



Ira Lujan (Taos Pueblo) plans to periodically add new pieces of hand-blown glass to his *Cloud Antler Chandelier*, 2017.

PHOTO KITTY LEAKEN

THE FOURTH DIMENSION OF GLASS

BY SUZANNE FRICKE

IRA LUJAN

(Taos Pueblo/Ohkay Owingeh)

Ira Lujan was raised in Albuquerque, where he studied graphic art, design and marketing at the Harwood Art Center. After moving to Oregon, he developed a fascination with hand-blown glass while visiting the Eugene Glass School. Lujan then relocated to his grandfather's ranch in Taos, attended the University of New Mexico, Taos, and studied glass art with Tony Jojola.

Lujan also trained at the Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington, founded by noted glass artist Dale Chihuly. At Pilchuck, he met glass artists such as Preston Singletary and Chihuly himself, who encouraged Lujan to work larger and grander. "Chihuly once said that once you put the light inside the piece, it becomes a light fixture. Without it, it is a sculpture with a different life. You can see the shadows and the shapes. The fourth

dimension of glass is light," Lujan said.

Lujan often attends annual retreats at Pilchuck, an opportunity to work in a quiet environment with no distractions. "I used to go there with an idea about what I would want to create, but once I arrived it would change, because you are around all those people." In May 2022, Lujan attended The Gathering, a retreat at Pilchuck for Native American artists. Originally scheduled for 2020, the event brought together celebrated artists such as Singletary, Cara Romero and Erica Lord.

Lujan uses a variety of techniques. For example, his piece *Avanyu* is an olla (wide-bellied ceramic jar) made with curried yellow glass on an amethyst base. He created it by hand-blowing purple glass into the distinctive olla shape found in northern pueblos. Lujan then applied a layer of powdered yellow glass, followed by a layer of sandblast resist, to create a design.

He also paints with glass, creating designs on a surface, and sculpts hot glass to create faces, like the one on *Jade Water*

INNOVATORS



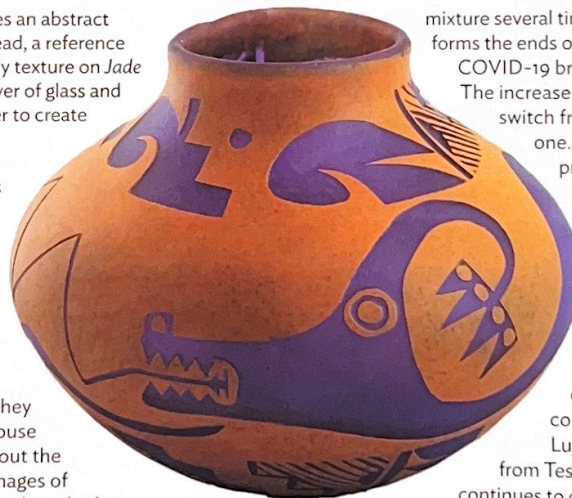
Canteens, 2021, glass

PHOTO KITTY LEAKEN

Carrier from 2017. The face graces an abstract open form with an olla on her head, a reference to Pueblo women. For the muddy texture on *Jade Water Carrier*, Lujan applied a layer of glass and then dunked the piece into water to create a crackled surface.

Lujan often uses glass to recreate historic pottery shapes and designs from across New Mexico, many inspired by his father's extensive pottery collection. The elder Lujan, a surgeon, worked in Grants, New Mexico. People came from across the state to see him and give him pots. Lujan's parents also acquired works as they traveled, so he was raised in a house filled with pottery from throughout the state. His glass pieces include images of feathers, parrots, quails, rain, clouds and other elements of nature.

Lujan is perhaps best known for his hand-pulled glass antlers, which were inspired by the work of glass sculptor William Morris. Lujan experimented with different techniques while perfecting his own antlers. He starts with a piece of heated clear glass and then adds a frit, a chunk of white glass. Once the frit is in the hot glass, it warms and liquefies, so Lujan can stretch it. He pulls and folds the glass



Avanyu, 2021
Hand-blown purple glass olla
with yellow glass on an
amethyst base

mixture several times to create distinct layers. He forms the ends of the antlers by hand.

COVID-19 brought many challenges for Lujan.

The increase in fuel cost encouraged him to switch from a gas furnace to an electric one. It became more difficult to find his preferred materials, especially some of his favorite colors. One of the main colored-glass factories in Germany closed because the cost of production became prohibitive. On the positive side, travel restrictions during the pandemic made Lujan's home studio a place for him to explore new techniques and to complete many pieces.

Lujan relocated his home and studio from Tesuque to Albuquerque, where he continues to create antlers and experiment with new forms. In the past few years, his work has been in many exhibits, most notably at SeaTac Airport in Seattle and in *Clearly Indigenous* at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe. That exhibit will soon travel to the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia.

Suzanne Fricke, PhD, is a teacher and writer who specializes in historic and contemporary Native American art, First Nations art and art of the Southwest. She is based in Albuquerque.