





# PRAIRIE DOG GLASS

## The Rise of Southwest Native Glass Art

By Cathy Short (Citizen Potawatomi)

**J**ACKALOPE HAS BEEN an iconic shopping experience in Santa Fe since 1976, with an ever-changing variety of animals to observe and merchandise to buy—almost like an amusement park for home-and-garden shoppers. About 15 years ago, the owners began looking for an additional tenant where customers could watch artists at work and buy their art. Patrick Morrissey and Elodie Holmes, local glass artists, proposed building a glass studio near Jackalope’s existing prairie dog colony. Although all of the animals, including the prairie dogs, disappeared over the years, Prairie Dog Glass has retained its name.

Morrissey and Holmes cofounded Prairie Dog Glass as part of their joint commitment to community education and service. Holmes, an award-winning glass artist, has had her own studio and art gallery, Liquid Light Glass, in the Baca Street Art District in Santa Fe since 1986. Morrissey began working with glass at the Penland School of Craft in North Carolina in 1978 and earned a BFA and MFA from Southern Illinois University.

Over the years, Prairie Dog Glass has provided an extensive public hot shop, instruction, mentoring, glass supplies, glass art for sale, and the opportunity to view first-class glass artists at work.

**ABOVE** Prairie Dog Glass gaffers, from left to right: Ramson Lomatewama (Hopi), Tony Jajola (Isleta Pueblo), Patrick Morrissey, Robert “Spooner” Marcus (Ohkay Owingeh), Ira Lujan (Taos/Ohkay Owingeh), Carol Lujan (Diné), 2019. Photo: Cathy Short (Citizen Potawatomi). All images, unless otherwise notes, courtesy of the author.

**OPPOSITE** Robert “Spooner” Marcus, *Cobalt Cosmic Blue*, ca. 2010, blown and sand-carved glass, 18 × 14 in. Photo: Wendy McEahern Photography.



Morrissey is the driving force behind everything that happens there. A skilled glassblower, he is an endless source of knowledge and technical expertise about the construction and operation of glass equipment. Unfailingly willing to help with whatever needs to be done, he is widely known for the mentorship and resources he provides.

Among those who depend on Prairie Dog Glass is a community of six Southwestern Native glass artists whose work is frequently seen in Santa Fe Indian Market, other art fairs, galleries, and fine art collections: Tony Jojola (Isleta), Ramson Lomatewama (Hopi), Carol Lujan, PhD (Diné), Ira Lujan (Taos/Ohkay Owingeh), Robert “Spooner” Marcus (Ohkay Owingeh), and Adrian Wall (Jemez). Prairie Dog Glass provides them a place to work and a base for collaboration and camaraderie. They are the first generation in a movement for a medium that has not been part of their historic cultures. Glass naturally lends itself to collaborations because of the complexity of the process of converting a blob of hot glass into a work of art. While other genres may lend themselves to solitary endeavors, glass artists are often involved in the work of others, which leads to connections rather than competition.

## NATIVE GLASS ART'S ORIGINS IN THE SOUTHWEST

**THE FOUNDATION OF NATIVE GLASS ART** is intrinsically tied to the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe. In the 1970s it was the synergistic coming together of college president Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee Nation, 1916–2002) and Dale Chihuly, the foremost glass artist from the Northwest. New supported young Native artists exploring new art forms and believed they should be influenced by their cultural background but not be constrained by historic genres. While Chihuly visited IAIA for only a short period, he provided the hot shop equipment and taught glassblowing for a semester. In return, he has been greatly influenced by Native American textile and basket designs in his own art.

In 1975 Tony Jojola became one of the first IAIA students to be attracted to working with glass under the guidance of Carl Ponca (Osage, 1938–2013) and Larry Ahvakana (Iñupiaq). Although Jojola was not the first Native artist to work at Prairie Dog Glass, his story is an important link to the American Studio Glass movement of the mid-20th century, in which objects were perceived as art in its purest form and began to intersect with the emerging

Native art movement. The influence of the Studio Glass movement, with its emphasis on art for art's sake, can be seen in the individuality of Jojola's work throughout his career.

From his earliest days as an artist, Jojola sought to create the impetus for Native expression in glass. Along with Kathy Kaperick, a close friend of Chihuly's, Jojola began a glassblowing program in Taos, New Mexico, in the late 1990s. Chihuly provided tools and other supplies in support of the effort. Originally intended to be located on the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico where Jojola's godfather was from, Taos Glass Arts and Education ended up as part of the Taos County Economic Development Corporation in the city of Taos where Native and non-Native youth could attend classes. Spooner Marcus and Ira Lujan were soon part of the effort along with Jojola. Taos Glass Arts and Education closed in 2005, about the same time Prairie Dog Glass was gearing up at Jackalope. This fortuitous timing ensured that a public glassblowing facility, including teaching and mentoring, remained available to Southwestern Native glass artists.

## NATIVE GLASS TODAY

**THE SOUTHWEST AND THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST** are the two major loci of Native glass. In both areas, the type of glass art being produced is significantly influenced by the cultural experiences of the artists. Among the Southwestern artists, historic forms of pottery, weaving, and other utilitarian items often influence the shapes, designs, and colors used, while woodcarving, basketry, and petroglyphs are more likely to inspire Northwest glass art. With more than one hundred glass art studios in Washington state alone, the Pacific Northwest has a long history of glass. This greater availability of significant public facilities has contributed to the large number of Native glass artists in the region. However, collaborations between Native artists from the two areas are not uncommon and have contributed to cross-cultural understanding and outstanding glass art.

In the Southwest, the Prairie Dog Glass gaffers all say that the first time they saw glass being blown, they knew they wanted to work with it. They went to great lengths to make it happen. They also speak of the difficulties in getting younger tribal members interested in blowing glass. In part, it is the lack of opportunity. Glass hot shops are hard to develop and expensive to operate. Often there are none anywhere nearby. Without exposure, it is difficult to generate much interest, especially since aspects of glassblowing is simply dangerous. Working with molten glass near hot furnaces for hours at a time does not appeal to everyone nor does the necessity for collaboration when the pieces are large and complex.

The Prairie Dog Glass artists support a restart of the IAIA's glass program, which would attract Native youth from around the country. Morrissey, Marcus, and Ira Lujan help with IAIA senior projects, demonstrate techniques, and teach courses at IAIA in hopes of generating interest. As Jojola puts it, "If you can put sparkles in a kid's eyes, that is a good thing. They deserve it." Jojola stresses what he learned as a student at IAIA: the importance of carrying culture forward with your art, regardless of genre.

A deeper look into the six Native artists and when they started to work at Prairie Dog Glass shows the range and maturity of glass art in the region.

## ROBERT "SPOONER" MARCUS

**AFTER TAOS GLASS ARTS** and Education closed, Marcus worked at Liquid Light Glass in Santa Fe where he met Morrissey for the first time. It took a while for Prairie Dog Glass to get up and running, but within a year or so, Marcus and Ira Lujan started to blow glass there. Jojola followed them to Prairie Dog Glass not long after, and the three were working together again.

In addition to glass, Marcus works with molten metal and casts his own bronze. Having come from a family of potters, Marcus sees working with glass as a logical progression. He started as a production glassblower and says it took him a long time to understand what it



means to be a glass artist. Although glass is a demanding medium, Marcus cannot understand why everyone doesn't want to do it. "Glass is very therapeutic for me, because I have to focus on what I want to get done," he says. "When I am blowing glass, my sense of time goes away, and that allows me to be more creative."

Marcus is as adept at glassblowing as he is at fusing and slumping glass, kiln-forming processes that use gravity and heat to cause sheets of glass to take the shape of a mold. The real joy for him is exploring new techniques and styles rather than reaching a predetermined goal. As a result, he has become looser and more fluid in his glasswork over time. Marcus works in many different styles, although the influence of Pueblo pottery designs and his love of whimsy are often apparent in his glass art. He is known for his beautifully balanced glass shapes, later enhanced with artistic motifs related to his thoughts and feelings of the moment. He believes that the evolution of an artist's culture should be reflected in their art.

**ABOVE** Robert "Spooner" Marcus (Ohkay Owingeh), *Kiva Ladder*, 2018, enamel blown and sand-carved glass, 13 × 8 in. Photo: Kitty Leaken.

**OPPOSITE** Tony Jojola (Isleta) and Ira Lujan (Taos/Ohkay Owingeh) collaborating at Prairie Dog Glass, 2019. Photo: Cathy Short (Citizen Potawatomi).



## IRA LUJAN

**IN 2000 IRA LUJAN JOINED** Marcus and Jojola at Taos Glass Arts and Education. Although he started by giving motion to glass with free-form art, he comes from a more sculptural approach, incorporating the cultural ideas and objects he grew up with into his glass art. He considers his pieces as “scenes” out of his Taos and Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo cultures, with each piece telling a story that is both historic and living. He also works in ceramics, tin, and sheet metal.

In 1999 Lujan attended the grand opening of the Eugene Glass School in Oregon. “The smells and the glow of the colors reminded me of a past life, and I immediately wanted to work with glass,” he says. His move back to Taos coincided with Jojola’s opening of Taos Glass Arts and Education, where he apprenticed under Marcus. He also studied under Preston Singletary (Tlingit) at Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington. He started working at Liquid Light Glass when he returned to Santa Fe in 2006, and soon began working at Prairie Dog Glass.

In 2007 the Southwestern Association for Indian Arts awarded Lujan a fellowship, and he used those funds to build a mobile hot shop with the help of Marcus and Morrissey. The mobile hot shop is now at his home, although it is available for demonstrations and rental to other artists.

He believes that communities of artists, like the one at Prairie Dog Glass, make glassblowing different from other genres of Native art, in that everyone is taught teamwork and the need to work toward a common goal from the beginning. He continues to attend the Pilchuck Glass School when he can, bringing back new ideas and innovations to share with his Prairie Dog Glass community.

## TONY JOJOLA

**AS A YOUTH,** Tony Jojola worked with pottery and jewelry, but neither held the appeal of glass once he was exposed to it at IAIA. The unpredictability of glass, its constant element of chance, and its organic fluidity fascinated Jojola. In 1977 Pilchuck Glass School awarded Jojola a fellowship. He also worked with Dale

Chihuly in the Seattle area and traveled to Italy to work with Venetian master glassblowers. The Studio Glass movement that was in full bloom when he started working with glass in the mid-1970s influenced his art, including his attention to proportion and design.

His Isleta cultural heritage is clearly incorporated in his glass art. He is known for using pottery forms and designs in his work, as well as animals, particularly bears, recasting classical designs in glass. Vibrant, deep colors are his trademark. Jojola adds old family silver stamps to some of his glass pieces, an influence of his grandfather who was a silversmith. His grandfather was also a beekeeper and woodcarver and taught Jojola to be self-reliant and to work with his hands.

Among other glass artists, Jojola collaborated with ceramist Rosemary Lonewolf (Santa Clara Tewa) on a glass and clay art fence for the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, and on several sculptures for the Tohono O'odham Nation's Desert Diamond Casino West Valley in Glendale, Arizona.

Jojola continually works to expose Native youth to glass art. He still remembers his attraction to the possibilities of glass while a student at IAIA. He strives to pass this sense of wonder and curiosity on to others to ensure a vital and lasting Native glass community. Jojola believes "our Native cultures are so rich in so many ways. Bringing our Native culture into our work is the key to the success of Native glass artists. The door is wide open for Native expression in glass."

## ADRIAN WALL

**WHILE A SUCCESSFUL SCULPTOR TODAY,** Adrian Wall's first obsession growing up was music. He plays Pueblo flute and guitar professionally and believes his music and visual art connect on an emotional level. Wall's creative energy pushes him to keep learning rather than continuing to do the same thing.

Friends with Marcus, Lujan, and Morrissey, Wall credits them all as inspirational mentors. He first visited Prairie Dog Glass in 2008 when he was seeking help with an art piece he wanted to produce that required a piece of glass. The resulting collaborative effort with Marcus



helped him see ways that stone and glass can fit together.

Wall deliberately incorporated cultural elements into his art when he was younger, but began questioning the appropriateness of monetizing cultural aesthetics. As a result, Wall's art has become more organic and abstract over time, still incorporating the beauty he finds in his Jemez, Ojibwe, and Seneca background.

Glass is the most challenging material Wall works with, which has changed his perspective about art over the last decade. While the possibilities are endless, so are the mysterious ways in which to achieve a certain effect or end result with glass. While much is possible, it is difficult to figure out how to make it happen. His goal is to combine all of the materials he works with in a way that is meaningful and artistically pleasing. Everything that

**ABOVE** Adrian Wall (Jemez), *Chaco Sunset*, 2017, cast glass, limestone and steel, 64 × 25 × 18 in., collection of Roberta Robinson. Photo: Adrian Wall.

**OPPOSITE, TOP** Ira Lujan (Taos/Ohkay Owingeh), *Wedding Vase*, 2018, blown, hot-sculpted and sand-carved glass, 12 × 6 in. Photo: Ira Lujan.

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM** Tony Jojola (Isleta), *Mama*, 2015, sculpted glass, 7½ × 5 × 9 in., collection of the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, #59441. Photo: Kitty Leaken. Image courtesy Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, Santa Fe, New Mexico.



**ABOVE** Ramson Lomatewama (Hopi), *Spirit Figure*, 2019, hand-sculpted glass, 9½ × 3 in. Photo: Kitty Leaken.

**OPPOSITE** Carol Lujan (Diné) and Patrick Morrissey, *Water Dancer*, 2019, cut, fused, blown and rolled glass with glass stringers, 13¾ × 8½ × 8½ in. Photo: Stephen Lang.

Wall produces tells a story, even if the piece is abstract and the story is coded and only clear to him as the artist.

## RAMSON LOMATEWAMA

**A HOPI EDUCATOR, POET, JEWELER, AND KATSINA CARVER,** Ramson Lomatewama lets all these roles influence his glass art. Fascinated first by stained glass, Lomatewama was later introduced to glassblowing at the Rockwell Museum in Corning, New York, in the late 1990s. In 2005, the School for Advanced Research (SAR) awarded Lomatewama a Rollin and Mary Ella King Fellowship to experiment with glassblowing. When the furnace he brought to SAR for his work failed the first week, Morrissey helped him

repair it and invited him to work at Prairie Dog Glass. Over time, Morrissey has introduced Lomatewama to techniques that have improved his equipment and efficiency.

Lomatewama can do much of his glassblowing with his hot shop, Hotevilla Glassworks, at his home on the Third Mesa, but depends on Prairie Dog Glass and his friends Marcus and Ira Lujan for help with larger and more complex projects.

Lomatewama stresses how expressing himself through a Hopi cultural lens has strengthened his glass art. His elders taught Lomatewama that the creation of art is part of the healing process in Hopi tribal practices. Known for his spirit figures and corn maidens, he draws inspiration from Hopi symbolic representations and history.

As part of his commitment to the education of Hopi youth, Lomatewama has taught classes in glassblowing and stained glass in Hopi and is a board member of Hopitutuqaiki, or the Hopi School, where Hopi cultural values inform the curriculum and teaching process. He also teaches at the Idyllwild Arts Academy in Idyllwild, California, where he encourages students to view their glass art through their own cultural eyes.

## CAROL LUJAN

**AN ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY (ASU) emeritus associate professor** who earned her doctoral degree in sociology, Carol Lujan helped develop ASU's American Indian Studies Program. For more than two decades, Lujan has been an award-winning clay artist known for sculpting the human figure, masks, and horses. A 2013 Santa Fe clay workshop about making clay molds for glass fusing introduced her to glass art. The attraction was immediate.

Now Lujan works with fused glass, created by heating glass in a kiln rather than a furnace as is done with glassblowing. She began collaborating with Morrissey and Marcus at Prairie Dog Glass in 2018 to do "rollups" of her fused pieces to produce glass vases that could not be achieved by either blowing or fusing alone.

Lujan's Diné culture and the Southwestern landscape inspire the vibrant colors of her opalescent and transparent glass. She cuts these sheets of glass into specific designs, including Navajo rug patterns, such as those seen in her grandmother's weavings. Indigenous motifs can also be seen in her glass masks, bowls, and jewelry. Once the designs are complete, she heats the piece in a kiln to fuse the different glass pieces together. Her intricate designs often require multiple firings to reach the desired effect. She is especially attracted to the interplay between glass and light, and how light enhances the vibrancy and brilliance of glass.

Continually expanding her knowledge and glass-working skills through classes and workshops, Lujan's glass art has grown larger and more detailed as she has diversified the types of glass, materials, and techniques she integrates into her work. She approaches working with glass as a continuous learning experience, not only the creative process but also the technical knowledge of glass.

The overall message Lujan strives to portray with her art is "the beauty, strength, endurance, humor, and sovereignty of American Indian nations and peoples. Culture and life experiences are inseparable from what is expressed in my art."



## FUTURE OUTLOOK

**THESE SIX PRAIRIE DOG GLASS ARTISTS** are stamping a trail in glass and generating purpose in their art with a positive outcome. As Lomatewama describes it, "Prairie Dog Glass is a dome of humanity, where social interaction, friendship, and a sense of community are as important as help with glass projects." The artists each have their singular backgrounds and history, but they all support each other in glass art as well as in life. The ongoing collaborations among these Native artists are an important part of producing their complex glass art and advancing the medium through learning from each other. Prairie Dog Glass has helped to give these Native glass artists a voice. Where once galleries in Santa Fe featured glass art primarily from the Northwest, increasingly they feature glass art from the Southwest as well.

With a core group of three or four students and teachers working with glass at IAIA in the 1970s, there are now dozens of Native artists who are either exclusively involved in glass art or it is a significant part of their artistic output. While a relatively new genre in Native art can be slow to catch on among artists and collectors, other hurdles must be overcome if a new generation of Native glass artists is to join the current cadre. Exposure to glassblowing, availability of public space and equipment, and teachers and mentors are critical needs. Although some of the Prairie Dog Glass artists have limited capability for glassblowing where they live, the complexity and high cost of

glass hot shops is an impediment in most Native communities.

At Prairie Dog Glass, several glass artists share costs through teaching classes, reserving bench time, and the sale of glass products made on site. Morrissey also allows artists to work for him in exchange for bench time to work on their own glass art. This arrangement allows for more creative work than a situation where one artist must cover all of the costs of a hot shop through just their own output. Motivating youth to take their culture forward with them in glass art and to approach it with a sense of awe and wonder remains a worthy challenge, one that all six Prairie Dog Glass artists are committed to.

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