

Touring for Beauty and Creativity

By Gloria Hildebrandt Photos by Mike Davis

Artist studio tours are not just about the art, as wonderful as that can be. Tours are also opportunities to see the artists' homes and gardens, which can be fascinating because creative people tend to be original and interested in beauty and form in everything.

Johnson's reflection is visible in the mirror behind his five-foot-tall sculpture "Enigma, Mistress of Disguise."



David Bruce Johnson's Creemore garden is both art itself and a display place for his art.

"Adam and Eve" in the garden of David Bruce Johnson.



You can see the work of, and meet artists of all kinds: painters, potters, sculptors, woodworkers, photographers, jewellers and more. Early autumn is a popular time for self-guided studio tours in the communities along the Niagara Escarpment.

Purple Hills Studio Tour takes place in and around Creemore among the hills near the Escarpment between Orangeville and Collingwood. Here, the northern side of the Niagara Escarpment often looks purple, hence the term “purple hills.” The tour has been held since 1988, and this year on Sept. 24 and 25, will feature 34 resident and guest artists displaying their work in 21 studios. Here is a look inside just two of them: Eleanor Brownridge’s TurtleCreek Art Glass and the studio of David Bruce Johnson.



The original old farmhouse has been repaired and transformed by Brownridge into a charming showroom and gallery.

TurtleCreek Art Glass

Eleanor Brownridge first tried working with stained glass about 16 years ago.

“I then wanted to do other, bigger things,” she says. When she and her husband moved to the Pretty River Valley south of Collingwood, she thought about art glass as her next career.

They bought a 15-acre former apple orchard with an old farmhouse structure and a newer residence. The farmhouse was fixed up to become a gallery for some finished pieces, but Brownridge designed and had built, a state-of-the-art studio complete with four kilns.

She creates window installations, glass serving dishes, wall

sculptures, sconces, sinks and countertops, working by commission on pieces for specific locations and uses. She works with stained glass, which uses lead cane or solder to hold together pieces of glass. She also creates fusion glass. This involves pieces of glass layered onto clear glass, then fused together in a kiln without lead or



Eleanor Brownridge’s TurtleCreek Art Glass studio is large enough for her to work on several projects, house four kilns, display finished pieces and hold classes.



Carved from a single piece of butternut, the three-foot-tall "Another Funeral" shows the emotion of an old man. Johnson likes to have the grain of the wood contribute to his work.

Johnson's "Mobius' Ghost" rewards close study: hidden within a loop is the impression of a face.

solder. A third technique is "molten movement."

"Molten movement is a form of fusion glass," Brownridge explains, "but you use higher temperatures to take the glass to the molten phase and then manipulate it while molten. I coined the phrase 'molten movement' but the techniques are used by others. The way I use the techniques artistically is a little different from others." She creates new colours and patterns with molten glass, finally shaping it into her signature pieces.

Her works may need several firings in a kiln, with each firing taking 12 hours or more to heat up and cool down gradually. Sinks and countertops can be in the kiln for five days!

"I've been known to come and check a kiln at 2:00 a.m.," she confides.

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The state-of-the-art kiln room lets Brownridge create glass pieces of all colours and sizes.



Large pieces like this coffee table created by Brownridge are displayed inside the old farmhouse.



Brownridge uses the old farmhouse as a gallery for her work.



A few of Brownridge's original, unique art glass dishes.

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Unlike pottery, which can be fired in several layers at once, glass needs to be fired in a kiln with a heating element in the roof.

“You can only do one layer at a time,” Brownridge says, “and having just one kiln would limit my output. For different effects I want different fusing schedules. It would be inefficient to fuse just one small piece in the large kiln, so I use the appropriate size kiln for a specific job.”

Recently, she has been working on large sculptural hangings and scenes with great depth of field mounted on logs, which are very popular pieces, as well as a multi-piece wall sculpture for a new client.

“I really enjoy working with clients and coming up with something unique specifically for them,” she says. “I tell my clients this piece of art will be a collaborative project, your thoughts, favourite subject matter and colours, with my design and execution.”

See more about Brownridge's work at www.turtlecreekglass.ca.

David Bruce Johnson

To get to the studio of David Bruce Johnson, a sculptor in Creemore, you walk through part of his large garden. Rising from the mature plants are large, weathered wood sculptures. One of them was carved on the spot from the stump of a tree that died. Another one, entitled “Adam and Eve,” was placed in the garden.

“I noticed large Manitoba maple logs in a lot that was intended for a new home construction,” Johnson says. “I asked for the wood, received it, and let the wood dictate what it would be. The anatomical elements of a male and female figure seemed

“Victory?” questions the price paid for a boxer's glory. Johnson carved a powerful physique from a large black walnut log.

obvious to me. So I helped reveal them for everyone to see.”

This is how Johnson works in general.

“I love the creative process,” he says. “With most of my wood



pieces, I start with an idea. Sometimes I will make a sketch or if it's a complex piece, a small model. Then I basically free-carve mainly because I like to respond to whatever opportunities or challenges



the specific piece of wood offers.”

Johnson has been interested in art his whole life. He completed his first carving in 1987, and worked only with wood until 2003, when he tried a piece of Brazilian soapstone. He has continued with stone ever since.

“With my stone pieces, I usually envisage something in the convoluted piece of stone, letting the shape and colour of the stone dictate the result,” he explains.

In his studio at the back of his house, large pieces stand on pedestals on the floor. Smaller pieces fit onto shelves, tables and windowsills. Johnson lets visitors examine the pieces, even touch them. His sculptures beg to be felt. Many of his pieces seem to incorporate puzzles or surprises that reward close inspection.

One sculpture of a woman's head, called “Eve,” has braided hair at the back of her head turning into a rattlesnake. “Enigma” is a female figure with a white “mask” over her face while she holds a “realistic” face mask in one hand, yet with her other hand, holds behind her back, a frowning head with hair.

Or there's “Mobius' Ghost,” which Johnson describes this way: “A Mobius loop is a mathematical anomaly because it has only one side. In it, I carved a positive face covered with a sheet. On the opposite side, I carved a negative face which is the face pushing up the sheet. Since the Mobius loop has only one side, both faces are on the same side, which of course is physically impossible.”

When Johnson is not puzzling out sculptures, he can step outside.

“My garden is always a work in progress. It is a work of art in itself. More importantly, it is a living distraction from the routine inherent in the subtractive process of sculpting wood or stone.” **EV**

For more of Johnson's sculptures, see www.davidbrucejohnson.ca.