

Ashes to art: Kalispell duo turns remains into glass works

By MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian



Krista Johnson mixes ashes and glass to create beads in Kalispell recently. Johnson and her mother, Linda Markellis, are the artists and owners behind Over the Rainbow Memorials. MICHAEL JAMISON/Missoulian

"Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened."

- Dr. Seuss

KALISPELL - It's the day before Halloween, and Linda Markellis smiles sweetly as she holds out a shiny red bowl of what appear to be brightly colored candies.

But they're not.

They're human and animal remains, bits of bodies stashed in glass, sparkling cheerfully there in the October sun. They are what's come to be known as ashes to art.

"Western culture has a fear of death," Markellis explains. "We push it away, don't think about it. Then, when it happens, we're not prepared. We don't have any coping mechanisms."

In the bowl, she says, are her colorful crutches for coping.

Markellis and her daughter, Krista Johnson, are the artists and owners behind Over the Rainbow Memorials, a very, very small part of America's \$11 billion death-care industry.

And whatever you expect of that industry, these two are not, to be sure, what you'd expect.

"It pretty much got started with Ziggy," Markellis said.

Ziggy the dog was a longtime companion of a longtime friend, and was to be the "flower girl" at the friend's wedding. But Ziggy didn't make the wedding. Ziggy died last year before walking the aisle.

It was sad, surely, but there wasn't much Markellis could do but offer her sympathies. Or was there?

The mother-daughter team had for years been making stunning glass jewelry, selling it in galleries across the nation.

Was it possible, the friend asked, to blend some of Ziggy into the glass, to make a bracelet to be worn at the wedding? She brought a tiny box of ashes, Ziggy's cremains, and Markellis and Johnson went to work.

"The process took months to perfect," Markellis said. "There were so many hours of trial and error."

Trouble was, ash and glass don't mix that well. They cool at different rates, and so the pieces tended to crack. And the blend created a chemical reaction, breathing off carbon dioxide that blew bubbles into the pieces.

"We had many, many failures," Johnson said.

They started with firepit ash, "because we only had a little bit of Ziggy, and we didn't want to waste it," Markellis said.

Eventually, though, they turned to the real thing. "My dog Maggie, who I'm wearing" - Markellis touches the heart-shaped pendant at her throat - "we had her ashes, so we had Maggie assist us."

Ashes, in fact, were not hard to come by for Markellis, the wife of a Kalispell veterinarian.

"I used to work with him," she said. "You never, ever, ever get used to the end of life, the euthanasia."

Many of his clients were friends. She had known their pets from the start, as puppies, as kittens, right through to the fiery end.

"I would try to counsel people," she said. "But I felt at a loss. I wanted to provide some comfort, but ..."

Markellis fingers that pendant.

"This glass work is the most rewarding thing that I've ever done. It brings smiles through the tears."

There is, in fact, an entire industry booming on that simple comfort. The famous Latin "memento mori" can be translated as "remember your death," a reminder of our inevitable mortality.

Markellis keeps that old adage close at hand, as well as another - "the only fair thing about life is death, because everyone gets one."

That's part of what this is all about. But the other part is a reminder to celebrate life - or, as Dr. Seuss said, "Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened."

"I like that quote," Markellis said.

So must have British artist Nadine Jarvis, who has designed pencils from cremains (250 pencils to a body), complete with a fancy little box to catch the shavings as you sharpen death. Jarvis also is credited with artistic bird feeders in which ashes are mixed with suet and seed, allowing birds to scatter loved ones randomly throughout the forest.

Last year, Philadelphia played host to the Ashes to Art exhibition at the famed ICE BOX gallery, where wildly artistic urns stole the show. And the Art Honors Life gallery, just opened north of San Francisco, is all funeria all the time.

Ashes in a prayer wheel, spinning in the sun. Ashes pressed into sparkling diamonds. Ashes as art.

The popularity of cremation makes all this possible, and America's exultation of the individual makes it good business. A decade ago, 20 percent of Americans were cremated. Now, some 32 percent of us choose the heat. And if the Cremation Association of North America is any good at predicting such things, more than half will be choosing cremation by 2025.

That's a lot of ashes, especially with 76 million baby boomers ready to take the giant step.

Funerary art - as ancient as our species - has always served to remove the abstraction, if not the mystery, to put death in your hand where you can touch it. Monks fingering the knucklebones of supposed saints. Egyptians putting up pyramids, mummies wrapped in chilling decoration.



Traditional tombstone art, like these new glass baubles, is essentially a self-portrait, a declaration of "me-ness," not unlike writing your own wedding vows.

"We learn about them," Johnson said of the pets and people contained in her glasswork. "Where they came from, what they liked, who they were. It's a cooperative process. The final piece honors an individual; the uniqueness of that loved one is what should come through."

This piece looks like a polished river rock. "An outdoors guy."

This one a glittery heart, flashy. "A star," she explains. "An attention-getter. Very outgoing. Flamboyant."

Forget the somber old urn on the mantle.

"I'm wearing my dog, Deacon," Johnson says, showing off the ivory veins that trace through a turquoise heart hung high at her throat.

You can almost hear the conversations.

"What a lovely pendant!"

"Thank you. It's my grandmother."

"But it looks so modern, not like an antique at all!"

"No. It's not my grandmother's. It's my grandmother."

This sort of memorial, Markellis admits, is not for everyone. Some can do it, and some just can't. And some can, but wonder why you would.

Fact is, though, the pieces are beautiful here in the soft slant of fall light, colorful and smooth and wonderfully ... alive. It's impossible not to be drawn to the glass gems, to need to touch them.

They are just lovely enough not to be macabre, just strange enough to be interesting and just unique enough to be, in the end, important.

Important, at least, to the grief counselors who have become the business's greatest advertisers.

"They tell us it's a big part of the healing process," Johnson said. "When people lose somebody special, they have to go through a grieving process. Having a touchstone, something beautiful they can actually hold on to, it's a great comfort. Personally, it's making me more comfortable about that next part."

Sometimes, they show up long before the loved one is dead, carting along fresh-cut hair to be singed to ash and then encapsulated in glass. Kids going to college, that sort of thing.

Other times, "people have been stuck in one phase of grief for a long time. Some of these people have had the ashes in the closet for five or 10 years."

Some sift the ashes themselves, measure out the quarter-teaspoon or so needed to make each piece. Some bring the whole box, all of grandpa, or what's left, and let the ladies do the sifting.

It's a tiny bit unsettling, somehow, watching this all-American mom and her oh-so cheerful daughter carting around boxes of cremains, smiles on their faces, happy to be making memories, dear old dogs hung around their necks.

The purple bit and the trace of brown, there in the swirls of blue, those are Maggie. But at the same time, they're not. They're the memory of Maggie - the good times, not the strangeness of death.

Pick your colors, blend the ash, purify it all in fire, then wait for the surprise at the other end of the kiln.

It's like life, or death for that matter: You cannot know what it will look like until it's done.

Some pieces crack, and some fortunately don't. Some are beautiful, some not so much. They'll fire 10 glass beads to

get three or four "with good color and ash presentation," Johnson said. The ones that don't make the cut explain that shining Halloween bowl of candies that aren't.

About two-thirds of the beads contain pets, one third the remains of people. A very few are a combination, the pet and the owner sealed together under glass.

Johnson fires up her torch, dons protective sunglasses, spins the ash into the glass, lays the mix atop layers of color, blends, folds, creates beads and pendants and prismatic pyramids that fracture the morning light into a rainbow of color.

And over the rainbow, a memory, just as their business name promises.

"We definitely didn't mean to get into this type of business," Johnson said.

"But it's so rewarding," Markellis adds, "to be helping people this way. I believe we learn through love just how big our hearts are. And memories are here, in our hearts."

And there, on the necklace, too.