



Elliot Walker



Blows Us Away

*Elliot Walker, Corruption, 55 cm x 17 cm x 17 cm, 2021.
Photo by Simon Bruntnell.*

*Elliot Walker during Blown Away.
Photo by David Leyes.*

by Dr. Julie Anne Denton

Elliot Walker is “the random British guy” who won the second season of the Netflix smash hit TV show *Blown Away* that first aired on January 22, 2021. For those who have not heard of the show, ten glass artists at different stages in their careers are pitted against one another in a supercharged, high-octane, fight-to-the-death competition based on technical skill and intellectual smarts. For each of the ten episodes, a new time frame is set, and the glassblowers are expected to create a work that satisfies the project theme while demonstrating their technical and/or conceptual virtuosity. The aim in each episode is to be named “Best in Glass.” The contestant who doesn’t meet the criteria gets knocked out and leaves the hot shop for good.

The grueling contest peaks when there are only two contestants left. This season’s finale was comprised of Elliot Walker and Cat Burns, who were given an opportunity to create an art installation of their choice in the gallery area. During each episode, contestants are appraised by a guest evaluator. In Season Two’s final assessment, the critic was none other than the senior director of creative strategy, Rob Cassetti from The Corning Museum of Glass (CMoG). Cassetti brought with him six seasoned glassblowers from the Corning team to help the contestants realize their ideas in glass in just eight short hours. Spoiler alert! Elliot won the contest with an installation called *Bodge Job*, which encompassed his feelings of being overwhelmed by the entire process of presentation.

The Blown Away Experience

I caught up with Elliot Walker to find out more about stepping out of his comfort zone to appear on *Blown Away*, how the love of glass began for him, and how his future plans are shaping up after winning such a prestigious competition.

What was it like to take part in a televised glass competition?

I only knew the program from the previous series, so I had no preconceptions of what it would be like. The entire process took about six weeks to complete in January and February of 2020, and each episode took four days to film—a day in the hot shop, a day to film the contestant commentary, a day to polish, and a day to present our pieces. The show was filmed in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, at an old steel factory that had been converted specifically for *Blown Away*. Since we were filming for a TV show, the whole experience was very surreal, but the making itself? Well, as soon as you are on the bench with your assistant and your idea, then it's business as usual! Especially for me, because I blow every day and have done so for the last eight years. I was lucky in that respect, because some of the other contestants had only blown occasionally.

It seemed to me that you came into the show without any expectations until episode six or seven. Would you agree?

I think we all went through a similar process. Halfway through the show, we all received two days off. It was at this point the producers told us that we should all be considering what we would create for the finalists show. In my case, I was thinking less about the prize and more about being given the chance to create the final piece. A prize worth \$60,000 including a residency at The Corning Museum of Glass was just a bonus on top of the opportunity to create your final show with fantastic assistants to help you. It was great to be pitted against Cat in the final show, because she had such positive energy! Always cheering the other contestants on, she was a great person to be “against.”

There was a lovely moment in the finale where you commented, “Over on Cat’s side, that’s the exciting side of the camp. Over on my side, it’s the boring side of the camp.”

It was delightful seeing how dynamically Cat worked and how she was able to splinter everyone off onto different jobs simultaneously. There was so much going on over there, whereas my style and aesthetic is procedural and rigorous. I was getting the job done, rather than being flamboyant and experimental.



Elliot Walker, Irreverence, glass, silver, and bronze, 120 cm x 120 cm, 2021. Installation from the solo show, Plenty, at Messums Gallery. Photo by Simon Bruntnell.



Elliot Walker, Spilt Milk, 26 cm x 40 cm x 30 cm. Limited Edition of 8 sold through Blowfish Glass UK. Photo by Simon Bruntnell.



*Elliot Walker, Citrus Sinensis,
25 cm x 40 cm x 30 cm, 2020.
Photo by Simon Bruntnell.*

You used to work for London Glassblowing, the creative studio of glassblower Peter Layton, arguably known as the grandfather of the British Studio Glass Movement. Were there similarities to your experience at London Glassblowing and working with the Corning team during *Blown Away*?

Yes, it was comparable, and it felt very comfortable to work with professionals during the show. At London Glassblowing there are always two teams working in unison. The teams work harmoniously, helping one another to create our handmade objects. I love that atmosphere.

For the *Blown Away* final did you create the inflatable hammers and screwdrivers yourself?

Yes, but the entire process had to be a team effort right up until the end installation. I was almost acting as a director delegating jobs. There was no way I could have created that masterpiece alone in the set amount of time."

When Rob Cassetti from CMOG was appraising your entire body of work from the competition, his positive sum up was, "Fast, visceral, and you get it." Would you agree with that statement?

I have cultivated an ability to replicate objects, and this aptitude affects my work rather literally. When reacting to a set project, my overarching priority is to instantly engage with the viewer. I want my audience to get what they are looking at and accept it. I agree with Rob's commentary in an aesthetic and visual sense but, of course, the production company put its own spin on how each contestant was portrayed.



*Elliot Walker, A-Maize, 70 cm x 14 cm x 26 cm
(upright piece), 29 cm x 58 cm x 14 cm (prone
piece). Photo by Joanna Sullivan.*

Would you agree with the statement that if you must explain the work, then visual artists have failed in their storytelling?

Especially for the show, the viewer needs to have that instant connection to the artwork. The judges had to judge in the round for the everyman. I did well in the show because of the immediate connection people could make to the pieces. With my own personal work I am more ambiguous. In many ways I am exploring the themes in my own work as I am creating it. I am lucky to have the time and space to be able to follow my own path and systematically work my way to a finished concept.

What has happened since *Blown Away*, and has it opened any doors for you?

Yes! I would say that now all the doors are ajar. Taking part in the show and winning has massively changed things, but it's also built upon the foundation work I put in for the last decade to build myself a career. It takes years to get a rapport with galleries and for them to gain a rapport with their clients. This entire experience has springboarded all my years of effort. I have a good catalogue of work to draw inspiration from and an idea of how to present it, plus I am learning what the collectors enjoy. Hopefully after the pandemic I can make the most of the opportunities that are coming my way.



*Elliot Walker, Surf, 50 cm x 100 cm x 47 cm, 2020.
Exhibited with Vessel Gallery London.
Photo by Simon Bruntnell.*

I was impressed by your innate ability in *Blown Away* to positively embrace change.

Flexibility is very important if you wish to sculpt. I have never claimed to be excellent at any one thing, but after having worked with so many different processes within glassblowing, having that versatility means that I can work more freely as a sculptor.

Going back to your finale judge Rob Casseti, he was pleased that your final installation went deeper. Where would you say your work is rooted? From where do you derive your inspiration?

My work is always exploring something, whether it be a part of art history or different forms that I am interested in. Regarding art history, I create still lifes out of glass, which I am enjoying so much. I can begin with the basics and creep along through these different historical avenues taking inspiration as I go. I like to work with multiple components, which gives variety to my making. I feel that successful artists can get stuck creating a single set of objects. With my still lifes I can create anything.

I draw great pleasure and inspiration from the surrealist art movement and, in particular, Max Ernst in his Dadaist period. A lot of my design work and high art pieces have been inspired by the idea of surrealist collages and visual poetry. Out of all the episodes of *Blown Away*, I feel the final installation was the best reflection of how I see myself and my work.



*Elliot Walker, Thou Shalt Have, 51 cm x 50 cm x 40 cm.
Photo by Simon Bruntnell.*

How It All Began

I asked Elliot how he discovered glass, and it turns out that he had planned to become a psychiatrist. He has a bachelor's degree in psychology and was particularly interested in the greats like Freud and Jung, but also lesser known psychologists, although equally as great, such as R.D. Lang. In hindsight Elliot shared, "My study of psychology colors my glasswork subconsciously. Freud has given me a taste for the practices of automatic writing and drawing that, in my opinion, make things less contrived, leaving more to the imagination and serendipity."

While studying psychology, Elliot took an evening class in stained glass, and his love for glass art blossomed. After completing his studies, Elliot's interest in sculpting glass intensified, leading him to attend the glass course at Dudley College, UK, originally the International Glass Centre, in Brierly Hill.



Elliot Walker, Domestic Balance, 75 cm x 100 cm x 50 cm.

Photo by Ester Segara.



Elliot Walker, Still Life with Lemons, 42 cm x 30 cm x 32 cm, edition of 6, 2021. Photo by Simon Bruntnell.

It was at Dudley that something clicked, and the immediacy and directness of glassblowing piqued Elliot's interest. During that time, Elliot's pragmatism took over as he realized the demands of a process-driven material meant that he should concentrate on learning the rules first. "If you want to make glass properly, you must take it step by step, learning each technique and then moving on to the next. At a certain point you can then allow intuition to step in. To make a good piece of work in a specific material, you need to understand how to use the material to the best of its abilities."

Elliot's enquiring mind led him to continue his education with a master's degree at the University of Wolverhampton. There Elliot determined he would concentrate on hot glass proficiency, and before his degree ran its course he was snatched up by London Glassblowing. He worked part-time for Peter Layton for seven years. Not long after he started with Peter, his skills were also retained by the Contemporary Chandelier Company, founded by well-known glassblower Iestyn Davies, where he continues to work now a few days per month. Elliot finds it very important to keep his autonomy, and he continues to develop his own bodies of work alongside his professional practice.

Moving Forward

Elliot Walker currently lives and works in Hertfordshire with his partner Bethany Wood. Bethany and Elliot have formed the initiative, Blowfish Glass Art, which acts as an intermediary between artists and clients to promote high-end glass art from prestigious UK artists. As well as hosting glass auctions, events, and educational blogs, they are producing exclusive limited-edition versions of the pieces Elliot created during *Blown Away*. They soon plan on relocating their studio and gallery to the heart of historical glassblowing in the UK, The Midlands.

It is obvious to me that Elliot Walker is a team player who wants the best for his artist and sculptor peers. On a larger scale he wants to be pivotal in initiating a renaissance of the British glass and art movement for the good of the many.

When asked what his greatest accomplishment is to date, Elliot sheepishly admitted that *Blown Away* stands out by a mile. "It was never an aim or an achievement, but I am so glad it happened."

G&A

Elliot Walker

www.ewalkerglassart.co.uk
www.blowfishglassart.com
ewalkerglassart@hotmail.co.uk
+44 795 140 42 69



Still Life with Lemons (detail).

Dr. Julie Anne Denton received her doctorate in the combination of sandcast and flameworked glass for artists from the National Glass Centre, UK. She has learned from and worked with the best flameworking artists in the world including Emilio Santini, Lucio Bubacco, Vittorio Costantini, Gianni Toso, Shane Fero, Loren Stump, and Sally Prasch, to name just a few. She rounded off her education with Bertil Vallien of the renowned Swedish design house Kosta Boda (est. 1742).



Julie settled in Zürich, Switzerland, in 2010. From the center of the city she runs her design firm, www.Atelier315.ch, and www.ZurichGlassSchool.com, her online learning platform for sculptural flameworking skills. She works with a small team beside her who all care deeply about quality education, creativity, and business.

Dr. Julie creates glass and bronze work that resonates beauty, workmanship, and authenticity. Her key themes are people, folklore, nature, and counterculture. She has also received worldwide recognition for her storytelling skills as an artist and her technical skills as a glassmaker.

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