

A person stands on the edge of a dark, jagged rock formation overlooking a vast ocean. The sky is filled with large, white, fluffy clouds. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

out of the fire

DANIEL MOE'S MUSE IS
SUPER-HOT AND ENDLESSLY CREATIVE—
AND YES, IT'S A VOLCANO

STORY BY RACHEL DAVIES | PHOTOS BY MEGAN SPELMAN

AD Full Page

Out of the Fire

Daniel Moe's inspiration oozes up out of the earth in the vast fields of Hawai'i Island: hot lava. "It's so elemental," the glassblower says. "When I go out and see the lava flowing, I understand—from my experience with glass—the intelligence of it, the nature of it, what it's going to do and how it's going to respond." After more than two decades of working with glass and fifteen years of living on the volcano, Moe has become so intimate with hot lava—generally around two thousand degrees Fahrenheit—he can now touch it without getting burned. "Something happens with the body," he marvels. "I dunno. It's like I'm immune to the fire."

Moe wasn't always able to touch flame. During his first years studying Broad Arts at the University of Wisconsin, he expressed his creative talents in other fields: drawing, sculpture, painting, video, everywhere but in the glassblowing studio, where loud music blasted until midnight and the furnace radiated hot and dangerous. "It was really intimidating," recalls Moe.



"I saw fire as just this immense power that could destroy. I didn't really comprehend how it could be contained, focused or used." He avoided the glass studio until his senior year, when he had a last paper to complete. On his first "gather"—the name given to the process of scooping up molten

glass from the furnace on the end of a long metal pipe—Moe burned his knuckles, singed the hair on one hand and felt justified in his avoidance. Then he tilted the pipe, letting gravity draw the glass downward and elongate it into a molten tube, swung it up and watched the tube collapse in on itself. "Once I got the glass on the blowpipe, I just blew a bubble and then I swung it around and I was like, 'Oh my God!'" grins Moe. The glass moved unlike any medium he had seen before. "There was this originality. ... Looking at this piece of glass, I realized that it wasn't possible that this form had ever existed before. It was totally unique, and I was just fascinated."

Moe changed his major, completed his fine-arts degree in glass and stayed on as an assistant in the studio for several years, teaching and getting plenty of hands-on experience in the craft, creating traditional forms like bowls, vases and platters over and over until he had laid a full foundation of understanding. He also experimented, playing with the form and shape of glass



Glassblower Daniel Moe has been inspired by Kīlauea volcano ever since he arrived in Puna fifteen years ago. Seen here in his studio with assistant Sarah Rose, he works on a vessel designed to evoke the volcano, pulling its top into a teardrop shape with glass tweezers. "These pieces start out as a round bubble," he explains of the image above. "We compress that bubble with two cork paddles so it becomes more of a flattened oval shape—a shape very similar to lava as it oozes out of and across the ground." Opening spread: Moe in Kalapana.

AD Full Page

Out of the Fire

and incorporating it into other mediums. “It was like a conversation I was having with the glass,” he explains. To pay the bills he worked part-time as a finishing carpenter. “With wood, if you want to do something, you hit it and cut it, and it’s violent,” he says. “But with glass there’s this fluidity. It’s softer; it has this flow, and you have to get in tune with it instead of getting power over it.”

In the 1970s glass artist Dale Chihuly, along with patrons Anne and John Hauberg, created a summer glassblowing workshop on a secluded fifteen-thousand-acre farm in Washington state. The workshop blossomed into the celebrated Pilchuck Glass School, today the world’s most comprehensive center for glassblowing education and a much-loved and admired creative cauldron. European master glass artists would visit and share their traditional Old World techniques with American artists who were experimenting, inventing new forms and glassworking methods. Naturally Pilchuck attracted Moe. “By then it was the 1990s and glass was hot. Dale Chihuly and the whole American Studio Craft movement were really taking off,” Moe says. “The price that people were getting for pieces of glass was just climbing higher and higher and higher.” Inspired by the work of innovative glass artists like William Morris,



Karen Willenbrink and Chihuly, Moe committed himself even more deeply to a career in glass. He left Wisconsin for Pilchuck, working for a summer, meeting fellow glass artists and studying with renowned teachers. “Originally I was there on the maintenance crew,” he says. “It’s such a potent place to be. I was willing to go there and clean toilets, take out the garbage, do all these jobs, so that’s where I started. A lot of people start out that way

and work their way into being teachers’ assistants and then teachers themselves.”

Moe worked full time, attended demonstrations from visiting glass artists, sat in on classes and got studio time early in the morning and on Sundays. The abundance of creative stimulation and opportunity left Moe with many choices and future pathways: to follow his Italian teacher Pino Signoretto back to Venice to blow glass, to stay on at Pilchuck or to heed the suggestion of Rick Mills, glass artist and professor at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, that the Islands could be a good place for Moe. Moe’s father’s advice rang in his ears, backing up option number three: “Before you settle down, move someplace warm.” A friend was heading to Hawai‘i Island, and Moe tagged along, arriving in Puna in 2000.

There, for the first time, Moe experienced the primal force behind his craft: He saw molten liquid in the form of hot lava coming up out of the earth from the volcano Kīlauea and watched it flowing, spreading and hissing into the broad, crashing ocean, creating endless forms as it hardened. He ached to have his own studio, to blow glass professionally and create pieces that expressed the feel and energy of the landscape. To realize his dream, he built part of his studio—a glassblowing



“The glass,” says Moe, “is just like the lava: When it’s hot, it’s red; when it cools off, it’s black. On the left I’m applying a bit of hot glass; on the right I’ve textured it to resemble pāhoehoe lava. It all happens really quickly: I have about four or five seconds to apply the glass and texture it. Within the next five seconds it’ll harden, and over the next thirty seconds or so the red glow will gradually fade to black.” Above: The ever-varied patterns of Kīlauea’s lava.

bench—and would sit on it imagining what he wanted to create around it: “I just kept visioning, ‘I’m going to have my own studio, I’m going to have my own studio.’”

Over the next decade plenty of hard work and the support of the art community brought Moe closer to his dream. Glass artist Hugh Jenkins invited Moe to work at his newly formed public-access art studio in Hawai‘i’s oldest macadamia nut factory in Honoka‘a, the Live Arts Gallery. Moe blew glass there three days a week for five years, returning to traditional forms like bowls, vases and platters as well as developing his lava work and creating sea life forms like turtles, manta rays and octopuses. Twice a week he sold his pieces at the Hilo, Maku‘u and Volcano farmers markets, and he’d incorporate feedback from his customers into his developing work. “The watery pieces started having this loose, liquid feeling to them,” says Moe, “and the lava pieces started having this cracked and hard form to them. It was such an evolution.”

Moe explored the lava with fellow artist George Nixon, who had been a professional drummer for Bonnie Raitt and moved to Hawai‘i Island to work as a glassblower. Nixon loved Moe’s enthusiasm for the landscape and encouraged him, giving Moe free studio time to pursue his work. When the Live Arts Gallery shut down, fellow glass artist Kane Stebbins, who shared Moe’s love of the volcanic landscape, suggested they build a studio together out back of his property. Stebbins made jewelry and Moe made larger pieces; the friends worked side by side for four years in a continually evolving, creative conversation about the volcanic landscape in which they lived.

One day Moe spied a call to local artists in the newspaper: The Hilton Waikoloa had a new gallery and wanted to feature local artists. Moe showed them his work, and they, too, felt excited by the potential of his lava pieces. “They got this display cabinet specifically for me, and the way they displayed the pieces really made them come alive,” explains Moe. Around the same time Da Factory, a Maui glass studio, closed down and offered to sell Moe its equipment. “I wasn’t in a position to spend \$15,000 to \$20,000 on equipment. Finally they said, ‘Just come and get it and you can trade glass for it.’ I was like, ‘Really?!’” Moe and a friend hauled everything back to Stebbins’ studio, but the place was too small to hold it all: Moe needed more space.

With revenue coming in from several galleries, in time Moe was able to find a home in the neighborhood where he dreamed of living: Puna, near the ocean and close to the volcano. The house had an adjoining studio, an immaculately designed and maintained mechanic’s garage. It was



Both images courtesy Maria Arroyo Photography

Moe versus the volcano: The finished vases that Moe creates pay homage to the fire and form of Kīlauea; fiery orange glass evokes lava flows and crackled surfaces mimic texture. “When the lava bursts out of the ground,” says Moe, “it forms a skin quickly but that skin continues to expand as hot lava below is forced up. I try to give the glass a similar experience, but instead of the volcano creating the pressure I’m using my breath.” HH

as if the garage had been designed to function as a glass studio: It was a perfect size, had outlets in all the right places, a high ceiling conducive to airflow, and one whole side opened up to give Moe a view of the lava field. The dreams Moe had had sitting on his glassblower’s bench had come true. He met a Venezuelan-born woman named Maria, wooed her with his ability to touch hot lava, and the pair married three years ago. They are a good match. Maria supports Moe in his work, particularly on the business side: Revenue doubled in the first year she was involved, and his work is now in twenty-two galleries both in Hawai‘i and on the Mainland.

These days Moe makes glass during three or four six-week-long studio sessions each year, producing around two hundred pieces per session. He works with an apprentice as well as several assistants, usually four people at any one time on studio days. He is continuing to create his Kīlauea collection, which includes the Kīlauea crackled vase, a shiny black vessel with fiery orange veins and hot lava flowing from its neck. He’s working on the Kalapana Kai collection, which features the Kalapana Kai wave, a loose, cresting, clear blue wave. He’s developing a new and quite different body of work: large cylindrical vases with complex graphic designs sandblasted into them in smooth orange, red, yellow or blue glass. The pieces feel primal, tribal and weighty, and glow from inside in the light. Some feature geometric bee motifs, an interlocking hive of hexagons, large wings and antennae. Another in bright orange shows the face of Kū, the Hawaiian god of war and protection, with lines of interlocking triangles and waves all around him. Moe works the intricate designs into the tall vases over several hours once the glass has cooled, pulling upon his early drawing and painting skills.

“William Morris was the one who made me see the limitless potential of glass,” says Moe, referring to the pioneering American glass artist who, like Moe, started out as a worker at Pilchuck and went on to revolutionize the medium. “That it wasn’t confined to any ideas of what anyone thought it was supposed to be. It’s truly a medium where you can be free to express and create that which is inspired by nature rather than by glass techniques themselves. Morris inspired me to just try anything: dip it in water, drill it with a drill, hit it with a hammer, pour baking soda on it—just loosen up and let go of all the rules.” HH

AD

Full Page