

A Profile of Artist Lance Arnold

by Margaret Czepiel

The vestibule to Lance Arnold's home studio is designed to look like the night sky. The dark blue painted ceiling, peppered with twinkling lights creates the sensation of floating in a midnight sky. Passing through the makeshift planetarium, I step into a room filled with colorful shapes and designs, Lance's studio, which rests above the three-car garage. On the floor there is a foam alphabet mat, the kind you might find in a Kindergarten classroom, across from it sits a shelf of jewelry boxes and fairy houses and on the other side of the room a makeshift swing hangs from the ceiling. A salmon skull, beautiful driftwood, bird feathers, fish nets, even a pair of sunglasses can be seen scattered around the studio. Every surface is covered from floor to ceiling with colorful glass, and sculptures in various stages of completion.

Lance is a flotsam found object artist, meaning he takes things that he has found in nature and repurposes them into stunning art. Lance, dressed in blue jeans and a Hawaiian shirt, explains that flotsam is something that floats in water and jetsam is something that has been jettisoned off a boat.

"Jetsam can become flotsam if it floats," Lance explains, "but most of the material here is flotsam, things that get to the shore and accumulate at the high tide mark and I can pick them up." He was a decorated high school science teacher at Tolland High School for thirty-five years and used to take his students down to Bermuda where much of his found objects and flotsam originate. Lance has collected unique objects for his art from the Connecticut and Rhode Island shores, forests around his Ashford studio and even the desert from around his son's home in Palm Springs. He creates sculpture with these objects and glass panels that can be hung against a window. All of Lance's glass panels are round, so that his buyers don't have to worry about the measurements of their window. The glass panel will always fit in front of it so the sunlight can shine through.

Glass is where Lance got his start as an artist and a forager. His childhood home bordered a refuse dump and as a boy he would often explore the shards and find unique pieces among the mundane green glass of broken soda bottles.

"I was the spoon man," Lance recalls, "I had this shtick going with a spoon man jacket where I replaced the buttons with spoons and I made these elaborate wind chimes out of spoons." He

brings out a binder with a worn plastic cover, an archive he has kept since 1977. The pages are yellowing towards the spoon man era, but contain a sketch and date of nearly every piece that Lance has created. “I look back and say, ‘oh I was doing a lot of sculpture then’ or ‘I’ve been doing a lot of painting why don’t I switch it up,’” he adds. Lance has recently recorded his 1,522nd piece. His style has evolved to include paintings, sculpture, jewelry boxes, pins, and even fairy houses.

Lance's style of glass-sculpture making was introduced by American artist and designer Louis Comfort Tiffany (son of Charles Tiffany, founder of Tiffany & Co.) during the 19th and early 20th century. Tiffany used this technique to create his famous stained-glass lamps and other crafted luxury goods. Using the tools of a glass cutter, a soldering iron and solder, which is a low-temperature melting alloy that comes on a spool resembling yarn, Lance demonstrates how to fuse two pieces of glass together. He wraps foil around the exterior edge of a piece of glass and uses the soldering iron to melt solder onto the foil which creates the artistic bead around the edge and fuses the two foiled pieces together.

“This is what Tiffany found out, the old guys before him were using a lead channel between panes of glass.” He hums as he melts the solder into a neat bead connecting the edges of the glass shapes with the iron. When he finishes, the front of the object now crudely resembles a dragonfly. He passes the soldering iron and the roll of solder to me. “Would you like to try?” Together with my clumsy hands and his sturdy ones we finish the makeshift dragonfly and [OB] leave the solder to cool and solidify, as the dragonfly becomes a souvenir of my day. [OB]

I sit on the simple swing between shelves of Lance's art, just a short plank and two inch-thick ropes. “I always wanted a swing inside the house.” Lance shows me how to keep my feet so I can swing among the glass without breaking anything. “I like to waddle, as I call it,” he says, “I sit, not going back and forth but just rocking side to side to think.” The blurred, abstract world that comes from swinging fast is the effect that Lance creates in his painting. Inspired by, and reminiscent of Rothko and de Kooning, Lance’s art takes a more natural perspective to the abstract expressionist school. Lance uses his muse, the outdoors, plus the inspiration of these abstract expressionists to make works of art centered around a simple vine or a couple lemons come to life. Lance is beginning to receive recognition; his pieces have been shown at the Vernon Art Center as well as major shows throughout New England and New York.

Lance has called Ashford home since 1978. "It's a very nice, quiet town," he says, "the people are good as far as I can see and help each other out. I like my neighbors and we all look out for one another." Lance tells me about a beer hour that he started for the people in his neighborhood to gather once a month and discuss what was going on. "We would talk about things like, so-and-so down the street is sick, let's do something nice for them like plant a garden."

Lance's talent for creating art alluding to Rothko and inspired by nature makes him one of the artistic treasures of Eastern Connecticut. He brings his career as a science teacher to his art by paying homage and giving back in his own way to the natural world. "This road we're on now ends in a dead end, in a circle," Lance gestures towards the west, "and there's a small cart path called Burma Road at the circle that if you follow it far enough goes all the way to Moose Meadow. But between the circle and a small brook about a quarter mile in I have hidden twelve of my fairy houses." These are the types of fairy houses that would blend right in with the deciduous forest path. Lance has made them out of small stumps and wooden remnants painted with brightly colored doors and windows.

"This is probably cool enough so you can take this little widget along with you, and have some nice color to hang somewhere." Lance hands me my dragonfly, which is now solid as the three pieces of purple, pink and blue glass are held together with the dry solder, and I head back through the starry-night vestibule. Lance pulls down on a thin rope and opens a trap door on the ceiling. The stars part and I can see eight feet up through the square in the ceiling to a small, uninsulated room with windows overlooking Lance's garden. "I like to go up there at night in the winter when there's a blizzard, the way the snow swirls down through the spotlight that's on the house is just incredible." I imagine the billowing snow to be similar to the blurred world that comes from swinging in a room full of Lance's art and colored glass. The brief moments when the concrete natural world can become ever so abstract.