



Episode Transcription: "A Two-Way Conversation with Leo Tecosky"

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

From Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington, this is *Frit City*. I'm Jabari Owens-Bailey. Greetings, everyone. Welcome to *Frit City: A Two-Way Conversation*. This is a podcast which is going to be focused on interviewing artists from *A Two-Way Mirror*. I am the curator and your host, Jabari Owens-Bailey, and today we are joined by Leo Tecosky. Leo's work in the show is called *Cee(see)Knowledge* from the *Tacoma ABCs*. Welcome, Leo.

Leo Tecosky:

Thanks, Jabari. Glad to be here.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

I'm glad you're glad to be here. We're glad to have you. I just wanted to first start off just casually talking about your background as a person, and where you grew up, and all that type of stuff.

Leo Tecosky:

Yeah, sure. Let's see, where did it all begin? I was born in New Mexico, in Albuquerque, and I grew up there. So, I was about ten years old and the product of biracial parents. Well, I'm biracial. My parents are white and Black, Jewish, hippies – they're all kinds of folks. So, I came up in the Southwest, growing up with those two kinds of influences behind me, but also the Chicano and Latinx communities of the Southwest, as well as the Indigenous and native populations. So, I really remember growing up visiting reservations, hearing different types of music from the area, and it's also where I got my first taste of hip hop. I was eight years old, and – I was at least eight years old, if not earlier – but that's sort of my earliest memory of hip hop music, records that my mother brought home and played for me and my younger brother. We left New Mexico in the early nineties and moved to Miami, Florida.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

That's a big difference.

Leo Tecosky:

It is a big difference, especially back then. Albuquerque is a large city and has been for a long time, but it's not the cosmopolitan center that Miami was and is. So, that was an interesting change. Some things were the same, but some things were different. A lot more Caribbean influence – Latino, Haitian, West Indian, but also, like New York, Puerto Rican. And my family being from the East Coast, Philadelphia and New York, it sort of felt closer to





home, and that was like where my formative years... I'd say that's where my formative years kind of happened. I graduated from high school there, so I came up there from like ten to 18 and that's where I started living hip hop, and, because I was older, able to sort of grasp the context of the music and the cultural significance of it. It's where I started writing graffiti and it's kind of the jumping off point for my creative life.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Okay, I can see that. Yeah.

Leo Tecosky:

From there, I graduated high school and left to go to college in western New York State, rural New York, to Alfred University, which is a glass and ceramic school for the SUNY state school.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

I was going to say I mostly know them for their ceramics, but I've been hearing recently that they also have a pretty good glass program as well.

Leo Tecosky:

Absolutely, yeah. I mean, when I got there, Alfred was celebrating 100 years of ceramics, and that was 20 years ago. And yeah, it's just a known spot for American Studio Pottery.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Right.

Leo Tecosky:

And sculpture. And I think after the American Studio Glass movement in the sixties, lot of ceramic programs added glass to their curriculum because a lot of the equipment was similar. I mean, Alfred wasn't the only one, but it's one of the ones that's got a pretty robust glass program and has for a long time.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Well, that was going to be my next question to you, which was, how did you come to glass? So, did you get to glass before Alfred or was that an outcome of going to Alfred?

Leo Tecosky:

No, it was the outcome of going to school there. Okay. As a youth, I would leave Miami in the summertime. I needed to get away. And so, I had an uncle who lived in Vermont who





was friends with the blacksmith, and I worked at a blacksmith shop in the summers from about 15 till I graduated high school. It was a way for me to just get out of my area, get out of my situation and do something with myself, do something with all that youthful energy in a productive way. And I learned that I was interested in working with, one, my hands, but also too, working with materials, I guess industrial materials, craft-based materials, these wood and metal things that are building materials, things that are used in our everyday utilitarian but also aesthetic lives. And so, in a short story, that's how I got to Alfred. And when I got to Alfred, I was working in the metal shop and working in the wood shop, and of course, I walked into a glass shop because there know things going on, and I was dating a girl in the glass department. She brought me in studio and showed me how to make a cup. I had no idea that that was how a drinking vessel was made. Right. I mean, sensibly, there's numerous ways industrially now with mechanization, but this is kind of the original way and most simplest way to make a cup by hand, and I was blown away. And I tell students this when I'm around them, that we kind of take glass for granted as a material. It's in our glasses, it's in our windows. We just don't really know to care about how it came about or where it came from. But the minute I saw it, I was shocked. Molten blob of material. I mean, I had cast metal up to this point, cast bronze and cast iron, which is an interesting process to see metal flow at those temperatures, but it's not the same as pulling it out of the furnace and manipulating it over time, reheating and heating to create forms, and inflating it. Yeah, I was amazed. And so, I was like, I've got to do this, I've got to figure this out. I didn't end up going through the glass department, or the blowing department. I started my work with neon. One, because glassblowing was competitive, hard to get into, so I actually didn't get into any of the classes because of what my major was, but I was able to get into the neon shop, which is the same thing, using fire to bend glass, and, in this case, illuminate it and create signage with it, which is, like, having come from this graffiti and typography and visual background, it made perfect sense that that would be kind of the crossover of my interest.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Is that how you got to making artwork with text?

Leo Tecosky:

I guess so. I think even in foundations, I was always using letter forms. I don't know if it's text. I'm interested in the form of letters, and I'm interested in the meaning that letters carry. I guess it is text. It sort of has to be reasoned as text because that's how we all filter it, as sort of language and text.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:





Before we got onto this podcast, you and I were having a conversation about how you were really into semiotics, and maybe that's a better way of framing it than just only being about text.

Leo Tecosky:

I think you're right. I think you're right. In art school, we're sort of taught to find the deeper meanings and break things down. So, I mean, literally, I'm starting to break down words into their base forms using letters. I've always strayed away from words because they can be a trap in terms of how people see you and your work, but I will say that lately I've been leaning more towards words. But that is to say that, yes, at that time, I was really interested in breaking down the techniques of neon and therefore breaking down the forms that I could investigate with them, which were initially like hand-style tags, sort of one-line, signature-style works, occasionally larger bubble-letter forms, but they were always kind of abbreviated. I mean, literally abbreviated words and just, like, compositionally using letters. But, yes, that is when I started my journey into the text.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

It's interesting that you started off working with neon because I would say both neon and graffiti have this inherent seediness to them, especially with neon signs often being outside of gentlemen's clubs or outside of casinos, and all of those things. And then, graffiti being about reclamation of space, essentially through criminal action, which is tagging the place.

Leo Tecosky:

Yeah, definitely. That was kind of a no-brainer for me. You're absolutely right. I mean, cities have laws about where neon can and can't go, which is parallel to graffiti's situation. Yeah, it made sense. I don't think I was the first one to make that correlation, but I hadn't seen it, so I came to it on my own, and I kind of ran with that and I worked with that throughout school.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah, I can see how, especially being a young person... When we are young, we're also about countercultures. And then I feel like this thing happens naturally as we get older, you realize the counterculture, in some respects, starts to be the center. There's that dichotomy that often happens.

Leo Tecosky:

Yeah, it's very interesting, especially in both neon and graffiti. When I started working in neon, my professor told me that neon enjoys this wave of interest at times. It's like the art world's darling, and then it's again back to that seediness that you described, and then it'll





spring back up, and then it'll fade away again. And I think graffiti also has had a similar timeline. It's not much younger than neon signage is, actually, in the scheme of things, and it's had its time in the fine art world, and it comes, and it goes, and now it's enjoying a very commercial lifestyle, which I think is great for the medium. But yeah, like the counterculture, the subculture. I was listening to a great keynote by KRS One just the other day, from about ten years ago, and he was saying that people who grew up listening to his records are now CEOs of MTV. And I think that's where the favor comes in and out with these mediums. As we grow up through these countercultures, some of us remain in. I mean, some of us are still just straight up graffiti writers, and that's one lifestyle to live, which is hardcore and very specific, but then some of us grow up to be fine artists who have been influenced and use it, and some of us grow up to be curators like yourself, and gallery owners, and CEOs of corporations that know the culture. And it's very interesting to see all these proponents of the countercultures reconnect in this older age.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:
Right.

Leo Tecosky:
It's exciting.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:
Yeah. I think different cultures, countercultures have had that happen. Rock and roll, hip hop, all of the above. Well, speaking of counterculture – I don't know if this is necessarily counterculture – but I just wanted to talk briefly about being a glass artist of color. You are in a very small, and, as far as I'm concerned, honorable group being a glass artist of color. I mean, specifically this being an offshoot of the Studio Glass movement, and then how that has now come into a place with more pluralism and availability and, for some people, avenues opening up. If you could just briefly speak to your experience in that, that would be great.

Leo Tecosky:
Yeah. Being a glassblower, a glass artist of color... I mean, it's funny that you touch on the Studio movement because, let's see. How should we say this? The record of the American Studio Glass movement is absolutely singular. It boils down to a few names and then even the visual record, the pictures and photos of the time, have a very specific set of participants. And so, that's problematic in that there's no way, in this great country of America, that, during that time and during that kind of breakout in thought, that there wasn't more women, and more people of color, and more plurality happening at the time. I bring





that up because as an artist of color coming through art school where pedagogy is taught and a certain type of legend-making happens, what's difficult is... Not difficult. It's not difficult. What is the challenge is to become a creative in spite of that sort of forced singularity. And I've always been interested in what other voices were present at the time. And every now and then, something pops up, a picture, an article, or you meet somebody, or you meet three people who knew somebody else, and so you start to piece together this thing that there was so much more happening during the Studio movement and it's time up until now. And so, you have to you have to be this creative force that you want to be and work to the best of your abilities, but you also have to deal with this constant question by your contemporaries of *How is it that you are here? There's no Black people in glass. Black people don't blow glass. People of color. You're the only Black person I know who blows glass.* Those are quotes, by the way, from people that I've met in my time.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

I believe it.

Leo Tecosky:

I don't really think the question is whether or not I'm the only Black person in glass that they know. I think the question is, am I the only Black person that they know?

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

That's a big question.

Leo Tecosky:

Yeah. The root issue here is... My root issue, because the question was my experience. My root issue is having to move through this kind of fluid next wave of the Studio Glass movement that is being launched off of this idea that there were four white dudes who started it and there's four white dudes who perpetuated it. And now, all of a sudden, we've got queer, we've got trans, we've got Black, Brown, international. There's no way that that could have all come from one weekend of everybody sitting around saying, *Wow, we need more exposure.*

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

I see what you're saying. I think you're kind of drawing a broad circle around erasure in terms of the other people that might not have been necessarily as well known in the Studio Glass movement who didn't fit within the confines of just being white males, and I'm certain that there's some of that that has occurred. And also, one of the reasons that I wanted to do an exhibition like this is I feel like it's an important story to be told, what's happening right





now and then to contextualize it against some of the past, prior to the Studio Glass movement. And I think that there are so many different voices, some who are strictly glassmakers and some who have kind of veered into glass from just a general fine art maker space and kind of getting into those, where they might meet. That's kind of what my idea was. How do you feel about being placed into that context in the show?

Leo Tecosky:

I don't know, really, how to put it. It's... I'm actually in a show with some of my idols. It's kind of hard to... It's kind of hard to place it. You know what I'm saying? It's not the first show of only Black glass artists that I've been in before, but the last one was almost 20 years ago, so if that says anything... Maybe it does. But to say that I'm honored is maybe one way to put it, but I think the roster of this show, I know a lot of those artists personally, and those that I don't know, I'm certain that they have all worked extremely hard as artists to do the things that they do. And so, to be placed in line with those folks makes me feel proud. And it becomes something more than the sum of its parts, so to speak. Yes, it's a collection of artists of color, specifically Black, in African American, or African diaspora, but it really is a showcase of this incredible breadth of talent and type, too, which is very interesting to have artists who deal with the material in different ways, like you said – that was a great way of putting it, the artists who veer into glass. That is something that I would never have heard somebody describe, connecting with glass, right? But that just goes to show there's other ways of thinking about this material and how to approach it and yeah, let's veer into this. Let's veer into it. Let's collide with this material and see what happens. And it's amazing, I think, to think that you could pull together a show like this with such a caliber of artists.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Yeah. I feel as if you are the top. You are of that caliber. You are of that ilk and that lineage. I think that's very important.

Leo Tecosky:

Thank you.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Can we briefly talk about *Cee(see)Knowledge* from the *Tacoma ABCs*, which you happened to make at your residency here at Museum of Glass? I just am interested in that experience for you, and the work that came out of it, and how it may or may not have helped you grow or see things differently. I know having a residency – and I'm sure you've had several at this point – where you're working with gaffers or artisans that can help you realize things that you can't realize only by yourself, and just the ability to have some expansion happen from





that. I'm just always interested in how people interpret that experience.

Leo Tecosky:

Yeah. Well, to start with, the residency was everything I needed to be in kind of the terms you just laid out. Residencies... I have not had many. I've had a few. But they are crucial components to growth, especially as a glassblower, the furnace being an expensive component to this process. Time becomes money very quickly. And so, as an artist, you need time to drop things, to fail, to retry. And so, it can be hard to do that when you're footing the bill. And so, the residency becomes this really crucial aspect of the practice. And when it comes with gaffers, it's kind of unheard of, but it also really steps it up exponentially. And I know the gaffers from the Tacoma Museum of Glass through my interactions with the glass community, so it was nice to reconnect with these artists. I knew a little bit about their process, they knew a little bit about mine, and so, we could just hit the ground running. And I wanted to approach the residency sort of as this research in the beginnings, maybe of text and maybe of language farther than this sort of symbol aspect. So, I came with the idea that I was going to work with my ABCs, and I spent a couple of months painting and coming up with schematics and sketches, and I landed in the shop, and we just literally started working on our ABCs, as well as a couple of the basic forms that I like to incorporate into my work, like stars and arrows and clouds. I actually brought in a new form that I hadn't really worked before, which is the cloud form of this, like, spray cloud or smoke cloud. That's often a component, an aesthetic component, of graffiti art. And I wanted to try some hot construction, meaning putting together different components of glass while they're hot, to sculpt newer, complex forms. So, I was able to do this while I was there on a larger scale, in a more complex way, with this skilled team. And the results were more than I could have expected, it has changed my practice. I'm now thinking in these ways of how to create new forms. And so, it was like... *Cee(see)Knowledge* from the *Tacoma ABCs*. It was a specific set of letters that I worked with in Tacoma... Kind of part of graffiti and the hip hop ethos is to give love to the spot you're representing at and to note the collaboration that's happening. So, some of the works I have from that residency have a more literal representation of the people that I worked with in the studio, with names and such, but the overall context for the work that came out of that was this *Tacoma ABCs*, and the work in the show is *Cee(see)Knowledge*. It is a representation of the letter C floating on a cloud, or sitting in a cloud. And it's got the word Knowledge on it and the word C in it. It's the letter C, which in the supreme alphabet manifests as the word C, or to see with your eyes or with your mind, and with that piece I was seeing this new knowledge of this new way of working, of this new way of thinking about the material. Also, a slight nod to sea knowledge from Diggable Planets, who I believe reside in Seattle at the moment. Just saying.



Jabari Owens-Bailey:

I just saw them this summer.

Leo Tecosky:

Yeah, true that. They did a huge tour this summer. It was fantastic. 30 years. Yeah. So glad to see them out. And some of the works that I do, they reference those artists. It was interesting coming up through college for projects, for research, you're always asked, *Go look up artists that inspire you. Go look up artists that make you want to work in this material and do things.* And I always just went back to my hip hop icons, B-boys, B-girls, emcees. And so, it was easy for me to kind of embed that into my work. If you're an Impressionist painter, I guess you look at Manet. But then how do you break free of that? I don't know. But I guess I was raised differently. I was always raised to sort of look around the edges and see things in a different light, to grab onto things that aren't always having a light shown on them, because they are probably interesting and hold something more than what is already sort of out in the open. Things that are marginalized aren't necessarily marginalized for negative reasons or for negative attributes. So, from an early age, I was kind of trained by my family to have this kind of one leg in the other. So, that's where my work comes from and that's where that piece, *Cee(see)Knowledge*, comes from. It's about seeing things through different eyes. When I came to the residency, I decided that I was going to touch the glass as little bit as possible. I was going to try and use the team as my hands and my arms and my hands to see how they approached the forms and the material, to know if I could do anything different than the way that I'd been doing it, which, of course, there was. And now the repercussions of that are that I have to work harder and make more stuff. But yeah, it's cool to be able to show that work from that residency in this context too. What do you think about that? Because I know not all the work that you show in the show is coming from residents' work.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

I personally think that adds another dimension to it, because, essentially, mainly, while it's in the space at Museum of Glass itself – if and when it travels, that context will shift a little bit – but to have things that have been made in the building... While not every piece was created from a residency, several of the artists in the exhibition have done residencies at Museum of Glass. And I think there is something about having experienced this space that can filter into the work. It's a very unique space in the sense that it's not only a museum but it's an actual active maker space as well, which doesn't happen in museums often. Some people might describe museums as artistic graveyards or living history books or all types of different things. But I think one of the very interesting things about Museum of Glass in Tacoma, and also a few other spaces, is having a live space like a hot shop inside that





actual objects are made, and that can kind of influence sometimes what happens in the gallery. Those two things can be in conversation with each other. So, from my perspective, I like that. I like the fact that you asked that question, too. Yeah, I definitely think that's an important thing to talk about. So, I think I feel like I've asked you most of the things I want to ask, except where do you see your work heading from here?

Leo Tecosky:

That's a good question. I might need to come back for a residency because all I can think of is these larger scale constructions that I think are going to get pretty complex, possibly working towards a more cohesive alphabet system. I've been thinking a lot about acronyms. Hip hop and the acronym, sort of, phenomenon and graffiti as well. I mean, just like using words to make, to shrink down larger ideas into a concise word form is really interesting, and then to use those and embellish those in a decorative and ornamental way. I think I'm interested in deeper decorative coldworking process. I don't know. I think I need to take some of the components that I've compiled over the last couple of years and refine them, but not to the point of high polish, so to speak. I think I need to dial them in a little bit into a more cohesive output. I've been feeling really good about experimenting over the last couple of years and coming up with these forms and coming up with the ideas of the forms in glass, and now it's time to really expound on that and expand. So, that's kind of where I'm at right now.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

I think I remember a conversation the two of us had, and you telling me specifically with the more squared-off motifs in the letters that that's not really what glass wants to do. It doesn't want to have these edges. It wants to be more rounded; it wants to kind of flow with like the centripetal force that is on the punty or on the blowpipe, and that you're asking it to do things that it doesn't usually get asked.

Leo Tecosky:

I'm not asking it, I'm just outright telling it that it has to do that, which is probably why it's so difficult. But yeah, it's true. The work I'm making is very angular, square, boxy, and yeah, that allows for kind of a different approach to the form. Again, it's like this coming at glass from a slightly different viewpoint, thinking about symmetry differently. There's single-axis symmetry but then there's also different types of nontraditional symmetry that can be worked in. And so, I'm still exploring that, and I think there's a lot more to be explored in that realm. And I'd been... Especially part of constructing, putting two pieces of glass together, especially within these square, boxy forms, the result is some kind of negative space somewhere, which, graffiti art is fifty percent of the piece. And so, kind of adding negative



space, sort of like a fundamental art technique, I guess. But really considering that a lot more in the glass. Glassblowing is, like you said, it's a sort of round, blobby, bulbous-leaning material because it spins and it inflates, so it wants to live round. But why not try something different? And also, not something that I invented, either. It's a process that's been going on since glassblowing was invented 2,000 years ago. But it is just about sort of existing on a plane that is slightly off the norm from what is going on. And because of the nature of its roundness, it's often viewed as this kind of thing that gets made, it's blown, it's finished, and then it comes out of the kiln, and it can go right on the pedestal. It's like this beautiful, captured moment of time. It's a frozen moment. Right? But the work that I'm doing involves so many more processes. I reheat the work, I pick it up numerous times. So, it's sort of like moving away from that immediacy or the kind of, what's the term? Immediate gratification that glassblowing is known for, which is like blow it, it's done. But I'm interested in this investigation. I'm interested in mining the attributes of the material and it's really a part of my process, this investigation. It's a knowledge-based approach of everything, and that is something that allows me to tie all these things together. My interest in world cultures, my interest in hip hop culture, my interest in glass and glass history. If I can sort of peel back some of the inherent qualities of glass, then it allows me to keep investigating the material through the lenses of these other things that I'm interested in. And that's the true trajectory of my work, is to keep learning about everything and glass so that I may be able to create new things that I want to say with the material.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

That's a great aspiration. I think there is a certain level of fluidity that glass kind of inspires in people who work with it, and I think that you seeking to push those limits and seeking to expand upon the language, you know... Oftentimes, like you said, you're not the first one to do it, but there's nothing new under the sun. But the way that you're doing it is the way that Leo Tecosky has kind of found that works. And I think that's an important thing to have.

Leo Tecosky:

And I feel that. that's resonating with me, for sure, and I respect that. And that's a push, you know... That kind of feedback lets me know that something's working.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Absolutely.

Leo Tecosky:

Good.





Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Well, thank you so much, Leo, for joining us on *Frit City: A Two-Way Conversation*. Please, if you are in the Tacoma area, be sure to visit the exhibition *A Two-Way Mirror: Double Consciousness in Contemporary Glass by Black Artists* and see for yourself what Leo Tecosky's work is all about.

Leo Tecosky:

Yeah, peeps.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Thanks so much.

Leo Tecosky:

Thanks, Jabari.

Jabari Owens-Bailey:

Thank you for listening. This has been *Frit City*, a production of Museum of Glass. Hosted by Jabari Owens-Bailey. Produced by Susan Warner, Elisabeth Emerson, and Jabari Owens-Bailey.