



Episode Transcription: “The Salmon School: Class Session”

Katie Buckingham:

From Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington, this is *Frit City*. I'm Katie Buckingham, curator at Museum of Glass. Today we will be speaking to artist Joseph Rossano about his exhibition at Museum of Glass, *The Salmon School*, joined by our own Hot Shop director and resident salmon enthusiast Ben Cobb. *The Salmon School* is presented as a temporary sculpture of 600 mirrored glass forms suspended in air to compose a school of fish. First exhibited in the Pacific Northwest at Bellevue Arts Museum, *The Salmon School* aims to shed light on maritime and riverine environmental DNA projects and salmon conservation. This exhibition has traveled internationally and created strong partnerships between arts, cultural, and environmental organizations. I'm so excited to speak to you both today and discuss the exhibition and all that it means for our community here in the Northwest and larger conservation issues abroad. I would love for you guys to take a minute and introduce yourselves and tell how you're connected with the project.

Joe Rossano:

My name is Joe Rossano. I guess I'm the founder of *The Salmon School*. This is an idea that germinated between my ears over many years, interacting with forests and fish. We'll probably get into a little bit more of the idea behind it, or ideas behind it, as we talk further.

Ben Cobb:

My name is Ben Cobb. I work at Museum of Glass. Salmon enthusiast, as noted in my introduction, and good friends with Joe Rossano. Learning about this idea that germinated between your ears was discussed loudly many a time on rivers in the northern Puget Sound. Yeah. And sort of, kind of went from there. So, I've worked alongside Joe to make some of this happen.

Katie Buckingham:

And so to start things off, Joe, describe the form of the mirrored fish and how the sculpture comes together.

Joe Rossano:

Well, the idea of the form is connected to how you see a fish in the river, especially a fish that's moving. And that is, that if you're looking at a fish in moving water, you have the reflections of light on the moving water obscuring your view. And if you see a fish that's





primarily silver with a darker back moving through the water, it is a ghost-like form that flashes silver every once in a while, and that's harder to pick up with all of these things happening at the same time. So, the idea of the teardrop form, the elongated teardrop form – just a very simple, very elegant form without any detail, which is how you view a fish in the real world – was at the center of the idea for the shape, and then making sure that it was something that was simple and elegant enough that anybody in the world could make it. Because the goal was to create, and remains to create, a community around an idea was, again, foremost in our designing of the shape. And basically, they come together as a school of fish. They've been referred to in Scotland as a shoal of fish. The idea for a school of fish is really that a group of smaller forms, when they combine as a school, for the lack of a better word right now, they present as something much larger and they, in essence, can protect themselves. So, mirroring that literally, the community of people who've committed themselves to making this happen have mirrored the idea of presenting us something much bigger. And that is where my involvement in this has ended. The idea came from me, the idea of stewarding, and then the management has come from me and others that have made this happen. So, the sculpture really is about this ongoing process of using art as a tool to create awareness.

Katie Buckingham:

And Ben, I know the museum when, Joe, when you talk about the art coming from a larger community of artists, the museum and our Hot Shop Team has been privileged to be part of that community. So, Ben, can you tell us a little bit about the process of creating a mirrored fish out of glass?

Ben Cobb:

The first few times that we got together and tried to figure it out, the idea was to make a simple form so that, as Joe said, anybody in the world – maybe we should narrow that down – anybody in the world who makes glass could make one of these. And it turns out sometimes the simplest things are the hardest. I think Joe and I are pretty detail-oriented people, so you pretty quickly home in on what you want, what's right and what's wrong about the form. Any rate: a few gathers of glass, blow a bubble, shape it a little bit with your hands. It's kind of like a short diamond shape. And to get the long, fluid forms, the piece is flattened and then it's stretched. So, stretch from something that's maybe twelve to 15 inches out to something that's 25 to 30 inches, sort of that fat diamond shape slenders down into the form of a fish. So, there's certain things, certain proportions that look probably better to us than others. So, not every one's a winner, but you get pretty close. And then, a lot of you





know, in the idea of the school, a lot of those forms sort you know, mingle, and some of them get lost and become just part of this mass, this biomass of glass and mirror.

Katie Buckingham:

Joe, I know mirroring is something that comes up across your body of work. Why is that aesthetic meaningful or important to you?

Joe Rossano:

Mirroring is important to me for several reasons. I think in this instance, the idea of creating an example of what maybe a recovered ecosystem looks like. *The Salmon School's* first goal in Washington state was to create more than 2,504 fish, and install them in a museum, and show that a community of people who care about it could make something that's bigger than the remaining populations of both wild king salmon and wild steelhead in the Skagit, which is the fourth largest outflow of the Pacific. We haven't achieved that number yet, but we're only through one life cycle, and we're about not quite halfway there, but we're there. The goal will be to continue this for a total of ten years or more. So, the mirroring is important because that bright, shiny object reflects us, the viewer, and as I may have said earlier, things that are fragile, transparent, and reflective. Glass is fragile, it's transparent. So, when you silver it, quite literally, you put a thin layer of silver inside of it, it becomes reflective, and it mirrors the world that is dependent upon the ecosystem that salmon are dependent upon, and the salmon are dependent upon us to take care of that ecosystem. So, in a lot of my work, that theme is consistent about those metaphors being consistent in that I'm talking about seemingly endless resources and representing them as either a transparent form or as a mirrored form.

Katie Buckingham:

And you've mentioned a couple of times so far that the installation has a life cycle which not only is about the life of a salmon, but also where the project has gone since it was opened at Bellevue Arts Museum. Can you tell us a little bit about where the salmon have been and where they're going potentially next?

Joe Rossano:

So, what I can tell you is where they've been. Where they're going next is the Museum of Glass, and after the Museum of Glass, there are a number of opportunities that we're exploring and I just think that I'll ask you to pay attention to www.thesammonschool.com and the events page, and likely on the exhibitions page at Museum of Glass, there will be





some information to connect to the exhibit. And should you want to, if you're a museum listening to this exhibit, you can speak to Katie. But it has been to the Bellevue Arts Museum, and then we experienced COVID, and I think it came down in late June or early July of 2019 and went into boxes. We began the community science program and began to solicit other venues for the exhibit, at which point the world shut down for two years. I received a phone call from an amazing person named Tiggy Pettifer, who is the head of development for the Atlantic Salmon Trust, and she said, "The boys would like to speak to you," and I said, "Well, I'd love to talk to them," and they said, "We'd like to propose *The Salmon School* be the centerpiece exhibit at the United Nations Global Climate Change Summit." And they were successful, along with Ben, myself, and an untold number of people, in bringing the exhibit to the UN Global Climate Change Summit in Glasgow, where it hung over 100% of the people in the world that could make decisions about the future of salmon, and it represented roughly a tenth of a percent of all of the wild salmon left in the North Atlantic. It's been to the Balmoral Estate on the invitation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and it is the first contemporary art installation to ever be exhibited in a royal residence, and it was the centerpiece of her majesty's Platinum Jubilee. So, all of us are very honored to have had that opportunity. And from there, it went to be exhibited at the Macallen Estate and Distillery. So, for those of you scotch drinkers out there, it swam in some peaty water, I guess is the right term. And now it's coming to Museum of Glass.

Katie Buckingham:

To ask a nerdy insider question to both of you: what was it like installing the artwork, especially at the Climate Change Summit and Balmoral, in two pretty high-security environments?

Ben Cobb:

It was great fun. No, it was pretty interesting. I think the way that invite happened, to my recollection, was, maybe because of the high-security environment, we didn't have a lot of notice to get everything crated, shipped, insured, all that. It was a scramble. Once it came together and we found ourselves in Scotland, we had to have some level of security clearance, so we all had background checks. We had to show up, and get our pictures taken, and get a badge, and get a sort of second background check. And doing this in the era of COVID, we had to register a negative test each morning that we went into this secure location. So, when we arrived in Glasgow, there was a giant perimeter set up sort of around the convention center. As we walked to work each day, to and from the hotel, you'd notice that the manhole covers and any street entrance access had been taped off so that everything





had been searched for potential bomb threats in a certain radius around the whole area. So, you'd have to walk through this, go through security checkpoints, and then start your day. We had to have safety gear, we had to have hard hats, steel-toed shoes. There's all these parameters that we had to all have on the install crew, and we were just one of... How many people do you think, Joe, were there for a setup for that convention?

Joe Rossano:

Several thousand.

Ben Cobb:

Yeah. I mean, there was literally thousands of people all setting things up for the summit, and everybody, they came from all different parts of the world, and we're sitting there hanging glass fish. People were kind of gawking at us because, I think, where we were doing it was also sort of the mess hall. So, when people broke for lunch, everybody was grabbing food on one side of this enormous space and kind of watching us hang these fish. We probably got some chuckles and some looks, but we also got a bunch of people that were really interested in what we were doing, which was kind of the point of the whole project.

Joe Rossano:

Yeah, I'm glad you took that on because you remembered much more than I did. I was focused on other things.

Ben Cobb:

There was one other real funny thing that happened, too. One of the nights, a few of us, the younger folks on the install crew, we went out to a bar. We went out to trivia, and we're sitting at this bar, and we listen to all the accents, and I hear an American accent, and we kind of look over, and there's a guy and a lady, and they're sitting there, presumably a couple, and we start talking, and we're like, "Wow, what are you guys doing here?" And we posed the question to them, and they're like, "You know, we were stationed in Germany." I was like, "Okay, so you're military." And I was like, "So what are you in town for?" And they're just like, "We prefer not to say." I was like, "Oh." So, then we were also asked not to kind of talk about where we were working so they would pose a question back. They're like, "What are you guys doing here?" We're like, "Can't really talk about it."

Katie Buckingham:

Nice.





Ben Cobb:

But there's two very different things here. Like, I'm pretty sure he was on security detail while we're art handlers. So, that was pretty funny.

Katie Buckingham:

So cool.

Joe Rossano:

I think the thing that's important is the sculpture was hung in the dignitaries' cafeteria, and it was hung in the blue zone, which is the secure zone. So, Jay Inslee and other officials that were attending from the Pacific Northwest had their images taken in front of *The Salmon School*. But that meant that in order for us to do anything in that space, including Joe Biden, President Biden, and I'm forgetting all the names of the dignitaries that we saw. I tripped over the president of Egypt. It was an amazing experience, and it was an amazing experience to be in that space where you've been through security, so you're seeing people that you see on the news, and their guard has been let down because they know that everybody in that room is safe. It was amazing, and they all walked underneath this sculpture that made them think, so maybe we've all accomplished something together. I'd like to think we have.

Katie Buckingham:

That must have been so surreal. Was it more surreal to be in that environment than Balmoral?

Joe Rossano:

That's a hard one. I shouldn't answer that question. What I should say is that the Secretary of State of Scotland, Alister Jack, was a very big supporter of this project and helped make it happen. The director of the Atlantic Salmon Trust and the assistant director, who is now the current director, are Robbie Douglas-Miller, OBE; and Peter Landale, and then Mark Bilsby, who's the, I guess, CEO of the Atlantic Salmon Trust, made all of this possible. They were tireless in petitioning the federal government. They were tireless in reaching out to the then Prince of Wales to advocate for us. This is an example of how, if you have an idea that you believe in strongly enough, there is really no end to where it can go. I'd like to think that the thing that I may have done okay in this instance is shepherded, sort of, the idea that we started with when we began making fish at MOG to a place where it is bringing attention to the subject and the people that have participated with it. I mean, I'm here talking about it





now, and I really think that I'm talking about the idea. This is about everybody that believed in this idea and has made it happen, from you, Katie, to the list of artists and the list of contributors that are on *The Salmon School* website. This is the village, so to speak.

Katie Buckingham:

And one last question about its travels. How has the conversation around the installation changed as a result of getting to be part of venues like these?

Joe Rossano:

How has the conversation...

Katie Buckingham:

Or has it? Is it the same conversation, just magnified over global communities?

Joe Rossano:

The goal of the project was not to talk about Pacific salmon. It wasn't just to talk about steelhead. I wanted to start with steelhead. It was to talk about salmon and their role in human life throughout time, and that is also a reoccurring theme in my work. And so, that meant that there are salmon in the Atlantic that were prolific from the Connecticut all the way into the Ungava, and then through Norway and the Baltic and down into, I think, Spain. And, at the same time, there were vast schools of salmon from Japan all the way around the Pacific Rim down to, I believe, it's San Juan Creek in central California. There are salmon people across the globe, and the salmon people include... I wanted this to talk about indigenous Celts, indigenous Norwegians, indigenous North Americans. All celebrated salmon and salmon were important to their lives. And if there was some way that we could reconnect, our primal beings could reconnect, to this thing that sustained us and was, in many reasons why cities were built in the locations they were... You know, the Thames River was a great salmon river, and London is there not just because of the cod and not just because of the shipping, but because of the food. And if there is some way to talk about the importance of salmon and have that connect to the issues of global climate change and we're doing it through art, that I felt like maybe we had a chance to make a difference.

Katie Buckingham:

Is that the logic behind having artists from around the world create the fish?





Joe Rossano:

Yes.

Katie Buckingham:

How has the collaboration with these other artists impacted the aesthetics of the exhibition?

Joe Rossano:

Well, I don't think it's impacted the aesthetic.

Katie Buckingham:

No, it's pretty close to your original vision?

Ben Cobb:

I think the original vision was just to have a massive pile of fish in a confined space to sort of put on display this seemingly endless resource. But I think, like I kind of touched on it earlier, as long as it's kind of close enough, it kind of gets lost in the mass. So, everybody who's made these things hasn't really... If it's changed the aesthetic, it's for the better because it grows the density of the installation.

Katie Buckingham:

Yeah. How many times have we made fish in our Hot Shop?

Joe Rossano:

Six, seven times? Eight? No, we counted the other day. It's eleven times.

Ben Cobb:

Eleven times total? Eleven days? Eleven days over the past five years.

Katie Buckingham:

I always think it's so interesting because there's this added twist when you work in our Hot Shop, which is that visitors can watch everything unfold live. Ben, why is that important for visitors who are going to see the exhibition?

Ben Cobb:

Well, I think anytime you have the opportunity to come into our Hot Shop and watch something be created and have the opportunity to come back and see it installed, I think





your appreciation for that goes up. The more often, especially for people who aren't familiar with glass, and they come in, they get sort of the rundown of how it works and they're like, wow, that's a lot more difficult, maybe, than they thought. And then to come back several months, or in this case, a few years, later and to see this massive pile of fish hung, they were like... I think they get it. It makes a more holistic experience, and I think it has more impact on the viewer and what it means.

Katie Buckingham:

To turn the conversation toward the meaning of the piece, can you, Joe, explain more about the salmon crisis and its larger implications?

Joe Rossano:

So, it's a difficult thing to discuss because the focus of the sculpture has been that salmon need cold, clean water to survive. We need cold, clean water to survive, and with global climate change, that's going away. To talk about the individual issues is something that we have invited our NGO partners to discuss, and the thing about the project is that it has been successful in bringing people into a conversation via the website or the fish-making events that would not normally talk to each other. So, art has been this tool that's disarmed these audiences. They have very different opinions. I think we all want to be confident as we walk through life, and that means that we understand certain things in life, and understanding 100% why salmon aren't returning means we really have to look at ourselves. At the same time, it also means we have to listen to what everyone else is saying, because, in the end, everybody wants a quality of life, and everybody wants... I mean, I doubt that you could find an overwhelming support for the extinction of salmon because it would mean the extinction of a whole host of other things. So, the idea of giving everybody a voice, having *The Salmon School* be a safe space around art, is really at the core. But also, and maybe we haven't talked about this, is it's one thing for an artist and a group of artists to have an opinion about something. It's another thing for that opinion to be informed by science and have that science brought to the conversation by youth. So, the project isn't just about making glass fish. It's about using the beauty and the symbol of a recovered ecosystem and giving youth the opportunity to collect information about that ecosystem in the area in which the sculpture is being exhibited. So, we're working with the Foss Waterway Seaport here. We've worked with the Clyde River Foundation. We're working with Glacier Peak Institute on the Skagit to collect environmental DNA and to understand what is present in that system now as we live through a changing world.





Katie Buckingham:

In that citizen science component, can you tell us a little bit more about environmental DNA and how that project connects to the installation?

Joe Rossano:

Well, I can. So, the goal 2020 during COVID was to begin an environmental DNA program in conjunction with fish making in Sweden as part of the Glass Art Society conference. And because COVID happened and the conference became virtual, Ben and I and young Posy Cobb went out onto the upper Sauk and did some DNA collection to understand what was present. I think we found cutthroat, rainbow trout, some fungus, some algae, and a few other things. The original goal had been to put this into action in Norway with Chris Meyer from the Smithsonian and Karl Gjelland, who's associated with Blast Studio, and that wasn't possible. So, the following year, we took the pilot program and put it into action with the Glacier Peak Institute and began collecting with youth science programs, and then, the following year, we did it with 65 grammar schools on the Clyde, and that was funded by the Atlantic Salmon Trust and the consortium of donors that you'll see on *The Salmon School* website. And the goal is that it's one thing to see this beautiful thing, and it's another thing to talk about salmon going away, but what are we finding there? And when you give youth the opportunity, you give youth agency, to tell everybody what the story is of the thing they're looking at in the museum, you really have created, I don't know any other way to talk about it, but you've really created something in the physical and the intellectual realm that can help change perspectives from the fifth grader to their parents. And that collection is as much art as the making and the hanging of the sculpture is art.

Katie Buckingham:

And what do you hope comes about by raising that level of awareness?

Joe Rossano:

I'll let Ben take this one.

Ben Cobb:

Dig into your brain here. What do you hope to see?

Joe Rossano:

My perspective on this, and we can talk back and forth about this briefly if you'd like, but this is creating a conversation around what people would like to see return or what people





would like to see changed. I know I want to create awareness, so this conversation happens. Ben, as a sportsman in the South Sound has a perspective of what he would like to see.

Ben Cobb:

I think overall, it's one thing to invite the general public into a space and, I think, make them stop and think when they look at this sculpture and they go, *Wow, maybe I need to pay attention*. But a lot of times when they walk out of a space, conversation dwindles off and carries on to something else that's going on in everybody's very busy life. But if you back it up with some scientific evidence, especially if you get kids involved at a level where it's very hands-on and they can see the results of what actually is around. And I think there's the you-should-have-been-here-yesterday sort of saying. *Oh, man. When I was a kid, we used to catch X here all the time and now that's nowhere to be seen*. I've lived here now for a little over 22 years and I have seen – and I think 20 years on the whole is a fairly short period of time – I have seen massive changes in the number of salmon returning to specific rivers, but also in the South Sound, which is where I spend a lot of time on the water. But also, other changes in the environment, from algae blooms to red tide events. I've seen increasing amounts of those which points to warmer waters, which is the opposite of cold, clean water. So, I think if we can change the perspective of *you should have been here yesterday*, and we can we do that through science and kind of keep that conversation on the forefront of everybody's mind, that can affect change.

Joe Rossano:

So, the real thing that the sculpture does is it offers context. If you think that this sculpture that we're going to put up is in the neighborhood of 600 fish, and it will occupy a quarter of a basketball court, and that's one fifth of all the fish that are left in the fourth largest outflow of the Pacific, that gives context, that allows people to think and it's to scale. You can move among it, or among the fish, but it's a beautiful thing. So, you're using beauty as a counterpoint to the very difficult message that the fish are trying to deliver, the *School* is trying to deliver.

Katie Buckingham:

I think that's really powerful. Something I was wondering for both of you that have been career-long artists, maybe to wrap things up: why do you think art is more well-suited, or better suited, to carry these important messages than other forms of media?





Ben Cobb:

I think now more than ever, especially if you tune in and watch the news or listen to the news, it's a lot of bad shit happening. And I think art has the ability to – whether it's a beautiful object to draw somebody in and make them stop for a brief moment, maybe it's the title of the work that makes them think – I think art has the ability to disarm people's perspectives, let their guard down a little bit and hopefully either change their mind or give them a new perspective on what they've just experienced. I think art in general has that power to maybe subtly deliver a message that could turn into a conversation that could make people stop and think a little bit more, to give pause.

Joe Rossano:

So what I'm about to say, you might not want to use.

Katie Buckingham:

Even better. I was hoping we'd get here in the end.

Joe Rossano:

So, I think that in the polarized world that we live in right now, people put themselves in camps and are very, very committed to being right. And that also translates to them not getting along and being anxious about being in the space with each other, occupying the same space with each other, because I think, fundamentally, we are brought up to be nice to our fellow man. And what *The Salmon School* has been able to do is it's been able to position people who are polar opposite opinions in the same space, making something that is a symbol of the beauty of what could be. You can look at the website and you can see this discordant group, and all I can do is thank every one of them for believing in this idea enough to actually come in to Museum of Glass, to show up on our NGO calls that were run by Missing Salmon Alliance, and those that continue to call and support what we're trying to do. It's a difficult thing to talk about because this is an example of art echoing a whole host of things that are going on in the world. So, if art can literally disarm those audiences and, as it has done in Scotland, result in measurable change through legislated law, then art's actually living up to its goal. And that is not about the beautiful fish or the fact that we've made glass. It's about all of the people who've come in and believed in the idea behind doing what we've done. And Ben has facilitated this, Museum of Glass has facilitated this, Starworks has facilitated this. A large portion of the fish were made at Hilltop Artists. DNA was collected by twelve-year-old kids all over the world. So, if that's a taste of what we might be able to do through art, then I guess we should keep doing it.





Katie Buckingham:

I love that. If listeners want to learn more about *The Salmon School*, of course they can come see it at Museum of Glass. The exhibition opens November 18, 2023. But if they want to follow you online, how can they do that?

Joe Rossano:

Well, they can go to *The Salmon School* at www.thesalmonschool.com. They can check us out at @thesalmonschool on Instagram or @josephgregoryrossano on Instagram. And they can check the museum website and find out all of the people who've participated with the *School*, and they can Google their names, or they can click on their names and they can learn about their individual art. And you can click on the information and the names of all the NGOs, and you can learn how you can participate in supporting some aspect of ensuring the survival of salmon and ourselves. Did I miss anything, Ben?

Katie Buckingham:

Perfect. Anything I haven't asked about that you wanted to share?

Joe Rossano:

I feel like I've done entirely too much talking. Ben, you've been basically the major sounding board. We've talked about stuff like this. We've talked about this as an idea for a long time, driving from my house to the Sauk and to other places. I've had the same conversations with past Region 4 steelhead biologist Curt Kraemer and others that I know that are fisheries managers. Again, you might not want to use this. I look at art as... It's hard for you to make things that just exist to be looked at, especially as I get older, and I really want to make things that contribute to a collective wellbeing, and this is an example of doing that. But the other thing that I think is really apparent is this doesn't happen because one person wants to do it. It happens because one person has an idea and other people champion it in their region, or others share the same idea, and they can rally around the group that's doing it. I think Ben and I talked extensively how do we make this so that people can contribute regardless of their skill level as glass makers. And yet, we can still put something together that would be emblematic of the story, and I do think that we had hoped that this would be something that people would be able to make fish and then send them to us. It became actually easier if we facilitated the fish making and invited them to participate with us. So, one of the things that you might not be aware of when you see the show is that, at this point, I don't know, have we had 100 makers, or 100 individuals come in and squeeze fish?





Ben Cobb:

I don't know. I mean, when we did it at the Schack [Art Center] in Everett...

Joe Rossano:

We had like 45 people that day.

Ben Cobb:

Yeah, so probably on the whole we've had, I would say that you're not far off, 100 people come in and squeeze fish.

Joe Rossano:

I think one of the more powerful moments in the fish making is that people basically have to kneel in front of the bench, and they have to put their hands together almost in the act of praying to squeeze the fish, and I just find that very ironic with the symbol of Christianity being a fish. This is not designed to be a religious conversation, but I do find that to be ironic.

Ben Cobb:

I hadn't really gotten there, but yeah, it is.

Joe Rossano:

It reminds me of the Albrecht [Dürer] hands. You don't have to use any of that.

Katie Buckingham:

But why wouldn't we? That was awesome. Thank you for listening to *Frit City* in celebration of our exhibition *The Salmon School* by Joseph Gregory Rossano. A production of Museum of Glass hosted by Katie Buckingham, produced by Susan Warner, Elisabeth Emerson, and Jabari Owens-Bailey. Recorded and edited by On Purpose Recordings. Original music composed by Quentin Merada. Copyright 2023. This has been *Frit City*. Thank you for listening.

