



How Artist Lynn Basa's Encaustic Painting Became a Monumental Glasswork

By Alex Davis, Bullseye Glass Co.

In late November of 2016, artist Lynn Basa of Chicago received an email alerting her to an incredible opportunity. The Regional Arts and Culture Council, a leading public art organization based in Portland, OR, had just expanded a notable call for public artists. Instead of regional, their search was now national. That meant Basa could apply.

The project's size, budget, and prominent location marked it as an obvious dream job for any public artist. But even though Basa "wrote the book" on public art, she found herself reluctant to apply. The deadline was tight, less than a month away. Not only would she need to figure out how to do right by the project—deciding how her art might activate 2000 square feet of prime wall space in a new county courthouse—she would need to prepare an application able to persuade the artist selection panel to trust her and her vision with \$750,000 and Oregon's most prominent public art opportunity in years. No small task. And then there was the competition. Given the project's high-profile qualities, it was sure to draw interest from the country's heaviest hitters in public art. Yet even if those causes for hesitation were thrown aside, Basa still had a fundamental reason to pause: if she applied, she intended to pitch making the artwork out of colored kiln-glass made by Bullseye Glass Company.

This ambition—to propose creating a work of such size with kilnformed glass—came with its own set of challenges. First, there was the cost. As a unique handmade material that requires multiple phases of skilled production, Bullseye's artisan kiln-glass costs significantly more than, say, canvas and paint. Second,

Artist Lynn Basa's unnamed artwork for the entrance lobby of the Multnomah County Central Courthouse.
Photo: Peggy Kendellen / Regional Arts and Culture Council

Basa was not confident the project's budget could fund her vision, even if she shrank her artist fee by two-thirds. 2000 square feet was a ton of kiln-glass (around eight tons, to be precise). Third, although kilnformed glass has been featured in numerous high-profile public art projects across the world, it remains a relatively undiscovered medium within that sector. As a result, building a proposal around it often carried the risk that the funding organization would not understand the material's unique appeal for such a project—let alone why that appeal would justify its extra cost. And even within the sophisticated circles of public art administrators, the false impression of glass as fragile can persist.

Basa's ambition to work in glass, however, also came with some considerable advantages. Among these was the fact that she had just successfully completed another high-profile work of public art in Portland, the TriMet Orange Line shelters mosaic columns. That project featured Bullseye glass and demonstrated Basa's effective creative and professional partnership with the Portland-based fabrication team at Bullseye Studio, who handled the artworks' production in collaboration with Canadian fabricators, Mosaika. The TriMet project also represented Basa's commitment to integrating her work within local culture, supporting the local economy by using local materials and hiring local partners. This depth of professionalism and thoughtfulness caught the attention of the project's committee. After viewing the extended portfolio shared on Basa's website, they invited her to interview.

"When the search committee interviewed Lynn for the project," recalls former RACC Director, Peggy Kendellen, "she pointed to her mosaics and other previous public works. But the committee had perused her website in advance and became interested in some of her studio work. When they asked about that, Lynn pivoted from her mosaics to share some of the encaustic work she was doing at the time, pieces that involved really interesting exposed layers. Within that body of work, the committee was especially drawn to pieces with hints of landscape. It was important that the work for the Courthouse not be representational

or didactic. So, in part, it was her work's abstraction that they were drawn to."

Soon after that interview, the committee awarded Basa the job. Not only did the complex layering and abstract evocativeness of Basa's encaustic work promise to suit the courthouse lobby perfectly, her proven professionalism allowed the committee to make their selection with utmost confidence. That Basa was clear about her choice of kilnformed glass as an exciting medium and Bullseye Studio as a proven fabricator only added to their confidence.

According to Kendellen, when public artists work with proven fabricators, trust increases across the board. "Trust is so important on all levels," she notes. "Everyone involved relies upon the fabricator to be easy to communicate with and trustworthy with everything from estimate to execution. There is the artist, who is turning over her ideas to someone else; there is the design team who needs clear and responsive communication; there are the builders and engineers and architects—everyone with their own needs, language, and agenda... And Bullseye Studio was able to communicate with all those parties, translating and organizing everyone to do their part of the job effectively."

But even with smooth collaboration among its many partners, the project still managed to raise challenges equal to its size. The first and most fundamental of these involved translating the small encaustic painting chosen by the committee into a colossal kilnformed glass version. Made from melted beeswax that is colored with pigments, encaustic painting typically entails applying waxy layers to a substrate such as wood or canvas. This layering process allows encaustic artworks to display richly textured qualities, with sumptuous transitions of color and subtle effusions of light. Converting as many visual qualities as possible from wax to glass was an unprecedented task. But Basa and Bullseye Studio needed to do more than achieve a faithful translation of encaustic's visual qualities. They needed to do so at well over one hundred times the scale. That meant creating a kilnformed artwork



Bullseye Studio Project Manager, Tom Jacobs, and artist Lynn Basa discussing color; Photo: Bullseye Glass Co.

that could affect someone from 60 feet away (or more) in a manner comparable to how the original encaustic painting would affect them from 6 feet away. The challenge, in other words, was not simply one of translating mediums, 1:1. It also involved exploring and discovering how to translate the experience of the artwork at completely different scales—roughly 1:150.

To begin addressing the project's translational demands, Bullseye Studio needed to devise a process able to reproduce with kilnformed glass the color wash and organic gradients of encaustic painting. Working closely with Basa, Bullseye Studio composed a color palette in glass that could represent her artwork's full spectrum when mapped on white opalescent sheet glass. But that palette still had to be applied at an unprecedented scale. Luckily, Bullseye Studio was well-versed in a collection of techniques pioneered by artist Narcissus Quagliata, often referred to as "painting with glass." These techniques, at a basic level, involve mapping crushed glass of various sizes and colors, known as frit, onto "canvases" of sheet glass. Bullseye

Studio also had the good fortune of consulting with artist Tim Carey, who had collaborated with Quagliata in realizing the enormous fused glass window for the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, by Judson Studios. Carey shared techniques he and Quagliata had developed for that project, leading Bullseye Studio to convey, at scale, the nuances of line and texture found in Basa's original artwork.

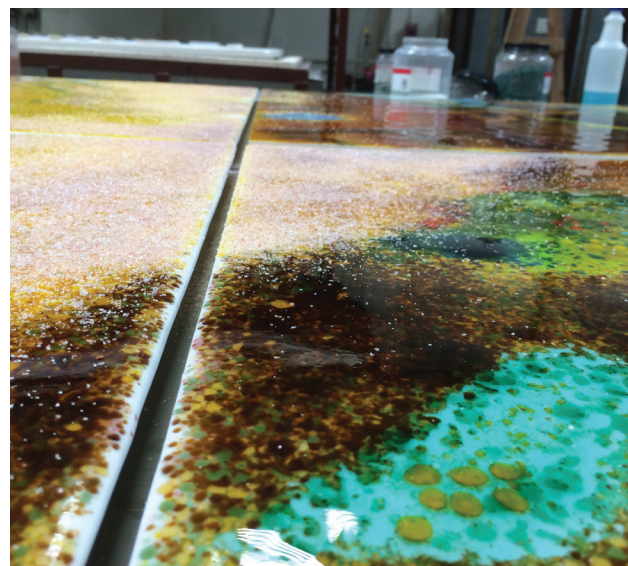
Even with these techniques in hand, a larger problem remained—namely, the artwork's ultimate size. After final drawings were received by the architect, the artwork was projected to finish at over 1700 square feet and 6 tons. Securely moving and installing it as a single piece would have been impossible. Plus, a vital part of the project's mandate required that the artwork endure for 100+ years. That meant it needed to facilitate easy repair and upkeep, even (and especially) should any damage or unexpected wear occur over the decades. To address these concerns, Bullseye Studio proposed that the artwork be made of 120 individual panels. These could be easily transported and assembled into

a contiguous whole. Likewise, panels could be taken down individually for any needed servicing. This solution, while solving important problems, led to a cascade of design implications.

The first implication involved the artwork's aesthetic integrity. Each panel would need to be made separately, its own miniature work of art. And yet each panel would need to interlock seamlessly with its immediate neighbors in terms of every compositional dimension. Line, color, texture, reflective property—each panel would need to flow into the next in ways that brought attention to the artwork's whole and not its parts. In the end, this demand added another significant level of complexity to Bullseye Studio's fabrication process. No single panel could be mapped out or created alone. Rather, each one was developed in relation to its neighboring panels and subjected to strategic visual audits, during which subsections of the artwork would be cross-referenced with other subsections for visual consistency and congruity.

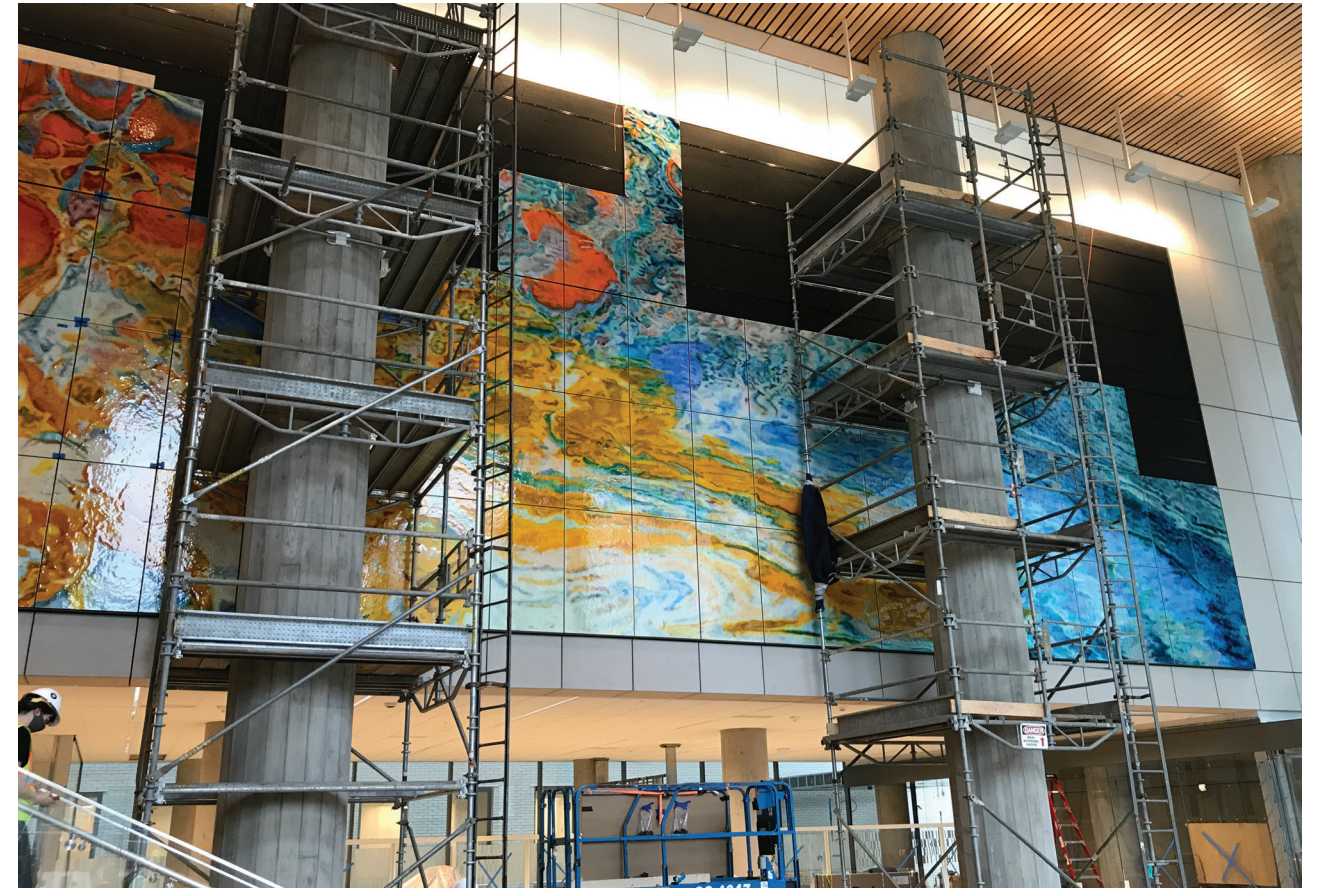
This production and visual coordination of so many panels accounted for a significant portion of labor hours on the project. Each panel, furthermore, would need to meet rigorous seismic safety standards. Lamination, normally, would be the standard treatment for creating safety glass with kilnformed glass artwork. In this case, however, it was unfeasible. There were simply too many panels. Not only would multiplying the lamination process have made the project costs balloon, laminating each panel would have left the artwork far too thick and heavy. An alternative, more creative approach was needed.

Counterclockwise from top left: Pre-fired frit lace. Sometimes we would use these components to build up layers, depth, or additional color saturation; From one panel to the next; Needing a little more color adjusting, these panels receive extra frit and will be fired again; In the case of a seismic event, metal honeycomb backers are being glued to the back of each individual art panel. Here Kristen is using a jig to apply the required amount of glue needed for safe and permanent adhesion of the honeycomb backers. (Cleats for hanging the panels are pre-attached to each backer.); We built a large frame that allowed us to preview six-panel sections of the work at once. Photos: Bullseye Glass Co.





Design Week Portland 2019 presentations of the project. We wanted the public to have an opportunity to see the glass up close and personal, given that once installed the artwork will begin at roughly 14' from the lobby floor. Photo: Bullseye Glass Co.



Lynn Basa's glass artwork for the entrance lobby of the Multnomah County Central Courthouse. Installation by Artech. Photo: Bullseye Glass Co.

“Artists don’t usually need to think about the technical side of integrating large-scale artwork into a building,” observes Tom Jacobs, Project Manager at Bullseye Studio. “So obviously it’s nice to entrust that responsibility to a project manager. As fabricators who also handle project management, we’re constantly coordinating with the architect, the engineer, and the construction company to make sure that countless details—sometimes small but always key—stay at the top of everyone’s minds. Regarding seismic safety for the Basa project, we knew cost and weight constraints made lamination a less-than-ideal option. The solution we settled on instead involved attaching the glass artwork to a lightweight honeycomb aluminum backer. The construction industry has used versions of that method for decades. Our little innovation was to attach the glass to the aluminum with enough closely spaced silicone beads that if the glass were ever to break, the great majority of it would stay stuck to the backers.

Any pieces that escaped would be small enough that they wouldn’t pose any hazard.”

Another major downstream effect of making the artwork in panels arose during installation. As is typical in public art, installation of Basa’s artwork could only occur near the end of the project. In light of the considerable liability that comes with handling finished art, installers must think twice about taking on jobs that involve even a single piece of artwork, let alone 120 interlocking glass panels. To make matters even more interesting, the dimensions of the installation space itself posed problems. The room boasted several concrete columns that were only 4 feet from the artwork’s mounting wall—a space too small for the kind of lifts that are normally used to accomplish such an installation. As a result, Bullseye Studio found it difficult to locate an installer who was up for the challenge. Finally, however, they found Artech, a Seattle-born company

ready and willing to see Lynn Basa’s artwork securely installed in its new home.

Ultimately, Artech built scaffolding around the columns in the courthouse lobby. They then choreographed a dynamic series of handoffs between lifts, crews stationed on the scaffolds, and technicians tasked with installing each panel onto the wall using a cleat system developed uniquely for this project. Every step in this dance was designed to protect the rest of the courthouse environment, the integrity of each panel, and the precise alignment of each panel relative to all the others. In the end, Artech’s precision helped realize the painstaking care Bullseye Studio had taken to ensure that the integrity of Lynn Basa’s painting would be reflected in the continuity of the finished installation.

After installation, the artwork measured 71’ x 25’ and is now visible from the first, second, and third floors

of the courthouse, as well as from the street out front. Upon seeing the finished artwork from outside, one of the project’s lighting designers couldn’t help but marvel, “It looks just like the rendering.” In the world of large-scale public art, there are few higher compliments. A translation that matches its rendering, when viewed from a distance through lobby windows, is a rare sight. But when that translation is lively and aglow in the way only glass can be, it is rarer still.

“I am so grateful,” reflects artist Lynn Basa. “Bullseye Studio understood how to interpret my painting with 100% commitment to my vision—not trying to talk me into shortcuts, not trying to take the easy way, not trying to rework the art. I was empowered throughout the whole process and spared from spending my creative energy wrestling with a swarm of technical problems. And we managed to stay within budget and finish the work on time, which was no easy feat. So now what

stands out to me about this finished piece is just how awe-inspiring it is. It is truly monumental in its composition and in its scale. It has dignity, but it also has accessibility. It makes its own atmosphere.”

As of October 2020, visitors to Portland’s new Multnomah County Central Courthouse can experience Lynn Basa’s kilnformed artwork and its inspiring atmosphere of color, hope, and light. The artwork, furthermore, will encourage glass fabrication studios around the world to expand and explore the incredible potential of kilnforming at an architectural scale.

Alex Davis serves as Writer/Editor at Bullseye Glass Co., where he helps hone everything from educational class guides to artist promotional videos.

Davis joined Bullseye in 2019 after leading communications for several non-profit organizations, and teaching college-level composition. In addition to editorial credit for scholarly works ranging from Victorian literature to the psychology of religion, he has authored various academic articles, short stories, children’s books, and young adult novels.

Davis holds a BA with highest honors from Western Washington University, an MA in Literature and Composition from Portland State University, and an MBA from Western Governors University. He lives in Portland, Oregon. ■

Lynn Basa’s glass artwork for the Multnomah County Central Courthouse entrance lobby in Portland, Oregon, fabricated by Bullseye Studio. Photo: Bullseye Glass Co.

