

# *Dancing* WITH GLASS

Tim and Katherine McManus  
are the creative minds behind  
Blown Away, an award-winning  
glass-blowing studio in Elora





Tim and Katherine McManus use a natural gas furnace heated to 1,500 C to melt their glass. By blowing air through a long, metal rod, the glass at the end opens like a bubble and can then be shaped or cut by hand.



BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM  
PHOTOGRAPHY • CRESTINA MARTINS

**T**im McManus says he can't dance, but you'd never know it when you see him in the glass-blowing studio.

Stepping from furnace to furnace, Tim and his wife, fellow artist Katherine McManus, are clearly in sync as they deftly handle molten glass to create a centerpiece bowl that shimmers with the blue-green colour of the deepest part of the ocean.

On an ordinary dance floor, Tim says he's a "toe-stepper."

"He doesn't look like he would be," laughs Katherine, "but he is."

However, on the concrete floor of their Blown Away Glass Studio in Elora, it's clear that Tim and Katherine are quick on their







**TOP:** Coloured glass is collected using a ball of molten glass on the tip of a blowpipe.

**ABOVE:** The couple is often sought out to design and create awards like this one, for businesses and organizations.

feet. No toe stepping, no hesitating; only the smoothest of moves here.

“Glass-blowing is like a dance,” Katherine says. “When they watch us, people can’t believe how in sync we are and how we move together in the process.”

They’re equal partners in the studio and they alternate tasks during a process that is necessarily quick. Even while describing the steps to a visitor, the glass has their complete attention.

That’s saying a lot when one of those visitors is Rick Mercer, irreverent and frenetic star of the “Rick Mercer Report” on CBC Television. Earlier this year, Mercer took his cameras to Blown Away Glass Studio where, with the couple’s calm, good-natured help, he made a lovely green glass centrepiece bowl.

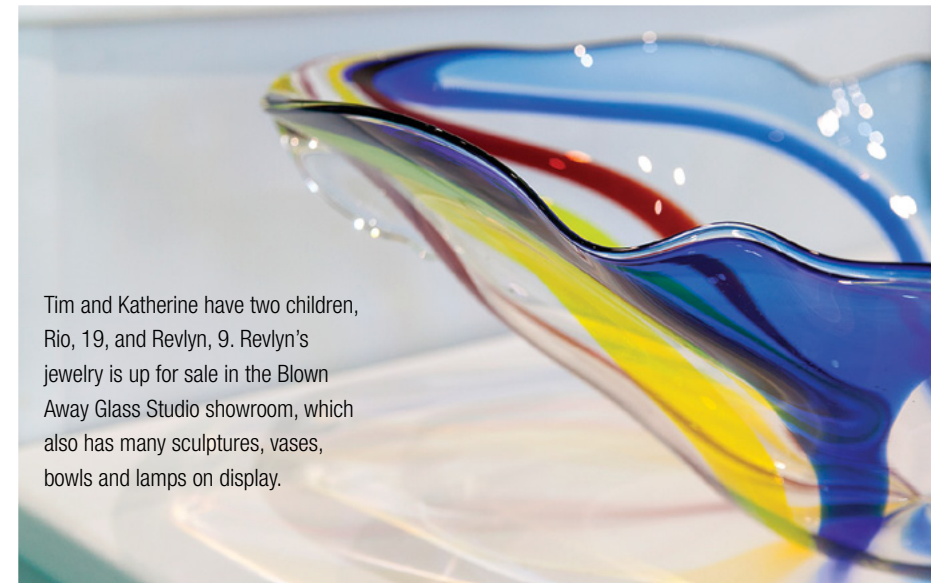
“Today I am a glass act. ... Today I

blow it good,” Mercer says in his introduction to the show. Needless to say, there were nail-biting

Mercer moments for which Tim demonstrated quick reflexes.

Step in the door of Blown Away Glass Studio on a grey day, as it was when I visited, and it feels like entering an oasis from the desert. In the showroom, my eye is immediately drawn to the vibrant colours of large glass globes, one perched on top of the other in such a way that it makes me wonder how the sculpture/light stays balanced. “This is my happy piece,” says Katherine, for whom yoga is an important part of her busy week. “The balls represent the energy within you and the balance needed to stay elevated.”

I admire the graceful, clear-glass sculpture of a woman’s torso (a collaboration with another artist), the Inukshuk



Tim and Katherine have two children, Rio, 19, and Revlyn, 9. Revlyn’s jewelry is up for sale in the Blown Away Glass Studio showroom, which also has many sculptures, vases, bowls and lamps on display.

sculptures, swirling colours of glass paperweights, vases, bowls and lamps, a commissioned piece featuring glass blown into a piece of driftwood.

All lights used in their pieces are Italian-made. “Lighting is everything with glass,” Tim says. They added more windows in their old home in Elora so that they could enjoy their own glass as well as glass pieces they’ve collected from other artists.

The gallery opens into their studio so that visitors can watch the magic happen.

It’s noticeably warmer here and the dull roar of the furnaces fades into the background as a visitor becomes accustomed to it. The studio’s three furnaces were constructed by Tim and Katherine and they designed the studio. On this day, they offer to demonstrate the glass-blowing process and they’re clearly experienced instructors.

To begin the process, Tim dips the long, stainless steel “blowpipe” into the natural gas furnace, which is heated to 1,500 C, and “gathers” the molten glass. Both artists wear protective glasses, but their hands are bare in order to shape the glass.

“The furnace never shuts off,” Tim says. “It takes four days to make it hot enough. If there’s a power outage, we run the generator.”

One of two garage doors in the studio is

partly raised to cool the room.

A second furnace reheats the glass on the end of the blowpipe so it can be worked further. A bench, where the couple shapes the hot glass, sits near this furnace.

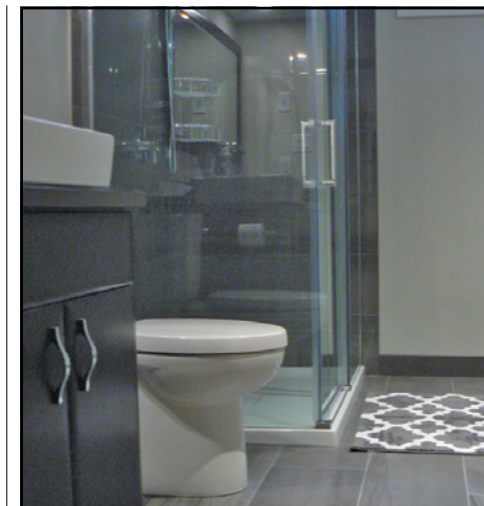
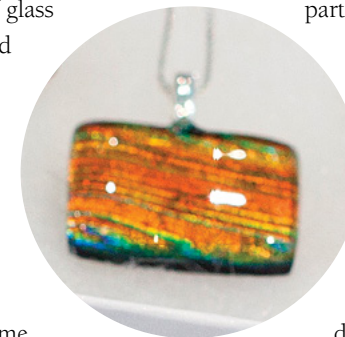
Handmade tools, including diamond shears, tweezers and cherry wood paddles, are at the ready near the bench.

The bench has a rail at each end on which the blowpipe or “punty” rod — a long metal rod used in the finishing process — is supported while the artists work at each end. With Katherine blowing into the blowpipe, the glass opens like a bubble while Tim shapes it, saying only a word or two to tell her when to blow and when to stop.

The rod holding the molten glass is turned quickly. “The colder it gets, the slower we turn,” Katherine says.

There’s a bucket and a thick wad of wet newspapers, which to the uninitiated seems too frail to protect their bare hand when it’s shaping hot glass. But the newspaper holds up, steam rising from it when it touches and cools the glass.

There are several more steps, including picking up more coloured glass, reheating, blowing and gathering clear glass over it to make the piece larger — all smoothly



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**ABOVE:** Tim and Katherine with their dog, Schnoopy. The couple has been blowing glass for more than 20 years. They met when they were both students taking a glass-blowing class at Sheridan College in Oakville.  
**RIGHT:** One of the couple's chandeliers, nicknamed 'the Princess,' hangs in a Mississauga home.

performed — and finally the finished centrepiece bowl with cascading edges is placed in the third oven, the annealing oven, where it will cool gradually for about 12 hours.

The bowl's swirl of green and blue colours makes Tim think of a deep ocean with doves flying overhead. Later, they'll sandblast doves on the piece, he decides.

Above us in the studio, I see brilliant orange glass pieces hanging from the rafters. They're ready to be assembled as a chandelier, resembling an upside-down fire, using a metal frame made by blacksmith Anthony Moore of Holstein, Ont.

One of the couple's chandeliers — installation art is a better word for it — hangs in the "dream home" belonging to Bohdan Shulakewych and Dr. Sonia Slawuta in Mis-

sisauga. Shaped like an inverted cone, the stunning piece is 1.2 metres to 1.5 metres (four to five feet) wide at the top and about 4.3 metres (14 feet) long in the centre of the house.

Shulakewych, a litigation lawyer and a past president of the Mississauga Arts Council, and Slawuta, a dentist, designed their French château-style home. The home is a piece of art in itself, in addition to being home to a large collection of Canadian paintings, sculptures and other art.

The couple wanted an arresting installation piece to anchor the home. When they met with Katherine and Tim, they knew they'd found artists who could produce their vision, both artistically and practically. Katherine and Tim made adjustments to the design, inspired by Shulakewych's and



PHOTOGRAPHY • DR. SONIA SLAWUTA-SHULAKEWYCH

Slawuta's respect for the work of American glass sculptor Dale Chihuly, so it could be realistically created, Shulakewych says.

The blues and light green colours in the two-storey art installation are reminiscent of the scenery outside, where the house backs onto the Credit River. The piece is attached to a beam on the second floor and falls just to the point where visitors can see a hint of glass on the main floor as they enter the house.

The effect is mesmerizing. The best time is when the afternoon sun hits the chandelier, reflecting the colours like a prism.

"I call the piece 'the Princess' because it takes all the attention," Shulakewych says.

The glass pieces, attached to metal infrastructure made by blacksmith Moore, are based on "Persians," or large, plate-like forms that are various shapes. Bell-shaped glass domes are at the bottom. The chandelier is illuminated from the outside by six lights.

A much smaller chandelier that Tim and Katherine created for the dining room is more subtle but no less beautiful.

Tim and Katherine McManus have been glass-blowers for more than 20 years. They've won numerous awards for their art and are often sought out to design and create awards for others. They've made corporate awards, dignitary gifts and pieces of art for offices and lobbies. On this day, Tim is packing up an award they created, a stylized red glass heart, to send to Variety Village for its award recipients.

Tim, 42, grew up in Elora; Katherine, 41, in Mississauga. They met when they were both students taking a glass-blowing class at Sheridan College in Oakville. Tim had been studying ceramics but made the switch to glass-blowing after seeing what glass could do. "The first paperweight I made, I thought that was the best thing ever," he says.

In 1998, after graduation, Tim studied for a year in Helsinki, Finland as an exchange student. Katherine did a one-year residency at the Living Arts Centre in Mississauga.

They decided to build their own studio after Tim returned from Finland. Blown

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Laura MacGregor with  
her sons David, Grade 10  
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Away Glass Studio opened in July 1999 when they were only in their 20s. They made a business plan, got a loan, worked hard and became known.

“We’re both adventurous. Every day is a new adventure here. You’ve always got different commissions and ideas and different classes. You can go to shows, meet new people,” Katherine says.

It helps that residents of Elora and area are big supporters of the arts, she says.

Married in 2002, the couple has two children, Rio, 19, and nine-year-old Revlyn, who has a design flair and whose jewelry is for sale in the showroom. Rio is headed to Humber College in the fall to study sound engineering and film.

Before the girls were born and when they

were small, “we used to do 15 shows a year. We’d pack up our stuff, set up a booth, talk,” Katherine says.

The family knows how to keep balance in their lives; their daughters have been involved in hockey, rugby, guitar lessons, snowboarding and other pastimes and Katherine was often on the road with them. Tim helped coach rugby.

“When you have kids, you figure out who’s going where and when,” Tim says. “We blow glass when we’re together and do the other stuff (such as etching) separately.”

Katherine loves yoga, a “too mellow” pastime for Tim. She likes to listen to folk, classical and jazz music while she’s glass-blowing; he’s more a fan of the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin. In May, Tim ran in the Rugged Maniac obstacle course in Kitchener and came first in the Muddy Grape race at Cox Creek Cellars north of Guelph. His dirt bike sits at the back of

the studio, retired and up for sale after Tim decided he didn’t want to break any more bones in races. Katherine, who went to the track and practised with him, sold her dirt bike a couple of years ago.

They have a full schedule. When they’re not creating in the studio, they’re teaching. Weekends feature private workshops for two people, in classes with unique names like One Hot Date, Second Base Date, Third Base Date, Homerun Date and Third Wheel Date (for three).

“The classes are really rewarding for us because everyone has a great time,” Katherine says. The couple’s experience and easygoing, friendly manner make people comfortable.

“There’s no one else I’d rather work with all day long,” Katherine says. “We both have strengths and weaknesses. We have our bases covered between the two of us.”

They’re never without ideas.

“After over 20 years of glass-blowing being our focus, we’ve built up these skills so we can dream up what we want and create it,” Katherine says. In fact, Katherine often sees designs in her dreams, and creates them later in the studio.

“I dream I’m blowing glass and the designs are coming out and they’re very specific,” she says. They also work with clients who have their own ideas, and they visit the site where the glass will be shown to get a sense of size, colours and texture.

“It’s always customized to their needs and reflects our style,” which Katherine describes as “very broad, eclectic.”


The theme of a group art exhibition will flood them with ideas, such as one for which they’re preparing now called “Death Perceptions,” opening in September at Wellington County Museum and Archives.

“The spring is the big creative energy time



A vase on display in the Blown Away studio in Elora.

because Christmas season is so hectic and busy,” Katherine says.

Travel also inspires them. On a trip to Montreal with their daughters, they visited art museums and enjoyed the architecture of old Montreal. “The two girls said they’d seen enough art to last a lifetime,” Katherine says, smiling. 

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