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Charlotte's Abraham Luski remembers Newtown

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Contemporary arts patronage is seldom spoken of, let alone reported on or written about. Patronage is often referred to in the collective - as in an entire subscriber base to a season of opera, or an evening's attendance at the theater.

One-on-one relationships between patrons and artists, while rare today, do still exist and as a result, exciting work is being made that might otherwise never have been created.

Arts patron and Charlotte businessman Abraham Luski enjoys direct relationships with numerous artists that are born out of his love for their work. This has led him to explore the creative minds and inspiration found within the artists themselves.

Over the years, Luski has befriended many North Carolina-based glass artists. He's been fascinated by the work being done in the Piedmont region, particularly Penland, an isolated mountain town known for craft making and home to the National Center for Craft Education.

Luski collects the work of such internationally known glass artists as Rob Levin, Jon Kuhn, Paul Stankard, Richard Ritter, and Ken Carder. He credits his younger brother, Isaac, as the most knowledgeable collector in the family and the one who piqued his interest in art glass.

The Luski name is well known within Charlotte philanthropic circles and particularly at the Foundation for the Carolinas. In its Uptown headquarters, an entire collection of significant art pieces are on display in The Sonia and Isaac Luski Gallery. The works in this collection were assembled over a lifetime. Jon Kuhn, Jose Chardiet, Chuck Close, Lino Tagliapietra, and Mark Peiser are among the many artists featured in this stunning gallery that is open to the public.

Collaborating in memoriam

Collectors such as the Luskis and Andreas Bechtler have demonstrated in large ways to the Charlotte community how sharing their artwork with the public can garner wide-spread attention and interest for

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artists whose work may not be widely known.

And in some instances, the collectors can actually influence and collaborate with an artist in their creative process to develop a special work that holds a unique place in the heart and mind of the collector.

Subsequent to the tragic shootings last year in Newtown, Connecticut, Luski turned to glass artist Ken Carder, whose work he has admired and collected for years, to execute an idea that had kicked about in his mind for weeks after the event.

“That children were involved to such an extent made this tragedy that much more horrific to me,” said Luski, who took some initial sketches and ideas about a memorial glass sculpture to Carder. Those sketches included ideas about where he wanted Carder to go with the piece, and included a butterfly - representative of the children.

“I didn’t have a place in my mind where I saw it residing; I just knew I wanted to have a special piece made in memorial for these children, their teachers, and the families. It just felt right.”

An Asheville-based artist, Carder is originally from Lima, Ohio. Introduced to Abe by his brother Isaac, Carder took the commission with both a sense of pride and obligation to bring honor and recognition to the brightness and unique character of the lives lost.

Formerly an artist-in-residence at the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina, Carder also worked as an assistant to both Harvey Littleton and William Bernstein. He was awarded the Southern Arts Federation Fellowship Grant and in 1988 he opened his own studio. Carder’s work is in the collections of the Mint Museum, the Glass Museum Ebetoft (Denmark), and the Glas Museum Oberglas (Austria).

Luski thought glass, with its light, vibrancy, and movement, seemed a perfect medium for the memorial – and Carder brought his special talents to bear in the creation.

Evolution and intuition

“I work through evolution and intuition,” Carder said in his correspondence with Luski during his creation process. “I first draw to become familiar with a subject, to get comfortable with an idea. I spent a couple of evenings with the original drawing doing my own drawings to work out technical issues and to see what I can find out. I draw to look, I draw to feel an idea out. As an idea starts to take shape, forms to express the idea begin to appear and then I try to make these forms in the hot glass.”

Glass has optical properties like no other material and Carder continues to use its effects in new and different ways. Over the course of several months, Carder and Luski discussed ideas and Carder forwarded prototypes to Luski for evaluation. “I was thrilled with the very first design and Ken just kept on improving upon it,” said Luski.

The final piece, “Memorial to Newtown,” showcases the fragility of life in a silvery glass butterfly whose wings appear to flutter as the viewer circles the crackled glass apple where the butterfly floats in a seemingly constant state of exploration. The work rests upon a pedestal meant for display from all angles. The symbolism is inescapable and the simplicity of the imagery is belied by the complexity and sheer beauty of the work.

“It was very important to me to retain the original ideas that Abe brought to the project and distill that down to the essence of what the final work represents,” said Carder. “I have my own 13-year-old daughter

and I couldn't help but think of her as I worked on this piece."

In need of a home

The piece holds temporary residence in Luski's Cotswold home while he is in talks with a well-established faith-based foundation that is considering the piece as a gift from Luski. Wherever this butterfly lands, it will undoubtedly become a true centerpiece and cherished memorial.

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