

THE JAMES BIRRELL MEMORIAL MOSAIC

A Post-Humorous Interpretation of "Pomp and Be Bop," 1982,

by Gundar Robez (03/20/53 – 01/20/05)

by David Wilde



Laure Heathcote and Melanie Kidd of Glowing Panes Studio in Toronto

This project has quite a background, and I shall try to shorten the story so we can get on with describing the actual mosaic. Gundar Robez started his training in crafts at Sheridan College, in Mississauga, Toronto's sister city to the west. His first craft of choice was jewelry, but he developed an interest in blown glass and then stained glass. One of his fellow students was Diana Birrell, and they became lifelong friends. I met Diana for the first time in Gundar's studio in Hamilton, which was to be, unfortunately, his last. Gundar had, sadly, as I have noted before, contracted ALS, the quickly developing form of the disease.

Diana had a nephew, James Birrell, who had succumbed to neuroblastoma, a nasty and sometimes fatal disease that affects children. That was in 2001. Diana and I met with Gundar's executor and old Hamiltonian friend, John Mephen, and we decided to explore doing a memorial for both James and Gundar, for the eighth floor of the Cancer Ward of the Hospital for Sick Children, in the form of a glass mosaic



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based on one of Gundar's signature pieces, "Pomp and Be Bop," 1982.

Diana Birrell had connections with the HSC in that she was fundraiser for The James Fund and, for a while, a fundraiser for the HSC Foundation, and we made a proposal. The administrators of that time, around 2007–2008, were very keen... but things changed, and the eighth-floor renovations were put on hold. After a couple of years, the administration had changed, and they agreed with pursuing the concept.

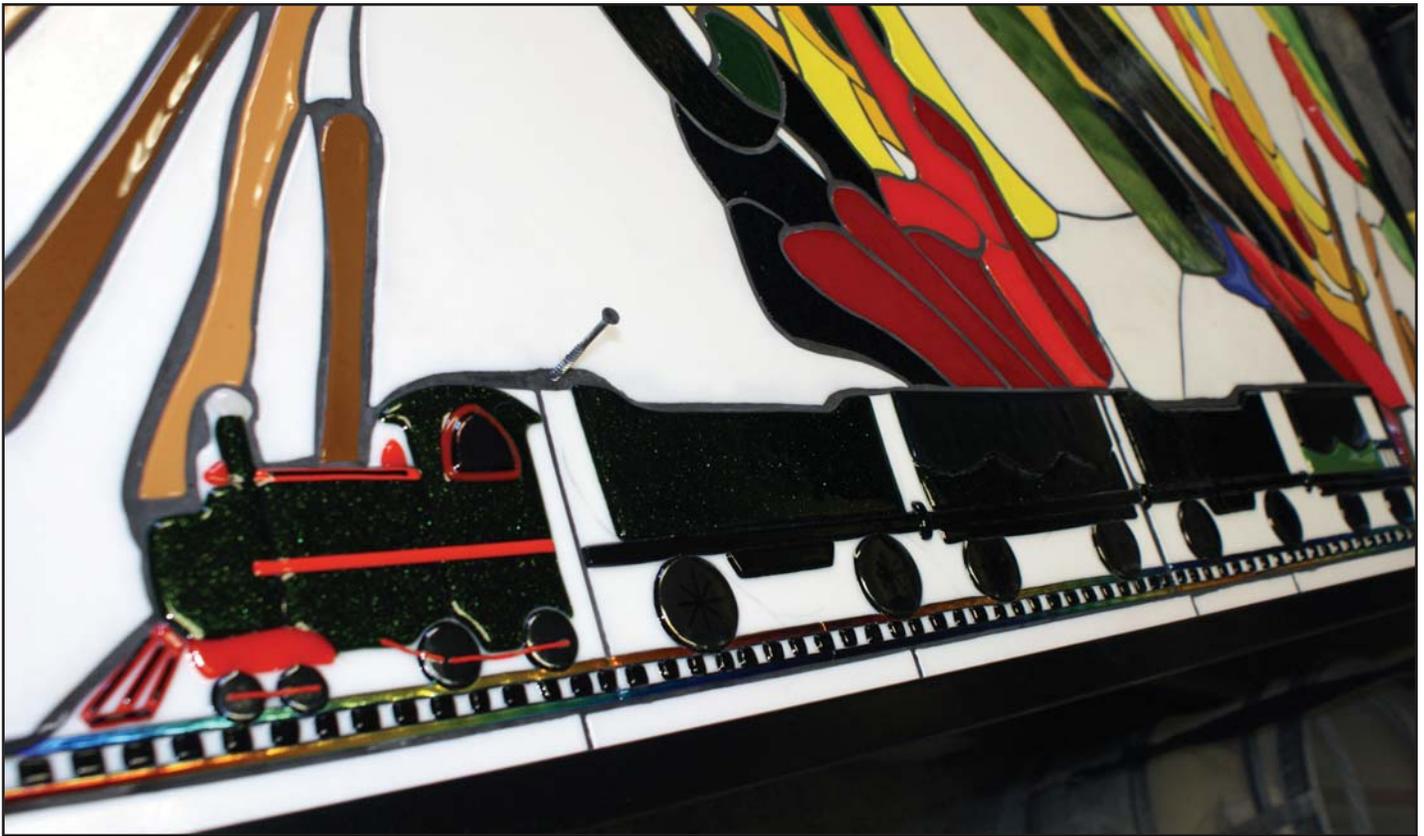
We started to build a team to make this mosaic a reality. I went to my friends at Glowing Panes Studio in

Toronto, Laura Heathcote and Melanie Kidd, and they volunteered their spare time and the use of their studio. Laura also asked if Hollander Glass Canada would donate the glass, and Manager Steve Ellis graciously agreed. A friend of mine and Gundar's, Doug Oldford, had worked with traditional mosaic, and so he suggested we use a special plywood, Siberian Birch, seven-ply, as the backing, because he knew it would not warp and pop off the glass pieces.

Laura Heathcote took a photo of *Pomp and Be Bop* to an architectural firm that could blow the image up to the four-foot-high-by-five-foot-wide size we needed.

We then traced the lines onto the plywood with carbon paper and numbered all the pieces. We used the blow-up as our cutline, numbered each piece, and labeled each with the color of glass, as determined from the original. Laura, Melanie and I then cut out all of the glass and numbered each piece on the back with special glass paint, and Melanie fired them each evening in the four kilns at the studio. This firepolished the edges of the glass and gave them a nice rounded look that was smooth.

We then mounted the glass pieces on the board with white cement that would reflect the colored glass rather than darken by absorption. When this



The train is an added element to Gundar Robez' original design; it was added in celebration of James Birrell's love of trains.



Fabrication



Grouting had to be applied and cleaned quickly before it set to the glass.

cement had dried, we grouted with black cement and quickly wet polished the cement off the glass before it could set. About eight small spaces were left open for the screws that would attach the mosaic to the wall, which were then covered over with the grout on site. While we were doing the glass, the project manager at the hospital had agreed to back up the drywall with two layers of seven-ply regular plywood for strength. He also had three halogen spots placed in the ceiling in front of the proposed exact position of the mosaic, which gave us perfect illumination with no “hot spots,” just a gentle light from above. The white cement we used reflected the colored glasses perfect-



The working photograph of Pomp and Be Bop

ly. Laura had an angle-iron frame made for the work which was placed over the mosaic before attaching to the wall, and the screws that attached the frame to the backing were also covered with a little black grout.

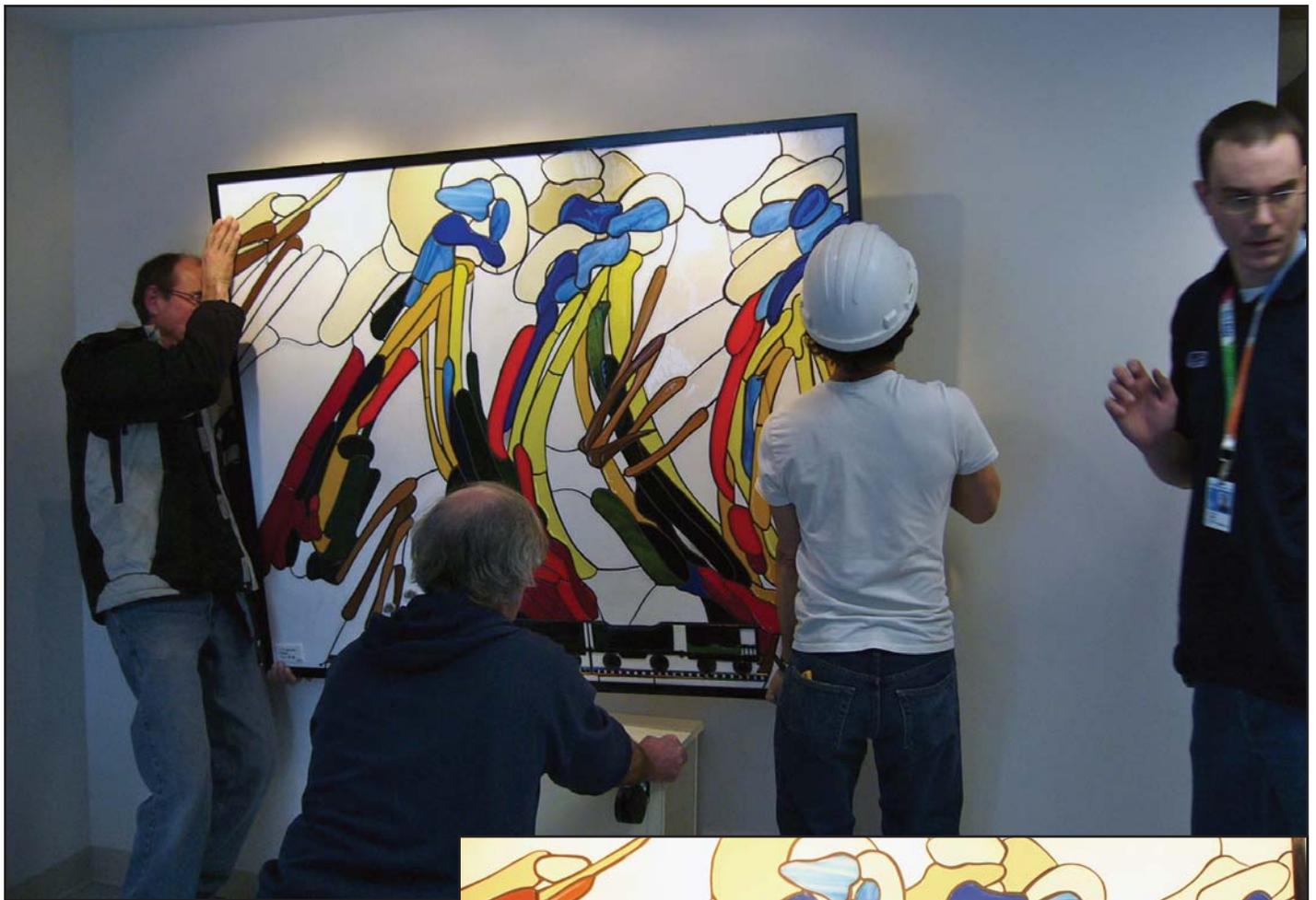
After the mosaic had just been installed, a family with a young boy in a wheelchair was coming in for treatment for neuroblastoma, and they stopped to admire the work. His Mom lifted him out of the wheelchair and took him right up to the mosaic. He touched almost every piece, and, each time he did, he would say “red” or “blue” or “green” and smile. There were no dry eyes there at that moment.

There was one alteration to Gundar’s original design. James Birrell, who had fought cancer for a few years, had a very devoted family, and his father, Syd, had written a book of the emails he had sent over the years, about the ups and downs of James’s ordeal. The back-and-forth trips from their home in Peterborough were sometimes made by train, and James would be invited to ride with the engineer; at age seven to eight, you can just imagine the love of trains he must have developed. On the back cover of Syd’s book about James, who said, “Ya can’t let Cancer ruin your day,” there is an illustration of a little train with green boxcars. Green

was James’ favorite color. Melanie made an intricate fused-glass reproduction of this train, which was applied to the mosaic, thereby making this an art mosaic dedicated to James’ memory as well as to Gundar’s.

The official unveiling in June of 2010 was well attended by family, friends, doctors, staff, and other artists. Gundar’s mother, Astrida, was also there and was, like the rest of us, overwhelmed by the joy this work will bring to those who see it on the eighth floor of this very important research and treatment hospital.

It will also brighten their thoughts, with the joyful message of *hope* that



Gundar's work will achieve posthumously. It was indeed an honor and a pleasure for me and all of those who were involved in this memorial, to have participated in its completion. I would like to mention two special glass artists who were present at the unveiling: Karl Schantz, who had been an instructor at Sheridan College in blown and formed glass; and Robert Jekyll, who had also taught Gundar at Sheridan, and who taught me at a short intro class at Georgian College. Karl's daughter had also been treated at the HSC for neuroblastoma, but she was a survivor. Karl and his wife, Janice, were supporters of

the project and were able to connect to the Birrell family through Diana. Karl, Robert, Gundar, and I shared studio

Installation and the completed piece

space in Toronto from 1980 to 1984. The term "synchronicity" comes to mind.

