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## Glass crafters turn their art into dollars

By Maureen McDonald  
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**PONTIAC** — In these hot humid days of Michigan summers, Jason Ruff and April Wagner spend most of their mornings stoking the 2,300-degree furnace. Their company, epiphany, has created large-scale glass pieces for clients such as the Detroit Regional Chamber, Pfizer Inc., General Motors Corp. and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"You become so absorbed in the work you forget the temperature," Ruff says.

He and Wagner transformed a former television repair shop into a state-of-the-art, 4,000-square-foot facility. They create pieces up to 6 feet high and 3 feet wide for corporate lobbies and conference rooms.

### Local Spotlight

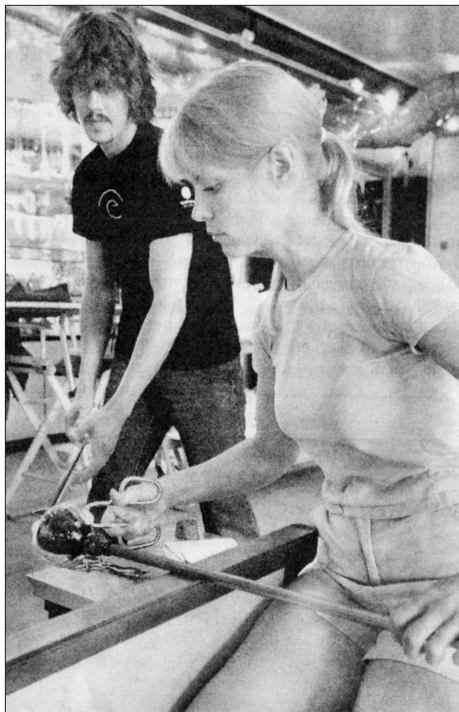
The process used by epiphany is traditionally termed "fazzoletto," which means the glass is blown in free form, such as the Italian glass blowers have done for hundreds of years. Ruff and Wagner, both College for Creative Studies graduates, commissioned the contractor who built studios for glass masters such as Dale Chihuly, Lino Tagliapietra and the Corning Museum to build their furnaces.

"Glass is the fastest growing medium in the art world, it has captured its own audience," says Ferdinand Hampson, owner of Habatat Gallery in Royal Oak, which exhibits epiphany's work. "Collectors want art that displays effort and physical energy."

The studio produces at least 50 works a month, from \$75 paperweights to \$5,000 sculptures made of glass tipped in gold. They exhibit work at a high-end men's store, D.Fine, in the Bellagio Hotel-Casino in Las Vegas, and galleries across America.

What distinguishes epiphany is its organizational skills, says Robert Maniscalco, owner of the Maniscalco Gallery in Grosse Pointe Park and moderator of Artbeat, a television show about Metro Detroit artisans that airs on Channel 56.

"The majority of artists don't have any business savvy at all," says Maniscalco, who teaches business law and marketing techniques to artists through the Scarab Club in Detroit and ArtServe in Lansing. "For the level of mastery many artists embody, they wind up dealing with clients who have a car-buretor mentality. They resist paying the asking price for art."



Charles V. Tines / *The Detroit News*

**Jason Ruff and April Wagner, owners of epiphany in Pontiac, have created large-scale glass pieces for clients such as the Detroit Regional Chamber, Pfizer Inc., General Motors Corp. and Russian President Vladimir Putin.**

A major break in epiphany's success came when they met Paul Huxley and Cindy Pasky, owner of Strategic Staffing Solutions in Detroit. The company agreed to invest in the glassblowers, helping subsidize the purchase of their Pontiac studio.

"We have April and Jason's art in nearly all our 13 offices," Huxley says. "Our employees have been collecting their work, as well. It is very appealing in form and creativity."

Their business plan, and assurance of commissions from the Strategic Staffing Solutions, helped them acquire a \$250,000 loan from the former Michigan National Bank.

"Banking officers told us they trusted us because we prepared our materials so thoroughly," Wagner said.

The mortgage helped the couple purchase a former television repair shop for \$115,000 and plunk another \$200,000 into remodeling it as a world class studio. Renovations included a glass garage door to move giant pieces in and out of the shop. Its glory hole, a device for refining glass, ranks among the largest in the country. They also have a metal fabrication shop, a cold working facility with etching capability and a digital inventory system.

On muggy days, the couple may take an afternoon break and develop marking plans on a picnic table in the English gar-

### epiphany

■ **Specialty:** The 10-year old glass blowing studio is among the largest in Michigan with a 4,000-square-foot facility. The artists create free form pieces for private collectors and corporate collections.

■ **Owners:** April Wagner and Jason Ruff are graduates of the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. They opened the Pontiac studio in 2000.

■ **Contact:** [www.epiphany-glass.com](http://www.epiphany-glass.com) or call (248) 745-3786

den they designed out of what was a former asphalt parking lot. Or they walk their kayaks a block to Beaudette Park and paddle the stress away.

"We still hold this humbling belief that glass is an astonishing material of unlimited potential," Ruff says. "Our driving force is to evolve and create large-scale, one-of-a-kind works."

*Maureen McDonald is a Metro Detroit free-lance writer.*



Epiphany created the custom "Earth," one piece from "The Four Elements" sculpture commissioned by Pfizer Inc. in Ann Arbor, Mich. in 2003.