A High-Minded Exhibit & A New Benchmark of Weed Acceptance

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"Step into my office," my brother tells me.

I'm not picking up what he's putting down. "What?"

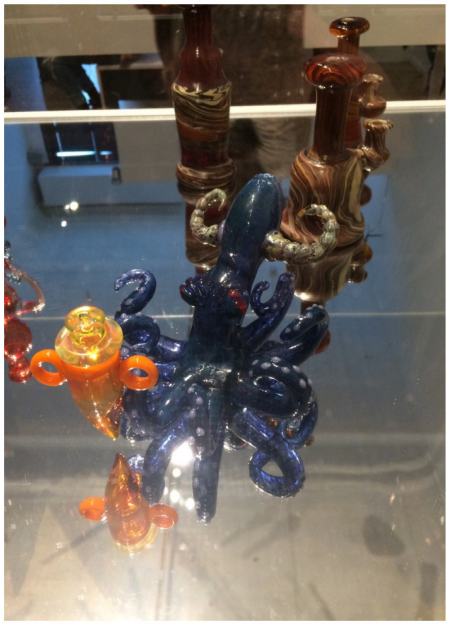
"My office." Dan raises his eyebrows and gestures with his head towards the door. I follow him.

We're now standing on the sidewalk outside of apexart, a gallery in TriBeCa. It's a mild Wednesday evening at the end of March. Dan closes his eyes as he takes an extended drag from his vape. He looks very dignified, as he should. This is a big moment for him. He hands the vape to me.

"Yeah, that David Bienenstock guy is a cool dude. Says he's based in LA," Dan says. He coughs. I take a drag from the vape. My mom is inside: It kind of feels like high school again. She and I took the train up from Maryland for the day. It's not every day that your son or brother is featured in an exhibit in New York City. Or ever, really. Especially not one like this.

A Who's Who (and What's What) of Functional Glass Art

It's the opening of "Outlaw Glass" at apexart. The exhibit highlights an astounding array of "functional glass art," though the function for every piece is the same: to smoke weed from. Some of the work on display is truly astonishing. Elaborate, imaginative—collaborative in some cases. There's a dragon, a meditative yogi on an intricate throne, an abstract collage of 'whooshes', a jar of pickles. Even the most straightforward pipes—your basic Sherlocks—become more impressive the more you absorb the details, the patterns of colors.



This is artistry of the highest order.

The pipes are from the best and most influential glass pipe artists across the country, including Jeff Newman, Banjo, and Bob Snodgrass, the "Godfather of Glass." Snodgrass has been doing it since the early '70s, when he sold his work while following the Grateful Dead. And while glass and pipes are, separately, about as old as human civilization, glass pipes are a relatively new phenomenon. Basically, before Snodgrass, they were nonexistent.

Dan and I are back inside now. It's small and packed, a more eclectic group than I… actually, I had no idea what to expect. Hippies, artsy folks. New York types. One girl, Victoria, from Brooklyn, is a self-described "curiosity enthusiast." There are art collectors and there are pipe collectors—the boundary of which this exhibit aims to put up in smoke.

And then there are the artists, whose work is on display. The artists happen to be the most unassuming of the bunch.

My mom is talking to apexart's director, Steven Rand.

"I just knew he was going to win," my mom says with glowing confidence. She's referring to the "Chopped"-like competition that was held at Brooklyn Glass two weeks earlier and was sponsored and organized by apexart. Fifteen artists were given a "mystery box" containing several clear and variously colored glass rods and a three-hour time limit. My brother Dan (Getz) was declared the winner for a piece he calls "Germinating Seed." That and two other works of his—an octopus and a variation of the winning piece he calls "Heart Seed"—are featured in the exhibit.

"Ah, yes. Well I think that's the maternal instinct. Natural, really," Steven gracefully counters, sitting Buddha-like atop a table in the entranceway. Steven founded apexart more than 20 years ago. An accomplished artist in his own right, Steven explained the concept of apexart when I met him at the Brooklyn Glass competition.

apexart has an open call for exhibit proposals from would-be curators. The proposals are read and voted on by apexart jurors, who live all around the world, and the most popular proposals are selected.

"A meritocratic approach," Steven says. He speaks deliberately and methodically, in flowing paragraphs.

Nine exhibits make it to the apexart gallery per year, and five more exhibits are held in non-traditional art spaces across the world.

For this exhibit, Steven tells me, apexart reached out to the curator first.

Legalization a Two-Way Street

I introduce myself to David Bienenstock. I comment that some of the pieces on display seem too beautiful to be pipes. "It's as if you'd be defiling art if you smoke out of them," I muse. The same comment had been received favorably a few moments earlier when I said it to Morgan, Dan's fiancée. But David doesn't like it. I'm missing the point entirely.

"No, well, I don't know… All of these pieces are *meant* to be smoked from. It's functional art. That's really what this is all about."

David's right. He's the organizer of the exhibit after all.

A veritable expert of weed culture, politics, and economy, David Bienenstock has been on the weed beat for more than 15 years. His impressive body of work includes a book, *How to Smoke Pot (Properly): A Highbrow Guide to Getting High*, (Penguin / Random House 2016) celebrating an anniversary on April 20th.

Trained as a journalist, David joined High Times magazine over a decade ago and eventually became the magazine's head of content. He moved on to write and produce weed-related articles and video segments for Vice (you may be familiar with Bong Appetite and the Weed Eater). One especially memorable piece documents his marijuana-infused meal at Owl Farm—the Aspen, Colorado, home of the late Hunter S. Thompson—with a gathering of marijuana luminaries, including Keith Stroup, the founder of NORML.

David tells me about his career and his goals with the "Outlaw Glass" exhibit. While many assume that the mainstream will dictate how weed culture changes in the face of legalization, David believes this is incorrect. "This undermines a vibrant culture that's well-established," he tells me.

The mainstream, David says, will have to accommodate the counterculture.

"And glass pipe making is an important aspect of it."

But glass pipe making is not just an important facet of marijuana culture. Many believe it's also become the vanguard of all glass art, both in terms of technique and sheer inventiveness. The fine art establishment has been slow to recognize its validity and, in many ways, still doesn't. That's why this exhibit at apexart feels particularly significant.

Right now is a funny time for weed. More people are accepting of the plant than ever. Recreational or medical marijuana is legal is twenty-six states and D.C. And yet, with Jeff Sessions at the helm of the Department of Justice, the Trump administration has signaled its intention to step up drug enforcement (in spite of the fact that there are still more than 90 vacant U.S. attorney posts).

David is not willing to speculate what impact the new administration may have on the culture and legality of weed. But for him, the importance of "Outlaw Glass" goes beyond celebrating an art form that, in his words, has long resided in a "legal grey area." It's about shedding light on an unconscionable injustice: that people's lives have been ruined due to persecution over a plant whose beneficial properties are undeniable.

Turning a New Leaf

My mom is tickled by all of this. I took a picture of her smiling, holding up a flyer for "How to Smoke, Properly," a follow-up event later in the week. The picture was a big hit on the family group text. What a difference eleven years make.

Eleven years ago, Dan and I were in high school. My stepdad was home cleaning the house on his day off for Yom Kippur. A bunch of our homemade bongs turned up in the basement in a traumatic incident I will forever remember as the Yom Kippur Purge. It was a rough day for all of us.

"I feel like I've been punched in the chest," I remember my mom saying. Her father—my grandfather—was in the FBI, and was a good man. Theirs was a more conservative upbringing than most, and weed was strictly forbidden. The same rules were passed down to our household… but not enforced quite as effectively.

Now, here she is at "Outlaw Glass." She is, first and foremost, here to celebrate Dan's success. This is easily the most significant moment in his artistic career so far. My mom is beaming with pride and taking it all in.

"I think those two were smoking outside," she tells me whispering with a half-smile and an air of mischief, referring to a couple of guys, red-eyed with dreadlocks standing a few feet away from us. Eleven years ago, her being here would have been a far-fetched fiction. But today, she is embracing this celebration of counterculture, this union of marijuana and art.

Perhaps it's a sign of the times.

"Outlaw Glass" is running through May 27 at apexart, located at 291 Church Street in TriBeCa, New York, NY 10013. The exhibit is open Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

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