

GLASS WORKS

Michael Allison demonstrates the art of glass

BY STEPHANIE STEWART

There's a lot of attention right now aimed at the amazingly gifted Dale Chihuly's shows at the Frist and Cheekwood, and rightfully so. But that doesn't mean we ought to discount the talents of local glass artists in our own backyards. Michael Allison is such an artist, and he provides a wholly different perspective on the power of glass art—and more.

Allison lives on lovely rural acreage in Joelton with his wife, stylist Samantha Roe, and their two children. There, he can exercise both his artistic talents and his love of the land—working the family gardens, busy planting orchards and fruit, and they keep beautiful breeds of chickens. He works with a local community garden as well—responsibility to the land and living healthy are important to him. In the restored cattle barn that also houses the gorgeously plumed chickens is his workshop (at the other end, of course).

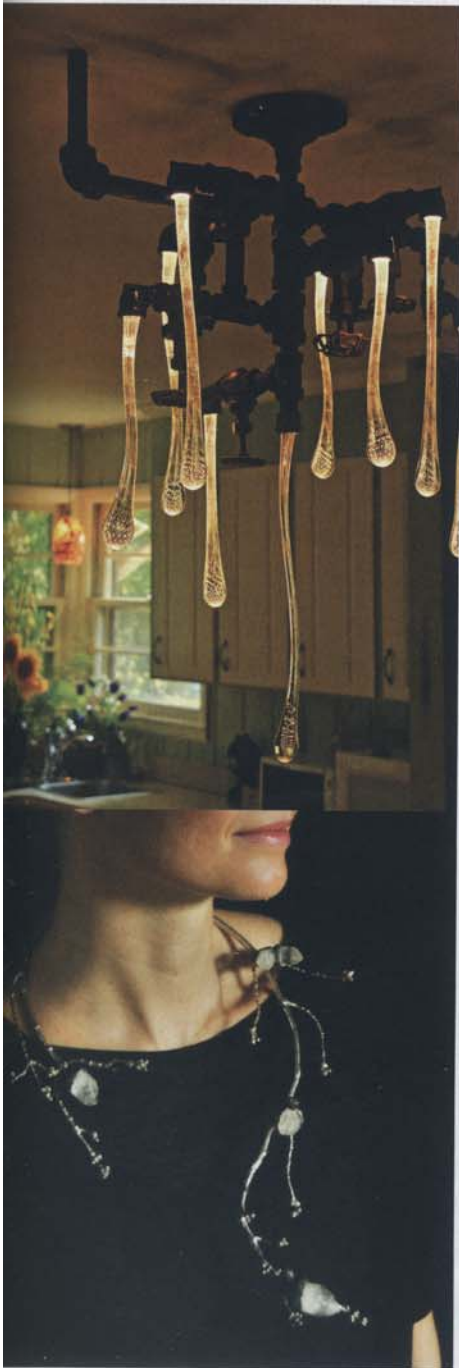
"I don't really have the space for a glass workshop here," he tells me. "I do most of my blowing back in Atlanta." He does, however, do metal casting and puts together the pieces of his more epic sculptures. Huge, jewel-bright "drops" of glass hang from the ceiling, and small pieces he aims to cast into jewelry components litter his workspace.

Allison's art can easily be described as organic—and it's not a cliché. He's thrilled by the fluid nature of glass. "What I find fascinating about glass," he says, "is when it's molten, it's so alive, constantly moving, glowing—so when a piece is done, I still want it to have some of that quality in it's cold, solid state."

Examples abound in his sculptures, mixed-media pieces that often involve light as an element (a beautiful chandelier of his design graces his own kitchen). Many of the pieces make use of vintage and antique industrial-looking faucets, each dripping glass like so much water, often with a backdrop of rich black walnut (he has boards planed from a tree that fell near Martin Luther King's birthplace in Atlanta) or highlighted with touches of cast bronze. The results are strong, vivid and remarkable in every way.

Casting metals is another of Allison's loves. He juxtaposes the notion of metal with life by casting found natural objects: Mushrooms and funguses from trees, recreated in bronze, crawl luxuriantly up one wall under a glass piece titled "Jackpot." Acorns, chrysalises, anise seeds, twigs, seed pods, you'll find them all, often cast in silver and set with glass or crystal and turned into jewelry with a fey quality of woodlands and wilds.





Allison doesn't have the almost de rigueur MFA that most of his fellows tout. Instead, he's pretty much been through what he calls the school of life. The child of divorced parents, he moved often, but always knew he wanted to be an artist. "Since I was a 5-year-old splashing in the pool," he laughs.

He started drawing young, then high school art classes drew him further, to sculpture and 3D work, and finally to jewelry making. When he decided he wanted to learn glass art, he literally went to workshops and offered to sweep floors for the chance to study by watching and doing. He quickly proved his bona fides, moving from workshop to workshop to learn different techniques.

His expertise is such that he's taught for Kennesaw State, the Spruill Center, the Atlanta College of Art and more. Teaching, as it turns out, is also a great passion. "I love teaching. I get to talk to people and be inspired by them—I see even their accidents can turn into the best things ever." The advantage of teaching, of course, is also often access to complete glass studios, among other benefits. Allison hopes to build his own studio shortly.

"All my art is sort of therapy," he says with a smile. "It's my way of dealing with the world. I had a tough childhood, and this was the way I could express myself—I find my strength through the act of creating, and it becomes my gift to share with the world."

Currently, Allison shows his work in Atlanta and Los Angeles galleries, and is looking for the right location in Nashville. He works by commission as well, so interested consumers can visit his web site (fluidglassmovements.com) and check out options. If you're interested in jewelry or other work, contact him directly via the web site.

It's thrilling when Nashville gets shows of renowned artists—but there's an extra delight when you discover there are people with incredible talents living nearby too.