

AMERICAN

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ART GLASS

QUARTERLY

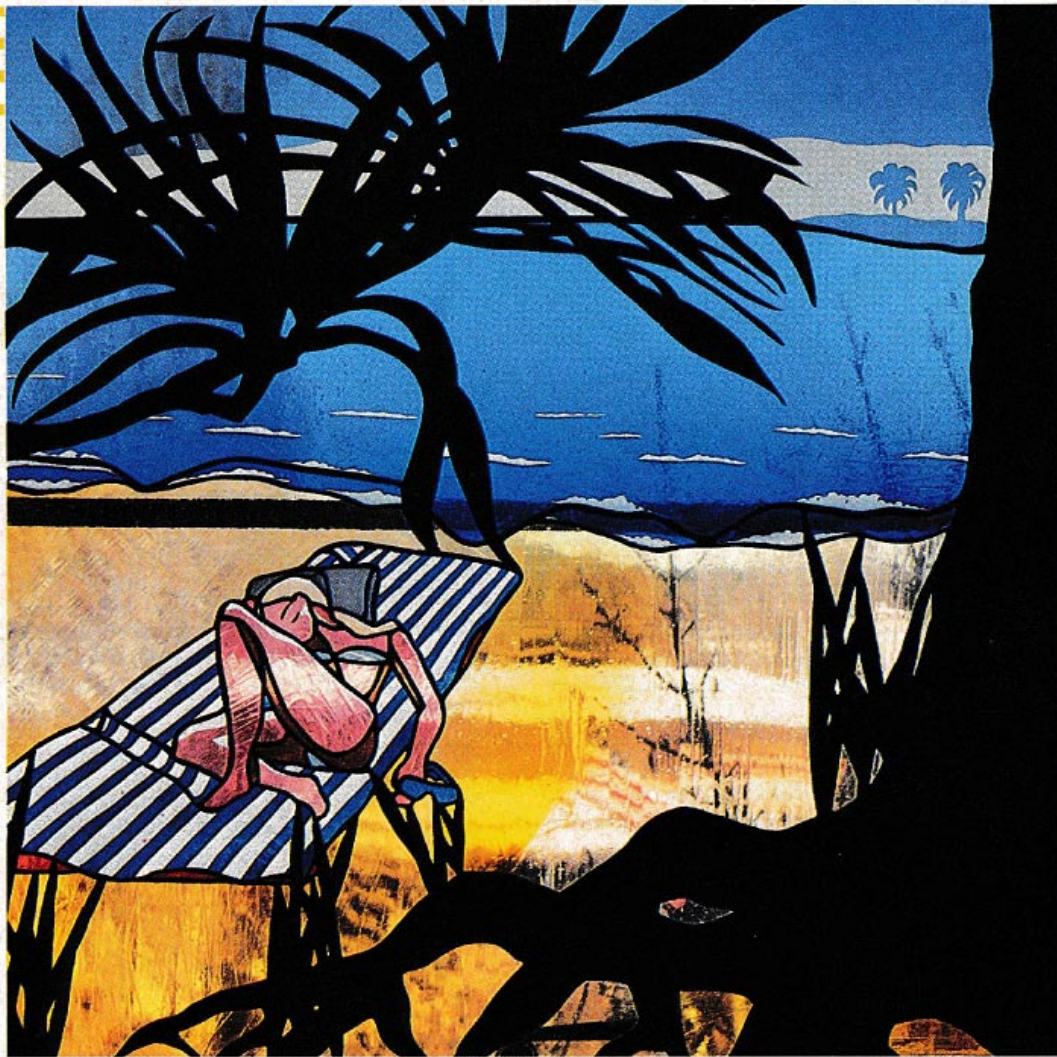


LUCY LYON

AMERICAN GLASS

Text by Dan Fenton

Photography by Lucy Lyon, except where noted



"The Beach." 1981. Single glass has been juxtaposed to layers that have been sandwiched; the black frond has been sandblasted on clear and painted black. Width: 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; height: 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches.



"Sunbathers." 1983. This freestanding piece with an aluminum storefront frame looks like a screen or, in Lyon's words, an "interior billboard." It is shaded and sandblasted, with painted lead and zinc came for the grid. Width: 48 inches; height: 35 inches.

Lucy Lyon named her studio American Glass because her subject matter "is about America" and ranges from the pop culture of punks and low riders to the nostalgia of classic roadside diners. Most of her material is inspired either directly or indirectly by the Southwestern region of the United States where she currently lives. She does not, however, portray traditional themes of desert landscapes and Native American symbolism but, with a visual vocabulary of graphic realism combined with an eye for seeing something special in the ordinary, she depicts today's Southwest in a unique way.

Lucy works alone at her studio, located in an office building in downtown Los Alamos. The space is relatively small, but she has no problem in making it work. Her layout is very efficient, with glass storage racks beneath the workbenches and composition easels set in north-facing windows, and there is no lack of natural light. Here she produced commissioned stained glass works for clients and creates her own pieces. The only work that she performs outside of her studio is the sandblasting, which she does with a siphon system on the back porch at home.

Los Alamos is an unusual small city, set in a scenic transition zone between high desert and subalpine terrain in New Mexico's Rocky Mountains. It is unusual because the town is not really indigenous to the area: its people and its economy are predominantly based on a new and singular industry, nuclear weapons research.

About ten percent of the research is non-defense-oriented, and about ten percent of the industry is non-science. Lucy's husband Vinny is a physicist who has been working since 1978 in a basic science research program, non-defense, affiliated with the University of Illinois.

Originally from Colorado Springs, Lucy had moved to New York City in 1969, when she was on a work-study program through Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. The job involved working for the New York City Parks and Recreation Department, and her duties included being driven around Brooklyn to count swings and seesaws.

It wasn't until 1976 that she gave even a passing thought to art. Then she took a basic stained glass course at Riverside Church in New York. "The more I think about it, the more I appreciate the woman (Ellen Simon) who taught the course. She taught stained glass design from the outset. She was very strong on color-value selection and light easel composition, but did not emphasize technique. I was terrible with my technique at first. We spent most of the semester designing our windows, and it took another semester to complete them, but the class was still a good one and Ellen Simon was a very good teacher."

Most of Lucy's technique is in fact selftaught, even though she has now attended many workshops and seminars. In one workshop, instructed by Paul Marioni,



Detail of "Vinny."



"Vinny." 1982. Sandblasted double-glazed glass; epoxy paint; glass insets; reamy flashed glass. Width: 33 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches; height: 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches.



Detail of "Bus Stop." A portrait of the movie actor Malcolm MacDowell.



"Bus Stop." 1981. Sandblasted double-glazed glass; glass insets; reamy flashed glass; foil overlay. Width: 35½ inches; height: 23 inches.



"Morning Cup." 1981. Sandblasted double-glazed glass; inset glass; reamy flashed glass. A portrait of Lucy Lyon's friend Sharon. Width: 28¾ inches; height: 21 inches.



Detail of "Morning Cup."



Detail of "A Visit with Wairimu."



"A Visit with Wairimu." 1983. Width: 18¾ inches; height: 28¾ inches.



"Stardust Lounge." 1981. The sign has been sandblasted, acrylic-painted, and attached to the back of a Mississippi Burlap Obscure grid. Width: 28 inches; height: 40¾ inches.



"Cholo." 1982. A straightforward piece, with little sandblasting and paint. This won the Best Flat Glass Award

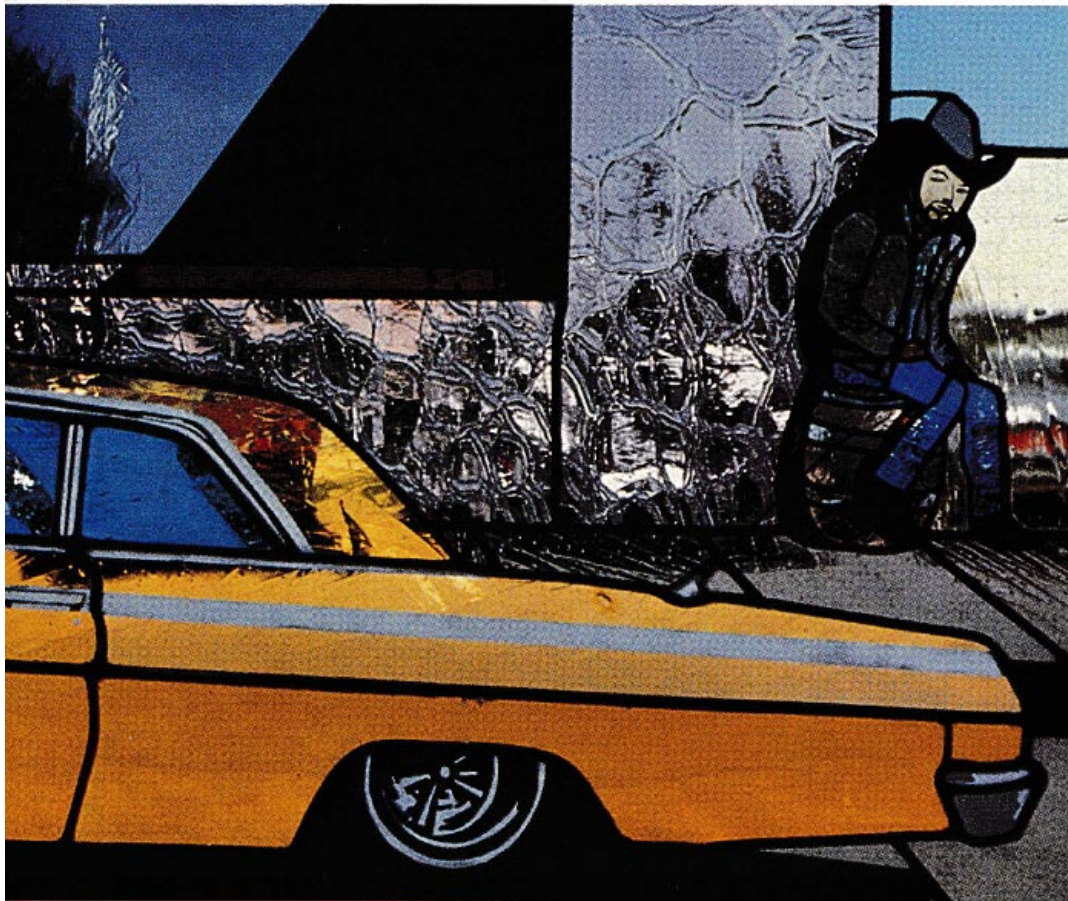
she realized what the potential of multi-layer glazing might be. She learned abrasive blast-etching on her own, and she used these techniques on flashed glasses for color change and tonality. When blast-etched pieces are double-glazed, Lucy realized that a wide variety of shades, shadows, and highlights are possible. To accentuate the highlights she applies a clear epoxy-based non-fired glass paint to eliminate the frost texture in certain areas, allowing the brilliance to return to the glass after the sandblasting. She will also use black epoxy paint for added line detail within the leadline. Occasionally she will blast completely through the glass, removing whole sections, and inset other colors of glass into those places.

Although Lucy uses abrasive blast-etching fairly freely in her work, she is more sparing in the use of other extended techniques, using them only when they can be most effective. She admits that she really doesn't like fancy technique for its own sake: "I don't use many different techniques, even though I know about them. I have actually taken workshops in fusing and slumping, even kiln-building, but I don't want to use these tech-

niques until I can see them actually doing something in my work. I am not firmly convinced that technique in itself is a prerequisite to making art in glass. Painters have been making art for centuries and what do they use? They use canvas and a brush, and some paint. I feel that the design is the most powerful aspect of my work."

In designing Lucy often goes beyond simple drawing by using methods that are often employed by graphic designers. This involves drawing from projected photographs, working over the drawings, cutting and composing them like a collage, and working them over again to form the design for the glass work. She uses photographs as a point of departure rather than translating them directly to form the basic design. The photograph continues to serve as a reference during the color composition and the blast-etching stages of creating the work.

Vinny, a portrait of Lucy's husband, was designed using a photograph for reference. The face detail was blast-etched on a single piece of orange flashed on clear glass that had the frost texture removed in selected areas by using clear epoxy paint, and the shadows were



in *New Mexico's Third Annual Glass Show*. Width: 44 inches; height: 17 inches.

created with transparent red epoxy paint. The eyes are pieces of German machine-flashed blue on clear glass, that were inset into blast-cut holes in the orange glass. They were then blast-etched and painted with black. The jacket area is double-glazed German machine-flashed dark blue on clear over light blue on clear. By etching on both pieces and removing texture in certain areas, and then superimposing them, a wide range of tonality and shadow was achieved. These same techniques of glass handling and light modulation were also used in *Bus Stop* and in *Morning Cup*.

"I was really interested in doing people at that time, and very few people that I knew of were doing portraits in glass. It seemed like something that hadn't really been tried. When I first showed *Vinny* most viewers mistook him for an Indian. That's probably because this is New Mexico and there are so many artists here who do Indians. Actually he's Chinese but it's hard to tell, probably because of the cowboy hat. Vinny looks somewhat sinister when he wears it, and I liked that look about him. This was not an attempt to be particularly Southwestern, although it does have something to do with being out here."



"Auto #1." 1982. Red on clear flash; semi-antique; mirror sand-blasted on back and painted. 30 inches by 30 inches.



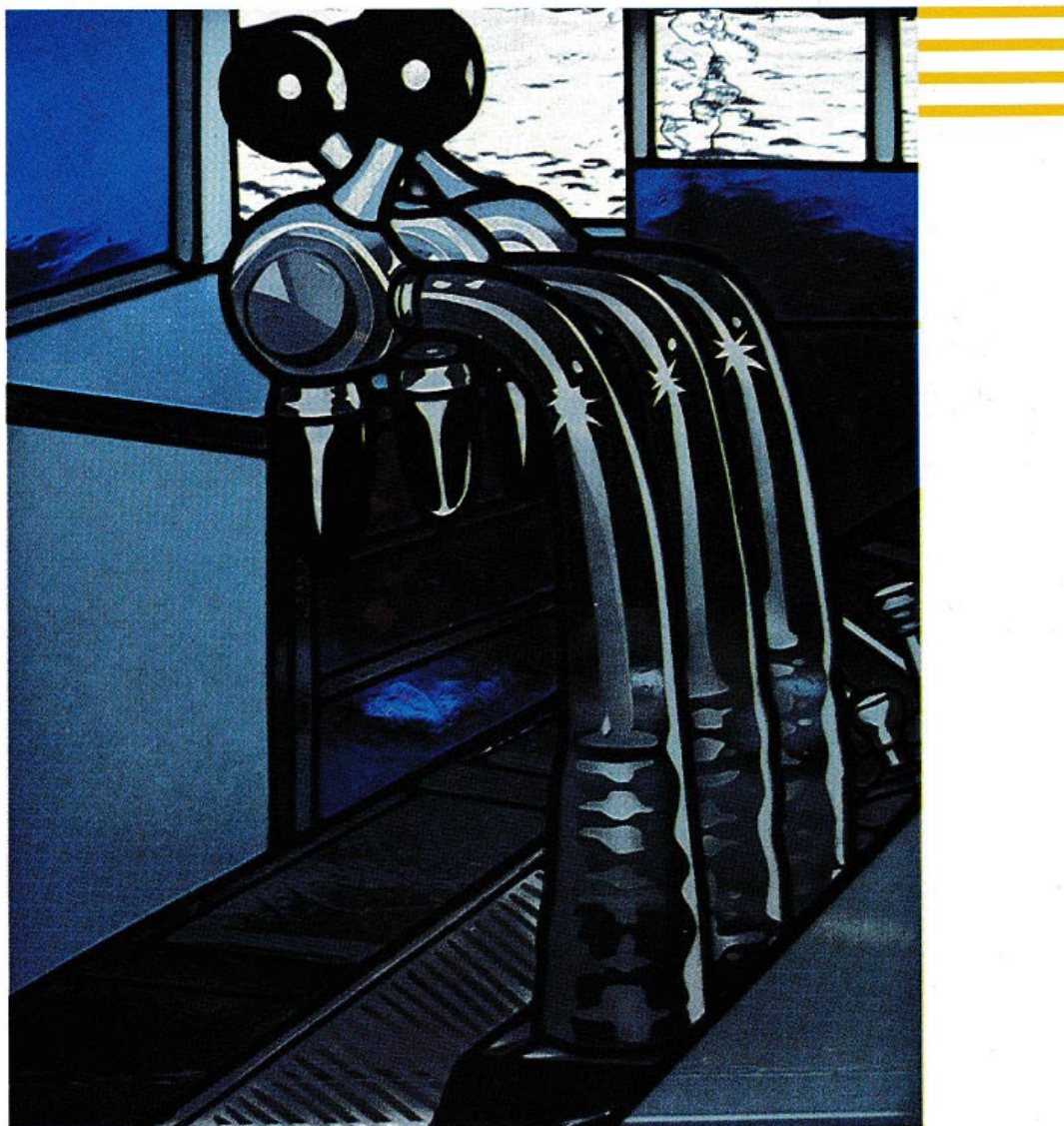
"The Menu," from The Diner series. Shaded; sandblasted; leaded. The glass in The Diner series is all either German-manufactured or semi-antique or antique flash. Width: 23 inches; height: 18 inches.

After having lived in New York City for seven years, and in Illinois for another two, Lucy admits that she did have some difficulty, at first, in adjusting to life in Los Alamos, and this was reflected in her work. About *Bus Stop* she explains: "I made this piece just after we moved out here. These are people from New York that feel trapped in the alien land of New Mexico, not knowing whether to stay or go, and not knowing where to go. They are really characteristic of people from New York, which is a place of extremes that I am very fond of. That is very much the way I felt about myself when I first got out here." Although the figures in this piece are based on real people, Lucy worked from drawings from the outset this time, rather than from photographs: she then cut and shaped them into a collage incorporating the anachronistic elements of Malcom MacDowell, James Dean, and an unidentified actress from the silent screen era.

This theme was extended further in *Morning Cup*, a portrait of Lucy's friend Sharon. "I made this one some months later, after living in Los Alamos for a while. I

thought, 'This is what people do in Los Alamos.' I was still in my disillusionment period, a contemplative state of mind that you get into when you don't have much to do. You're just hanging out at home and your husband has gone off to work and there you are, wondering what to do with the day. Maybe it's just the bored housewife theme... but that's what really inspired me to get into working in glass full-time. I didn't want to just stay home and meditate."

Lucy's style of graphic realism has not removed her from a sensitive use of her materials. "In *Morning Cup* I used a reamy antique glass for the background because I wanted it to look liquid. Most of my work has an illustrative quality and I have a tendency to make things look flat, but here I wanted it to look like glass. Those large bubble shapes in the reamy background were already in the glass and their placement was accidental, but I guess they can suggest abstract thoughts, somewhat like cartoon clouds." Her regard for texture in glass is also seen in *Stardust Lounge* where she uses Mississippi Burlap Obscure for the window at which the figure is gazing.



"Soda Fountain," from The Diner series. 1983. Width: 15 inches; height: 18 inches.

Lucy is now reluctant to call these pieces portraits, "because there is more there than just the identity of the subject alone; I want them to convey a feeling. Besides, I want to sell them, and it seems that people are not likely to buy a portrait unless it's of themselves or of somebody that they can directly identify with. So far I haven't been commissioned for that."

Lucy does, however, consider her most recent piece in this series, *A Visit with Wairimu*, to be very much a portrait. "I feel that this portrait best conveys the subject's personality. Wairimu is an African woman who lives in nearby White Rock and is married to a physicist. She's a happy person and is busy all the time, and I think you can get all of that out of this picture. This is the way she dresses. I didn't have to ask her to get dressed up." The face is double-glazed in order to get a realistic color tone, and the details and shadings are



"Sundae Cups," from The Diner series. Width: 15 inches; height: 18 inches.



"Reflections," from the series of that name. 1982. These little sketches are sandblasted and shaded. Width: 11 inches; height: 5½ inches.

blasted. It took Lucy four attempts to get the shadings in the face just right. "At first it didn't look African, it looked Indian. Usually I would design my pieces based on photographs combined with imagination, and just stop at that point. Now I'm going directly back to the source when I start to sandblast. Working in this way makes a difference."

In 1982 Lucy began to concentrate on archetypal elements of today's Southwest. Impelled by her fascination with cars and the town of Espanola, the auto capital of New Mexico twenty miles away, she chose the theme of low riders. "The tourists don't exactly come to northern New Mexico to watch low riders, but they do notice them. How can they not notice! Having to drive through Espanola at fifteen miles per hour, they notice them. At least not too many people get speeding tickets

there." Lucy mentioned that she did have some difficulty in determining appropriate titles for these pieces. She didn't want simply to call them low riders: "Too straightforward. I wanted to use the Spanish name, so I called up some Spanish guys I know who are into it. Everyone had different names, but 'cholo' was the term most often used."

Auto #1 focuses on the lines of a lowered 1961 Chevy Impala, while *Cholo* is more a cultural commentary. "In a sense these are portraits. Both are the cars of a guy called Leo, who is now a hairdresser. *Cholo* is about the two main cultures that co-exist in Espanola. There are the cowboys, and there are the low riders, and they don't always get along that well. In this picture, there is a cowboy sitting in front of the local tavern and looking a little miffed while he regards the low rider parked there."

Auto #1 was originally intended to be a wall piece, but later on Lucy decided that it looked better in transmitted light. The color fields were intentionally made to look flat by blast frosting. To accentuate the lines of the car, mirror glass was used. This simulates chrome in reflected light and produces strong black lines in transmitted light. In *Cholo* Lucy used contrasting color values to create strong shadows and a feeling of directional light. Contrasting glass textures were used to give a visual tactility: crackle glass for the adobe is juxtaposed with the polished surface of the German antique flashed amber glass used for the car.

Lucy's most recent work is the *Diner* series. These still lifes are drawn directly from Sparky's Diner, one of the first, and still unchanged, eating places in Los Alamos, dating from about 1950. "I like old diners and eating at greasy-spoons while traveling cross-country. You can get off the Interstate somewhere in Kansas and drive into some little town, and you will always find some homemade pie and good stuff to eat. There is also something basically satisfying about eating." These panels are small, not much larger than life-size, but their scale preserves the intimate feeling of the subject.

In *Sundae Cups* and *Menu* she blast-carved in mid-depth relief to achieve added dimension. In *Soda Fountain* she used blast etching to achieve the sparkle effect of light reflecting off shiny surfaces. In all of these the use of color is minimal, allowing the grey glass to enhance the feeling of tonality and brilliant reflection.

Many artists like to stay in practice by filling sketchbooks with quick pencil drawings of ideas as they occur. Lucy likes to do this directly in glass, and her sandblasted *Reflections* series is a good example. She has made about thirty of them over the last four years, each one reflecting a different landscape ranging from desert roadsides to mountains to the surface of the moon. "I enjoy making these because they're imaginative, immediate, and fun; and they are complete in one piece of glass. It's like drawing directly with the sandblaster. I like the reflections theme—it's as if they were mini-models of the rest of my work."

Lucy's work has evolved in relative isolation from other artists who work in glass. Although she admits that she was somewhat influenced by certain artists whose work appeared in Otto Rigan's *New Glass*, the ones who influenced her most were the pop artists and realists. "I was aiming to be an artist from the outset. Paul Marioni was an influence because in his early days his work was very graphic. I like work that is realistic. I'm especially fond of many of the pop people like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, the realists like Edward Hopper, and the Impressionists."



Photo by Bernice Lyon

Lucy Lyon

Perhaps more important than influences from other artists is the subject matter that Lucy chooses to work with. She is fascinated with things happening around her that most people would consider rather ordinary, but in which she can evoke the extraordinary. This approach is not easy for her to maintain: "I don't want to divorce myself from my subject matter. I'm not willing to compromise; otherwise I would probably go after more commission work. I am really torn between selling and doing what I want to do. Even though I still have a large collection of my own work, I think things are starting to happen. I've sold a few early pieces, and that was really the beginning of all of this. I've done some commissions, but they usually don't have anything to do with ideas: they are basically decorative. I like to do things that involve ideas and evoke emotion, as in the diners with their nostalgia theme, or *Bus Stop*, which has a feeling of alienation. I want people to get a feeling from my work, and to me that is what art is about. It's not about technique, but about feeling."