator of popularity, the Zeus costume was a winner as Instagram and Facebook feeds filled up with images of Alessandro Bubacco creating a mythic pose on the catwalk. Eric Goldschmidt also contributed by making the blown lightning bolts carried by Bubacco.

New Artists

Another incredibly popular piece was the 80- to 100-pound glass coat created by artist Charlynn Lafontaine of Ottawa, Canada. Former curator at the Corning Museum and art critic William Warmus proclaimed, "I want this!" immediately on Facebook Saturday night after the show.

This was not only Charlynn's first fashion show but her first GAS conference as well. "Kinda hooked now," she says. The artist derived her inspiration for the spiny purple costume from a fur coat once owned by her grandmother. "The coat is flameworked boro, blown with two holes to put a wire through. It took nearly two years to complete. And besides, the more glass, the better."

Sabina Boehm of Seattle, Washington, was another artist late to the game. "I created these three glass corsets for the Erotic Art Festival here in Washington and then thought of the fashion show," says Sabina. "At first Laura was taken aback at the very late date, but she changed her tune when she saw the photos." The three corsets representing an angel, a devil, and something in between are a reflection of Boehm's own quest for balance in her life.



Laura Donefer, founder and organizer of the GAS Fashion Show.

Sara Sally LaGrand as Marie Antoinette.



All of the pieces were made of copper wire and boro glass. Boehm created a plaster cast of her own body to act as a model while she created the pieces. "It's hard to visualize the final piece as you are creating all the small parts. Making the plaster cast helped me, because I could lay the pieces down in a 3-D shape and get an idea of the finished look."

In total, the three corsets took three months to make after Boehm came up with the idea. "The work was intended to be an installation, but it ended up being more like a performance piece and a real labor of love," she says. The pieces were worn by two models being the angel and the devil, and Boehm herself modeled the in between piece.

The trio were part of the opening act for the show that included Josh DeWall with his flameworked guitar and Jasen Johnson, who created his own hot sculpted glass guitar in a tribute to the late David Bowie. Donefer says, "This was all a part of my vision. I wanted to see them playing their guitars up there on the catwalk, and they made my dream come true!"

Looking Forward to the Next Show

With Glass Fashion Show 2016 now just a memory, work has begun on a video and book to catalog the event. That will allow the event to be revisited by all who were lucky enough to be in the audience or on the catwalk. Those who could not make it to the event will also have a way to experience the show. Donefer says to her faithful posse of glass fashionistas, "We were the hit of the conference and, for a few hours, the most popular people in the entire glass world!"

Before you e-mail her begging to be included in the next Glass Fashion Show, remember the event only happens every four years or so. As that conference has not been announced yet, it might allow time for some creative reflection. However, nothing will stop you from starting your costume right away. As you start your sketches and Google past episodes of Project Runway, just remember the mantra for the day . . . You can never have too much glass! **GA**

Sara Sally LaGrand, award-winning artist and author, has had the great fortune to study glassmaking with many gifted teachers, both in America and Italy. She holds a BA in Glass Formation from Park University, Parkville, Missouri.

Honors include awards from Art Westport, Kansas City, Missouri; State of the Arts, Prairie Village, Kansas; The Bead Museum of Washington, D.C; Fine Line Gallery, Chicago, Illinois; Images Art Gallery; and the Kansas City Artists Coalition.

LaGrand has taught flameworking all over the world and has work published in many books and magazines. Her work can be found in public and private collections around the world.

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