



# Dabbling on the Dark Side

*Text and Photography by Robert Mickelsen*

“Come mothers and fathers throughout the land,  
And don’t criticize what you can’t understand.  
Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command,  
And your old road is rapidly agin’.  
Please get out of the new one if you can’t lend your hand,  
For the times they are a-changin’.”

**Bob Dylan** 

“Lead, follow, or get out of the way.”

 **Lee Iococca**

I am fifty-nine years old. Some mornings, I am shocked by the face I see staring back from my bathroom mirror. In my head, I am still thirty-five, but my expanded waistline, gray hair, and age lines creasing the features of my face like some fleshy lunar landscape are reminders that my time on earth is passing far more quickly than I had ever anticipated. My energy levels are much lower than they used to be, so my ability to be productive represents a set of rapidly diminishing values. I am reminded that the long, slow slide into oblivion has begun. Maybe it has always been there, but that face in the mirror makes me more aware of it than ever before, and every day more so than the last. So when something happens that returns me to more youthful levels of vigor, I pay attention.

We don’t have control over many things that affect our lives. The current dismal state of the American economy, for instance, is something that we can lament, but do little about. All of us have seen our income and opportunities sharply curtailed by a market that had its legs knocked out from under it with little warning. We can blame banks and politicians until the cows come home, and it won’t change the current reality that things are tough and they are not going to get better anytime soon. But how we respond is still up to us. My choices may not make sense to many people, most particularly my old friends and peers in glass, but if it makes sense to me, that is all that matters. Keeping an open mind is an important survival skill, and that skill has recently come into serious play for me.

## Riding the Wave of Cultural Change

I guess I never really had anything against glass pipes or glass pipe makers, but I never seriously thought I would ever make glass pipes. There are multiple reasons for this, not the least of which would be ego, my reputation as a glass artist, and peer pressure. In fact, my response to the occasional pressure to “just try it” had become ingrained in me to the point where my resistance was more knee jerk than anything else. So much credit has to go to my new friends down in Austin, Texas, especially Kevin Ivey, for being so persistent and finally forcing me to see what was right in front of my eyes all along—that there were new opportunities for creativity and marketing in pipes that I would be a fool to ignore. The minute I took a step back and allowed for the possibility that it would not kill me or end my career if I pushed a bowl into something I had made, I found myself suddenly energized in a way I had not experienced in years.

This happened back in March. Kevin had invited me to come to Austin to do a workshop for his crew at Flameworks, and since he agreed to pay my usual honorarium plus expenses, I had readily accepted. I found myself in the midst of some really talented artisans—Salt and Micah Evans, just to name two. Kevin and his crew picked me up at the airport in a white limo with a pair of longhorns where the hood ornament should be and proceeded to immerse me in their world for the next four days. At first I was a little intimidated. What on earth was I going to show these guys that they had not learned long ago and, in many cases, were better at



than I was? But their level of enthusiasm and unflinching respect soon replaced the anxiety with a palpable feeling of youth and strength I had not felt in a long time. I worked hard and made several pieces, one of which was a blown red wasp about sixteen inches long. When I had reached the end of the process, one of the crew yelled, "Push a bowl in it!" Without really thinking about it, I handed the wasp to Kevin and said, "I don't know how. You do it." So he did.

Then something completely unexpected happened: Nothing! The wasp looked almost exactly the same with the bowl as it did without, and that is when a light came on for me. It did not matter if there was a bowl in it. In fact, it was rather silly to think that a bowl or a down-stem or a water chamber made any more difference in the visual or aesthetic value of the piece than if it were a goblet or a vase or a paperweight. What was the difference anyway? There was none that I could see. The common prejudices against pipe functionality seemed to be just that . . . common prejudice.

But there is *one* difference. Pipes sell. Other functional glass forms do too, but the market for them is currently depressed. Not so with pipes. Pipes are riding a wave of cultural change that is picking up steam, while the rest of the glass art world is struggling to survive. If there is no difference between a goblet I have difficulty selling and a pipe that I can sell easily, what part of me is so dense to not be able to see how silly it would be to refuse to make pipes? What part indeed!

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## Weapons of Peace

I made two more demo pieces at Flame-works that I had Kevin and others in attendance push bowls into. One of the crew immediately bought the wasp for \$1,500—cool cash in my pocket on top of my honorarium (not to mention the undeniable fact that the guy who bought it was doing well enough making pipes to part with that kind of scratch). Light bulbs danced in my head. I realized that I did not have to change my work at all! I could keep making what I always made, just with some small modifications for functionality.

When I got home, my next sculpture was a pipe. It was a piece I had planned to make anyway. I had been making sketches of an AK-47 assault rifle for months and had it on my production schedule already. Turning it into a pipe not only made sense, but the structure of the AK-47 seemed to lend itself to the necessary plumbing. I made the grip the water chamber. I placed the bowl—the first I had ever pushed myself—at the top of the sight, which was seated in a fitting I bought from Kevin. I channeled the air down via a ring seal into the water chamber and back up and forward to the front of the barrel. In a real AK-47, the gas from the explosion is channeled back up to a secondary barrel and back to the heart of the weapon, where the pressure is used to eject the spent cartridge and push the next round into the firing chamber. Near the front, I channeled the air along the same path all the way to the rear of the gun, where I placed the mouthpiece at the top of the stock. Finally, I added a small tube to introduce air into the mix directly above the trigger housing and carefully constructed a spring-loaded, O-ring-sealed mechanism activated by the trigger. To use the device, one would hold it in exactly the same manner one would if firing the real weapon, with the muzzle pointed forward, sighting down the top of the barrel and pulling the trigger.

“Are you out of your mind?” My dear old friend seemed genuinely upset. We stood in front of the demo area at the GAS conference in Seattle, Washington, in June staring at photos of the completed AK-47 on its stand. I had just informed her that it was a pipe. Reaction from others was similar. From another dear friend: “I sure hope this is not what you are going to do from now on.” From another: “So you’ve gone over to the dark side, eh?” I could not disagree. I realized I had.

A month later the AK was sold, and the check was sweet indeed. I felt vindicated and invigorated. The next “Weapon of Peace” is already on the drawing board—a Thompson Submachine Gun. It will also be a pipe. Maybe I am out of my mind, but I have never been one to take the safe route in my career. Why start now?

## Discovering the Benefits of Collaboration

As I write this, I am sitting in the Austin, Texas, airport after spending a week with Salt, one of the premier pipe makers in America. We did collaborative work, something that is prevalent in the pipe community but that I have never done before. This week has only served to confirm that not only am I *not* out of my mind, but I have never been so sure about a career direction in my life. For



five days, Salt and I worked at a fever pitch—twelve- to fifteen-hour days in the blazing heat of Austin in July.

Salt was a joy to work with. He is bright, creative, and extremely talented. We were of like mind in imagery and ambition. Our skill sets melded in cooperative harmony. I have not worked with such focus and intensity in many years, driven by raw emotion and a desire to make work worthy of the pairing of two such committed artisans. We had moments of high exhilaration as well as teeth-grinding frustration and anxiety. We made ambitious and difficult work. In the end, we pulled it off. Collaborations are something I have always avoided, because I feared compromising my own aesthetic and dumbing down my work. But exactly the opposite resulted from my week with Salt. We ended up with work that neither one of us could have done alone. My first collaboration was so successful that I have already planned the next one with another prominent pipe maker and am ready to do several more next year.

Last night we photographed the pieces we made. Salt’s father came by for a visit. After hanging around with Salt and the boys at Flame-works all week, Salt’s father seemed like a very old fellow—that is, until Salt remarked that his father and I were almost exactly the same age. I realized with a start that I was filled with a feeling of youth and invigorated in a way that I had forgotten was possible for me. And perhaps therein is the real value in my decision to make pipes. Maybe this feeling will last. Maybe I will live longer. But whether I do or not, I believe there is no doubt I will live a happier and more creative life simply because my enthusiasm for my chosen medium has been restored. When people ask me why I have gone over to the dark side, I will be able to give them a concise and completely honest answer: “Because that is where the light is.”

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