



Ideas on Legs

A New Way of Looking at Things

By Kathy Johnson

When you first see his logo you know Bill Hess is creative in a different way. How often do you see a light bulb on legs? Using what other people throw away, Hess gets his ideas. His light bulb goes on and he is able to create something beautiful and unique.

Located in a studio in a beautiful little valley down one of those long and winding roads near the Nelson County line, Hess has found a perfect blend of nature and the arts. "Here in Nelson they don't recycle the glass anymore," said Hess. "So that all goes in the dumpster. Unfortunate. But Charlottesville is a good source." Hess pointed to the piles of glass near the backdoor of his shop. "So this is all bottles that we've gotten. Actually we don't even drink alcohol," he explained. "People donate stuff (glass and bottles) to us."

He was showing off his modest workshop on the back of his home. In this somewhat small, crowded space, Hess has created his magical glass and metal pieces. It would be hard to be neat in an area filled with bits of broken and powdered glass and impossible if you are working with those bits and pieces regularly. Some glass strips that were outside had come from a stained glass artist as scrap.

"So what I do is I crush them (the bottles)," Hess said, explaining his creative process. "I feed them into a machine in my barn and it makes sort of a glass powder. I hand-crush some of it, too, with my improvised sort of crusher."

Hess gestured toward a low round metal container with a heavy metal pole and a cover near the base, a sort of mortise and pestle set up with a cover.

"Then I'll put the pieces in a mold." He showed what appeared to be a small cement box. "I have square molds and rectangular pieces. And then these get put into the kiln."

Someone gave Hess the kiln he uses with a small computer he



Bill Hess

attached that allows him to control the temperature. In the glass making or melting process he needs the temperature to rise and fall. As the glass gets heated it melts together. Hess was very serious as he explained, "It's very important that it cool at a slow rate so that it doesn't crack. And then I create different textures depending on how hot I get the glass."

Hess showed one piece with a rough texture that he has polished so that there were no cutting edges. "I melted it just enough to stick together and then I burnish off the edges a little. The temperature can either melt the glass bits completely together or simply allow them to



Earthen Sublimation, fused recycled glass



Bowls series, fused and slumped recycled glass



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"A Wire Runs Through It": fused recycled glass, hand-made shade, cedar base, electrical wire embedded in glass



Awakening—illuminated sculpture: cast glass, welded reclaimed steel, electric lighting

adhere to each other."

Hess—who has a bachelor of arts from Dartmouth College (a double major in engineering sciences and studio art), a bachelor of engineering with a concentration in mechanics from Dartmouth's Thayer School of Engineering and a master of science in biomedical engineering from Northwestern University—



Green and Amber Coasters: fused recycled glass

explained glass pieces that appear to be cloudy. "What happens is that the glass is sensitive to what's called denitrification, a process where some of the chemicals in the glass can burn off and it starts to get into a sand form, which is what glass largely is. It's basically sand. At a higher temperature that's more prone to that process, the clearness goes away. There's a very tight window where it stays clear."

The smoky glass is kind of nice, too. It just depends on his plan for the end product.

Hess enjoyed showing off different pieces of glass that went through similar processes with different tem-

peratures and ended up looking very different. "I may use the glass powder for the base and then add glass pieces or shards to create the colorful pieces in the end product," he said.

"The challenge when I work with recycled bottles is that it's all from different bottle manufacturers." They have different properties depending on how they were manufactured and how fast the glass was cooled, etc.

"When I get it I don't know where it's from or what the properties are, and it's got to somehow mix together and stay together and sometimes it does and sometimes it

doesn't. When it doesn't it's got a little crack in it. I call it a localized crack, but sometimes they go all the way through. So it can become a visual effect."

A lot of experimentation goes into his glass. "Trying to figure out how it's going to go together so you still have a stable piece—but at the same time a visually interesting or exciting piece," Hess said.

Hess moved to the area about five years ago. He and his wife Wendy had been living in Seattle. "When I lived out there I became interested in kind of pushing my art in different directions and adding more color to it."

"I'd been doing metal work for a long time, doing welded found-items from old junkyards. I felt like the metal colors were so limited and there is a big glass community in Seattle. I started off doing cast glass and then reusing materials to the glasswork. Studio glass is all manufactured and I wanted to experiment with how to use recycled glass. There were some people at the time doing that, but I didn't really know how to make the connection. Living here, though, I was forced to explore more how to make glass in a controlled way because I didn't want to build a huge studio with a furnace and do molten glass work."

"So I started learning about kiln working and someone gave me the kiln and I started playing around with bottle glass and it all started fitting together."

"Now, this is what I do. I market and sell to retail stores and then I also have shows and I do commissioned work."

Hess sells glass tiles as trivets or coaster sets, lamps, table lamps, desk and wall clocks and birdbaths. He sells in Norfolk, Charlottesville and a store in Wintergreen, and online (www.idealsonlegs.com). "I'm trying to get out to other areas for retail and I do craft shows occasionally, but it is very tiring to plan and set up and take down."

"I've always been very connected to nature and appreciate it," Hess said. "Using recycled material is a way for me to be mindful of our ecological constraints and to embrace in my art-making how I can be mindful when I'm making things. Using recycled materials, we can show people how to look at discarded materials or just junk and then reuse them in a really beautiful way."