

All The Light You Can See

By Susan Kehoe, Ph.D.



Leau de Vie, a chandelier designed for the Inn of Harbor Shores in St. Joseph, Mich.

JEFF GARLAND

Many people enter the Rugby Grill in the Townsend Hotel in Birmingham and admire the striking glass sculpture outside its door. This sculpture is the creation of Michigan artist April Wagner.

Wagner started working with glass almost accidentally when she was a second-year student at the Center for Creative Studies (CCS). The ceramics class didn't fit into her schedule so she substituted a glassblowing class in that time slot. She found a skill that turned into a lifelong artistic career.

Her studio is on Orchard Lake Road in Pontiac, just east of Telegraph. The same Seattle company that built glassblowing studios for Chihuly, Steuben and the Corning Museum of Glass built her Epiphany Glass studio. Visiting this 4,000-square-foot space, it is evident that Wagner makes large lavish sculptures using enormous equipment. Her 800-pound tank furnace, which runs at 2,000 degrees, creates a high-quality glass, and the 52- by 41-inch reheating chamber allows her to sculpt each one-of-a-kind piece.

In 2007, Wagner was seriously injured when struck by a car while riding her bike. With a closed head injury and several broken bones, she was told she was lucky to be alive and might not be able to continue blowing glass. But, after a year of hard, persistent therapy, she returned to the studio and gradually regained her strength. She experienced a shift in focus after

the accident; she wanted to devote her time to creating large-scale sculptures that would be viewed in public spaces and as well as commissions for residential clients.

"With that change, I realized I had to give up control of 'everything' and devote myself to individual pieces."

She hired experienced glassblowers



April Wagner working in her Epiphany Glass studio in Pontiac. She has been blowing glass for more than 20 years. She says "glass is liquid caught in time and space." Above: One of her free-standing sculptures, *3 Stars Up*.

to continue her Epiphany line and launched a line of paper weights and decorations under \$100.

She recently finished a work for St. Joseph Hospital and has commercial installations in many states.

"When homeowners commission an artwork, I think communicating with them is the most important thing," she said. "I want people to be personally involved with the art and love it, not give them something I think they should have. Sometimes I show them the proposed piece and they say, 'It's just what I wanted, although I didn't know what I wanted!'"

Wagner begins with a visit to the home to get a feel for the client's visual goals. She asks for their ideas,

colors, function and purpose. Then she photographs the room and adds the design into the image for approval. Practical aspects like budget, timelines, engineering challenges and lighting conditions are also taken into account.

"We work within a budget so there are no surprises," she said. "The shipping, electrician's wiring, repainting the ceiling, anything involved with the creation is quoted up front."

"If someone is interested in a piece of artwork, having it custom-designed is not necessarily more expensive," she continued. "It's meaningful to have the experience with the artist. That is what gives the artwork a story, a history and makes it a treasure."

Wagner is a person who gives back. Every year, she works with a nonprofit to produce a special piece with proceeds to benefit the organization.

Her alma mater, CCS, is another recipient of her gifts. For a recent auction, she contributed a catered dinner at her studio. It sold for \$15,000 — twice. Among her numerous awards, she was selected for *Crain's* 40 under 40 and won the Collector's Award at the Coconut Grove Art Festival in Miami.

"Working with glass is immediate and responsive," she said. "It has an organic quality in the way it curves and flows, but it always surprises you. It's like social interaction." **NS**

Wagner sees clients by appointment only: info@epiphanyglass.com. (248) 745-3786.