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Flames of inspiration blaze in glass class

by [Justin Hughes](#), staff writer

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Bright orange flames glowed inside the furnace, the heat causing beads of sweat to drip down Nathan Watson's face as he stared into the flames with total concentration.

Watson, 31, teaches a glass-blowing class through the extended learning program at SF State.

Growing up in Kentucky, Watson was very devoted to soccer—but when he discovered the art of blowing glass, he developed a new passion that changed his life's direction.

"It is all-consuming," Watson said. "This heat, this fire...it has a lot of conceptual potential."

This is the first semester Watson has taught the class, which currently consists of about 12 students who vary in age and skill level.

"I am extremely happy with it," Watson said. "I can see a lot of progress in what people are doing."

He intends to expand the class and keep it evolving into the future. Since the class is offered through extended learning (and carries an \$867 materials fee), it can be too expensive for many students.

As a teacher, Watson said he is very receptive to ideas from everyone, so that the class can constantly change and take new directions.

"I like to use what students bring to the class to mold the class itself," Watson said. "I want to involve them and deal with more than what I know personally."

As an experiment, Watson wants to bring in jazz musicians to improvise while the class works on glass blowing—"to see how it inspires our work," he said.

"I want there to be a feeling of limitless potential within the class," he added.

The delicate form and transparency of the glass carries many levels of symbolic meaning, Watson said.

"It can really echo a lot of things that happen in the real world," he said. "It makes reference to perspective—the way we as people see things or don't see things."

A gigantic rotating sanding wheel rumbled as David Ensign, a

PHOTO



[Sarah Pingo](#) | staff photographer

Garren Doremos, a SF State glass blowing teacher's assistant, readies to add glass into the furnace during Monday night's class. The process, also known as "charging" is used to remove unnecessary particles in the material prior distributing to students enrolled in the course.

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34-year-old full-time graphic designer, polished his latest creation: a glass chicken head.

"I have one other chicken," said Ensign with a grin. "But I think my chicken phase might be over now."

Glass-blowing represents endless possibilities to Watson, and his students share his fascination with the art form.

"Glass is almost never a solo effort," said student Ian Sweedler, 44. "You are always working with someone else. We share ideas and talk about concepts common to all of us."

He inserted a stainless steel pipe into the fire, spinning it in careful, circular motions before eventually withdrawing it from the furnace, the tip searing with molten liquid glass.

Sweedler said that the glass can be completely mesmerizing to him as it undergoes its transformation.

"It goes through this wide range," Sweedler said. "It can be molten or completely transparent. It's almost as if it's alive."

Once the glass is molten, it is a similar consistency to honey, Watson said. In this liquid state, the artist can blow into a hollow pipe to shape the glass.

"From that initial bubble you can form anything," he said.

Watson admitted that the glass-blowing process can be dangerous.

As the furnace blazes between 1,950 and 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit, the best way to prevent an accident is to always maintain concentration, he said.

"Burns always result from losing focus," Watson said. "If you follow the rules and take your time and focus, you will only get burned a little bit."

Watson's passion for glass has taken him all over the country.

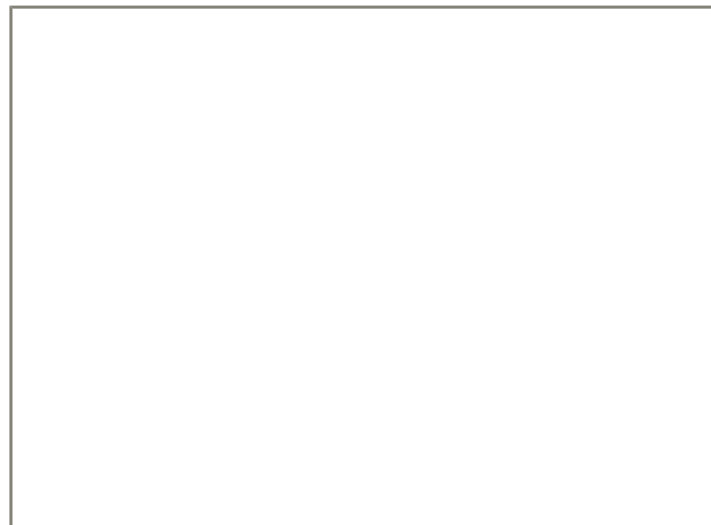
He first studied glass-blowing at a small liberal arts school in Kentucky called Centre College. He loved the art form so much that he moved to Rhode Island to study with Jose Chardiet, a respected artist who has excelled in many different techniques such as sand casting, kiln casting, hot sculpting, and blowing.

In 2004, Watson moved to the Bay Area to attend graduate school at California College of the Arts, where he refined his own artistic methods and began working with building materials such as sheetrock, joint compounds, string, and glass.

Dividing his time between teaching and creating his own art, Watson currently rents out an art studio in the industrial area of San Francisco near Third Street.

He incorporates various types of metal into his artwork to support the glass and also to contrast its fragile form, Watson said.

"A lot of my work is about balance," he said.



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Many of the elements that he mixes into his work carry some sort of significance—gears, plow pieces and pins all conjure up images of his childhood growing up on a farm in Kentucky.

“They all work to maintain some kind of meaning,” he said.

During his last class, Watson sat at the head of a table to showcase his glasswork, which shone with smooth gradations of magenta. A student showed him a twisted piece of glass she had been working on, the lower part of which was sharp and jagged.

“This is...” Watson paused, studying the piece. “...dangerously amazing.”

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