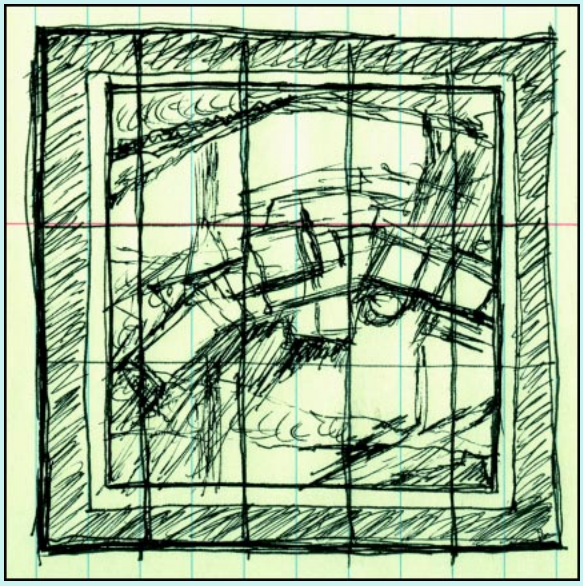
Design Methods and Kiln Techniques:
The Allison Inn and Spa Commission

By Gil Reynolds

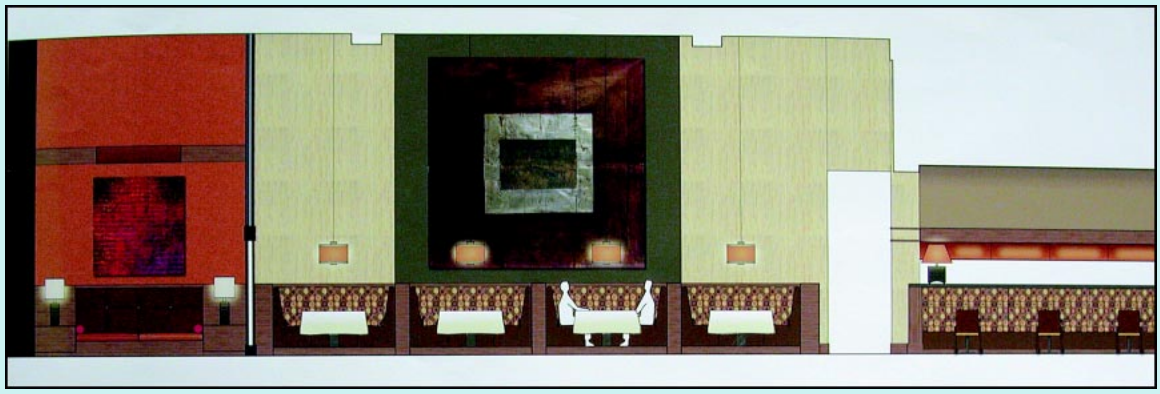
"Timeless Flight," (Detail), a fused glass, metal and wood wall sculpture at the Allison Resort and Spa, Gil Reynolds.

B. Architectural rendering of the Allison Inn and Spa looking down from above showing the three wings of the building complex.

"Over and over one must ask oneself the question, 'What do I want to express? What is my ideal, what is my objective? What? Why? Why? What?'" (Emily Carr, 1871—1945)



C. My initial sketch of the glass quilt for the Jory restaurant that pulled shapes from the architect's aerial view.



A. The interior designer's initial concept of the Jory Restaurant shows a large square piece of art on a green wall above the seating booths.

I love commission work and the challenge it presents. I like designing for a specific site. Some artists feel it limits their creativity, but for me it has just the opposite effect. I see it as collaboration and a chance to merge multiple visions into something that is greater than its individual parts. Commission work can also be like a giant puzzle with unforeseen twists and turns. As the projects become larger, the pressure and the stakes increase proportionally. Here is a travelogue, if you will, of my journey last year that shares among other things, some of my design methods and kiln techniques.

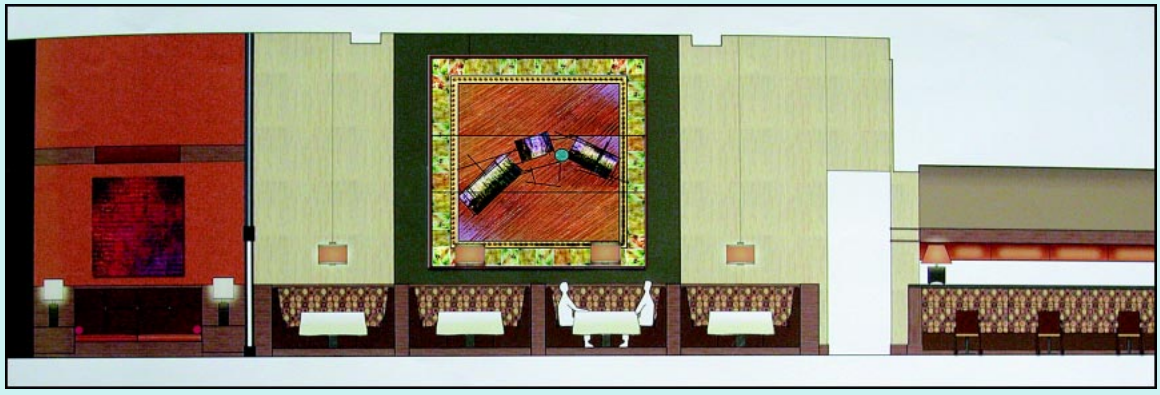
In March of 2009 my wife Carmen and I were invited to meet with the design committee for a new destination property that was being built a half mile from our studio. The area where we live has gained worldwide recognition for the quality wines it produces, and the Austin family was building a five-star resort to accommodate the influx of visitors coming to Yamhill County. It was an honor for us to even be considered for this project, and the prospect of having some of our art on site was very exciting indeed. We didn't realize it at the time, but that meeting was going to lay the groundwork for our activities for the next seven months.

We were told the Allison Inn was named after Lake Allison, a huge glacial backwater floodplain lake that flowed into our valley 15,000 to 18,000 years ago. During the end of the ice age, a giant body of water was formed in Montana. When the approximately 1-mile-long ice dam containing it melted, a huge flood speculated to be over 1000 feet above sea level in some areas, washed across Eastern Washington, down the Columbia River basin and caused a backup in our Willamette Valley that was 300 to 400 feet above sea level. Rich top soil picked up by the raging water was deposited here as the lake slowly drained, leaving our valley with some of the most fertile soil in the world.

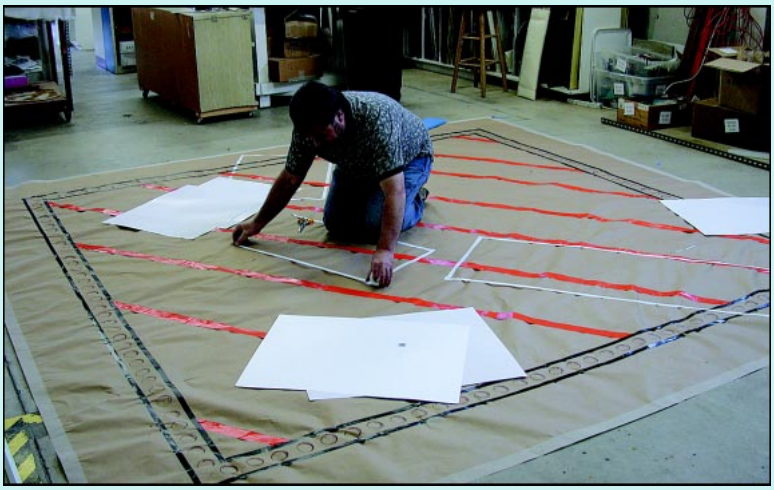
The Austin family's vision for The Allison was to reflect the significance of the valley's abundance and create a "feast for the senses." Every aspect of the inn from the polished wood and imported Montana mossy rock exterior to its dark walnut interior to its original art from local artists in every room, needed to pay tribute to the significance of the Willamette valley's agriculture, yet adhere to the Austin family's desire for an honest use of materials while maintaining the lowest possible impact on the land. "Oh great," I thought. "To get this commission I need to make a bunch of glass grape leaves." But that was not the case at all. They were very open to abstract art if it was in keeping with the spirit of the setting.

When approaching the design phase of a commission I need to know several things: the location, size and structural integrity of the space; how will the artwork be illuminated; what color palette and visual themes have been established; what does the client want the work to say and what are the timeline and budget limitations. All of these variables go into the mix and need to be addressed equally.

We were shown drawings provided by the Seattle-based architectural firm GGLO and told that the committee would like me to create some glass for the large wall in the Jory Restaurant (named after the jory soil that is predominant in our area), a 20' x 20' space with a green wall covering (Picture A). The drawing had a square image placed on the wall to show where the art would go. Although the image was not something I would actually use, the idea of a square format appealed to both the committee and my-

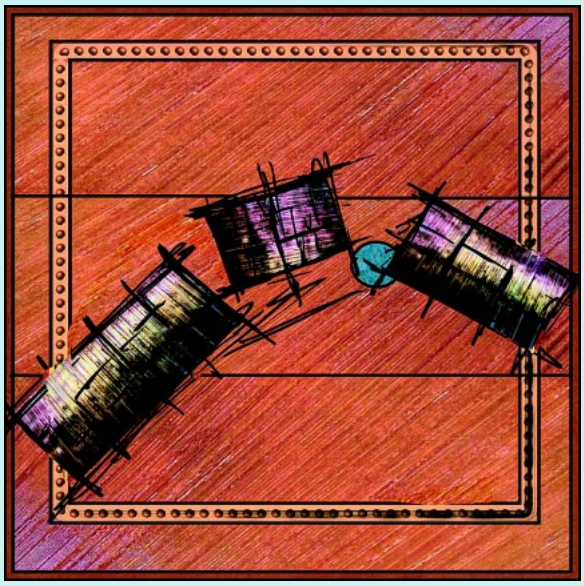


D. I photographed my first group of fused glass samples then used Photoshop to assemble the photos into a finished design.



E. This 12' x 12' mock-up made out of Kraft paper, cardboard and duct tape gave me a chance to see the piece at full scale.

F. My wife Carmen, Joan Austin and Loni Parrish helped me hang the mock-up in place one evening after the work crews had gone home. The seam in the sheet rock running horizontally behind my design is the expansion joint that turned out to have a significant impact on the final design.



G. I used a Sharpie to draw the loose line on this print-out of a design revision and found that I liked the loose line quality better than the straight lines I made on the computer.

self, and we thought something in the 14' x 14' range might work nicely. At this stage I really didn't even have a clue as to what I would build, but I told them the wall needed to be able to hold 16 pounds per square foot. I thought a strong wall would give me the freedom to include thick glass or heavy metal components if needed. Construction was already underway, and I felt I needed to get that element in place before it was too late.

Lighting would be both daylight from large windows in the restaurant and artificial lighting from above and across from the wall, so my work needed to be a re-flected light piece, because there wouldn't be any transmitted light like you would have with a stained glass window. The color palette being used by GGLO's Carol Schaefer represented "Oregon's Wine Country:" umbria, green apple, mint, mocha, gold, toast, cayenne, heat, bloody mary, chestnut, amber, platinum and chai – so that the indoors and outdoors would reflect a harmonious vision. The Allison was scheduled to open in late August, and they wanted the art installed before the opening. The budget was up in the air at this point, so I needed to include that as part of my proposal.

The bird's eye view of the complex provided me with some exciting visual images to play with (Picture B). The building has a footprint of 154,000 square feet composed of three wings. There is a prominent four-story circular clear glass stairwell that's represented as a circle in the aerial view. The surrounding vineyards are diagonal rows of parallel lines.

I was pretty excited when I left the meeting and at the first chance I had I sat down and drew out (Picture C) my initial design. I came up with the idea of a large glass "quilt" with textured borders framing a central motif composed of the shapes gleaned from the aerial view of the property.

I spent several days fusing samples that could possibly be used in the design. I picked System 96 glass to work with, because the color pallet seemed to fit nicely with parameters of the project. I photographed details of my samples and loaded them into Photoshop and started designing. My first concept (Picture D) had an outer border of greens and ambers, kind of like random leaves that have fallen to the ground, a dimensional inner border, a ribbed periwinkle orange back-

ground representing the rows of crops in a field, three curved and rippled rectangles referencing the wings of the building when seen from above and a blue circle for the spiral staircase.

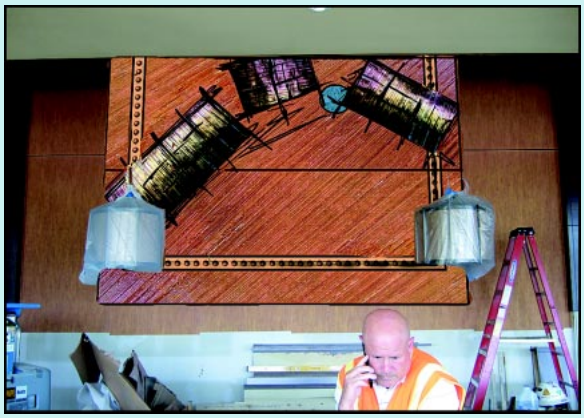
I presented the glass samples and the drawings to the committee, and they liked the concept but had concerns about the borders and the scale, and how it would work with the space. It was time for me to sell my vision. I went home and changed the border, reduced the size to 12’ x 12’ then made a full-scale test design (Picture E). My wife Carmen, owner Joan Austin and her daughter Loni Austin Parrish met me at the job site after hours. I hung the drawing on the freshly sheet-rocked wall. “Now I get it,” said Joan Austin. “That will be quite lovely.” (Picture F).

I’m thinking, “This is great. I’ve got the job, but how in the heck am I actually going to build this thing?” Now was the time to really get down to the nitty-gritty and think about the engineering. What size pieces of glass would I use? How would they be attached to the wall and how much is it going to cost in time and materials? I sat down with a stack of print-outs of the design and with a Sharpie pen I started modifying and transforming my initial idea into something I could actually build. I went out to the studio and started making a new set of glass samples, then back to Photoshop to record my changes.

During this phase a couple of important things occurred to me. I realized that I really liked the loose line quality of my Sharpie drawings (Picture G) much better than the mechanical straight lines I made on the computer. I made a mental note to try and figure out a way to work that organic line quality into the finished piece.

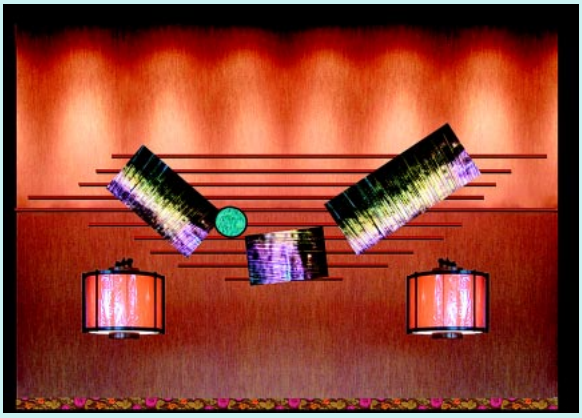
I also noticed that I had come up with a nifty system for designing. Sketch, fuse, photograph and Photoshop – repeat as needed. The sketch phases gave me the freedom and spontaneity to explore a lot of visual ideas quickly, and it gave me a loose, big-picture view of the project. By fusing then photographing the samples I had realistic images to work with, and Photoshop gave me the way to easily move, arrange and resize my real images to create a very close approximation of what the finished piece would actually look like.

By now a couple of months have gone

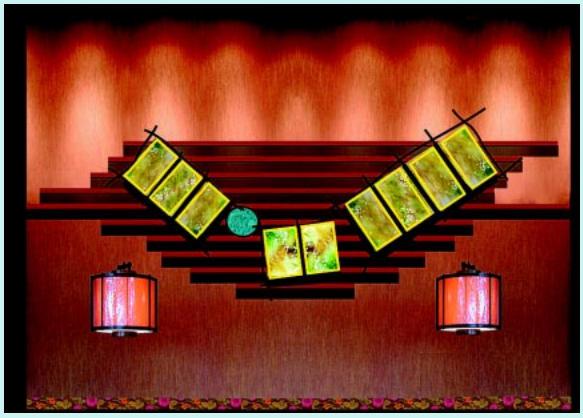


H. When I used Photoshop to place my design onto an updated photo of the site, I could see there were many problems, not the least of which was that the new drop-down ceiling blocked the top third of my image from most of the restaurant.

I. The 12' x 12' wall I built in my studio gave me a chance to see how the new lighting and the shadows it cast would work as design elements in the finished piece.



J. In this revision I inverted the V of the wing shapes to work with the large hanging lamp shades and replaced the square background with a pattern of horizontal lines.



J2. This revision is getting pretty close to my final design. I have included the shadows cast by the horizontal T-bars, replaced the ribbed iridized glass with panels in tans and amber, and refined the loose line border that will be made out of cherry branches.

by, and I have built a 12' x 12' plywood wall in my studio so that I can actually assemble the pieces in place. I have consulted with Michael DuPille and have modified the mounting system he and Richard LaLonde have used where the glass is attached to aluminum panels that mount to brackets that are bolted to the wall. I went back to the job site to confirm the specifications before I ordered all of my metal and glass, and I had an "Oh, No" moment.

The site now has a pumpkin–tan wall covering instead of the original green. My lighting is now only directly above the piece casting a strong light and dark pattern on the top half of the wall. There is no direct front lighting. A false ceiling actually blocks the view of the top third of the wall from part of the dining area. The large hanging lamps and their cords are a much more significant design element than I had originally considered. I learn there is a horizontal expansion joint running through the middle of the wall, so the top half of the wall can move up and down as much as ½" to accommodate snow loads and other variables. This means that I can't have any elements attached to both the top half and the bottom half of the wall unless they can move up and down when the wall moves. Oh, and they would like me, if possible, to hide the 20' wide x ½" tall expansion joint. Oh boy.

I have learned that there are almost always unforeseen variables with any commission, but I didn't see this coming. I saw the metal flashing for the expansion joint when I hung my paper drawing on the sheet rock, but it didn't register as anything I should be concerned about, and I didn't ask what it was. Wow. I was in shock, yet thankful that I found out about the changes before I had built my sculpture.

I photographed the site (Photo H) and realized that my design would not work. The color was wrong, the image was too tall, I had designed for a different lighting situation and the expansion joint issue would be very difficult to factor into this design.

It was time to redesign my piece and embrace the opportunity I had been given to make my design better. I took the elements I liked and got rid of the weaker elements. I changed the overall format to a short wide rectangular image, so it wouldn't look like the top was cut off if you were sitting in the main dining area.

I painted the wall in my studio to approximate the color they were using and mounted lights above it to simulate the light patterns. I mounted a test piece and realized that because of the angle of the

lights, anything I stuck on the wall was going to cast a shadow, and those shadows were now an important design consideration (Photo I).

By using horizontal rows of metal T-bar attached to angle iron, I could hide the expansion joint and have a structural framework for attaching my panels. By spacing the rows of metal close enough to keep the shadows they cast continuous, and altering the length of each row, I was able to get the metal to work as one large visual shape as opposed to just a bunch of random rows.

I liked the original idea of the three wings of the building, but I needed to invert the V to work with the large hanging lamp shades (Photo J).

The iridescent glass did not work at all with the new wall color and ribbing looked too mechanical against my rows of metal.

Dividing the wings into smaller panels made more sense now that the V was bigger, but I needed to make those panels more significant. I started thinking about the glaciers and the layers of top soil and outcroppings and the movement of the earth over time and how could I represent that feeling in pieces of glass. I remembered that years ago I had been on the beach at Drift Creek and had seen a ripple pattern that the water carved in the sand. I liked that pattern so much that I rushed into town, bought some plaster and strips of plastic to make a dam and went back and made a casting of those ripples. I dug out that old casting, made a mold and fused some glass into it. Wow, it was beautiful. The texture was rich and had a natural organic quality I would be hard-pressed to recreate. Anything I carved would look manmade and orderly.

It just so happened that we were having a family reunion at the beach. I packed all my supplies, and early one morning we loaded up parents, kids, grand kids and anyone that wanted to help. We drove to a spot where the river had made ripple patterns in the sand and made some big 4' x 3' plaster castings to use for this project.

I cut each of those castings into clean-edged rectangles, made a rubber mold from the plaster, then a Cast-O-Lot high temperature mold from the rubber. Stacking three to four layers of sheet glass and frit on top of the mold and using a low temperature (1415 degrees for 30 minutes) firing, I was able to fuse and slump my panels in one firing (Photo K).

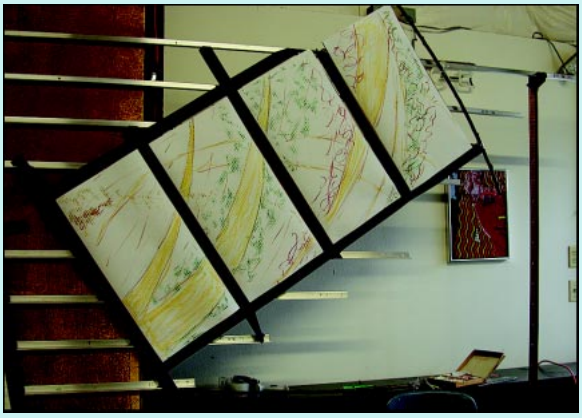
The design was really coming into focus now, and I felt that my wing shapes needed to work as segments of one big picture as opposed to three separate forms. Back to the Sharpie and some print-outs. I came up with a flowing image that worked its way through all of the panels and sketched that design onto the full-scale mock-up. These sketches became the cartoons that I used to cut my glass (Photo L, M, N).

I still needed a way to make those loose Sharpie lines that I like so much. One day the idea popped into my head to use branches to get those organic lines. They would also be the perfect tie-in to the theme of the property. My friend Bruce Chapen has a cherry orchard south of town, and he was pruning, so I loaded up my trailer with about 100 of his trimmed branches and drove it down to a lumber company in southern Oregon to have them kiln dried. Two weeks later the branches were done, and I brought them home and started cutting and fitting them into place.

Now everything was done, and the whole sculpture was assembled on my

K. This is the back side. Each glass panel was fused and slumped face down in a single firing.

L. My new design was now 20' wide, so it actually ran off of the edge of my wall.



M. On a computer print-out, I sketched a cohesive design that flowed throughout all of the panels. I enlarged that design onto pieces of paper that became the cartoon I used to cut and build each panel.

wall. All I had to do now was take it apart, drive it down to the Allison and put it back together exactly as it had been. Using a series of templates and registration points we were able to complete the install in less than 4 hours (Picture O).

I titled the piece "Timeless Flight," and I'm really happy with how it evolved into something that I feel really works with the space and captures many aspects of what the Allison represents. I am fortunate that I was able to see the errors of my original concept before it was too late, and I'm glad I was given the freedom to continually refine my vision. The whole experience taught me a lot of things, not the least of which was the importance of not being locked into a single vision. In the end, the process of continually revising my core idea produced a better piece of art.

There are over 500 pieces of original art made by over 100 artists in the Allison. It is indeed an honor to be part of the Austin family's significant addition to our community. My wife, Carmen? She ended up having over 80 pieces of glass in the Allison, but that is a whole other story.

N. Here is a finished panel next to its cartoon.

O. Fernando Remirez and Justin Smith helped me install the piece. We used a series of templates and registration marks to assure that all of the parts lined up perfectly.