

They'll leave a light on for you

Local neon artists Catarina Hosler and Bruce Suba have a glowing future

By Christa Martin

In Santa Cruz, come the holiday season, lights are strewn on houses and glowing ornaments adorn shrubs. But there are some illuminating decorations that stick around all year—they're signs on businesses, glowing sculptures and bright pieces of artwork created by neon artists like Catarina Hosler and Bruce Suba. "We have a very small neon art community," says Suba of his local colleagues. "I would say there are maybe five of us total."

If you've ever driven by the Rio Theatre, Staircase Tattoo, Santa Cruz Roller Palladium, or almost any other business in Santa Cruz that has a neon sign, you've seen some of the commercial work done by 54-year-old neon artist Bruce Suba.

"The magic of glass is that you always have to be on your game and perfection is the only way," Suba said. "I love neon art because when you make something new, you never know what it will look like until you fill it with gas and light it up."

Suba has been making magic with neon since 1979. He has a day job as a scientific glassblower, making X-ray tubes, and creates neon art after work and on weekends, but he remains as passionate as ever about his art. When he talks about it, his eyes light up like a kid who just figured out how to take the training wheels off of his bicycle. He doesn't just work, he plays. The way he describes his garage studio, it sounds like a cross between a backyard fort and a mad scientist's lab.

"I have all the toys to make neon, scientific glass work, plasma lamps, crackle tubes, and wireless neon art," Suba wrote in his bio for the California Glass Exchange. He has made many amazing pieces with those toys, working next to a "Neon Nut" license plate tacked on the wall. His enthusiasm



A Monterey Bay jellyfish neon sculpture by Catarina Hosler.

is contagious, and he's happy to share his knowledge.

"I work with other glassblowers who want their hollow glass vessels to light up," he said. "I have done movie sets, houses, signs, clocks, and bubble lights."

His special niche is working with all of the glasses: soft, Pyrex, and quartz.

"Not many people do this and light it up," he says. "I like the bizarre stuff, it is a challenge."

To call it a challenge might be an understatement. Suba's pieces can take anywhere from a week to several months to construct, and materials can sometimes be hard to come by these days.

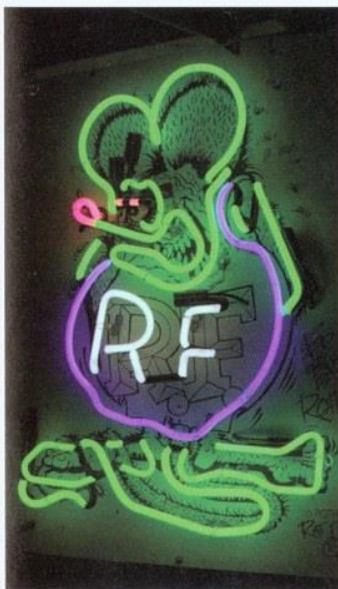
"They don't stock everything like they did 20 years ago," he said.

Currently Suba is working on a neon project for the Pebble Beach Concourse show next year. He also is designing some elaborate pieces that he hopes will be completed in the next six months. The process of creating and assembling these works is extensive and complex. They are made of many individual pieces, each of which involves a painstaking process of bending tubing with various burners to create a shape, welding electrodes to the ends, hooking up the unit to a glass manifold with a vacuum pump, running high volt-



Photo: ©Bruce Suba

Bruce Suba teamed up with art-glass legend John Forbes to create a glowing 1938 glass Cord automobile (built to 1/6 scale).



Photos: Mickey Carroll

A long time friend hot rod legend Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, Suba created Roth's legendary icon, the rat fink, in neon.

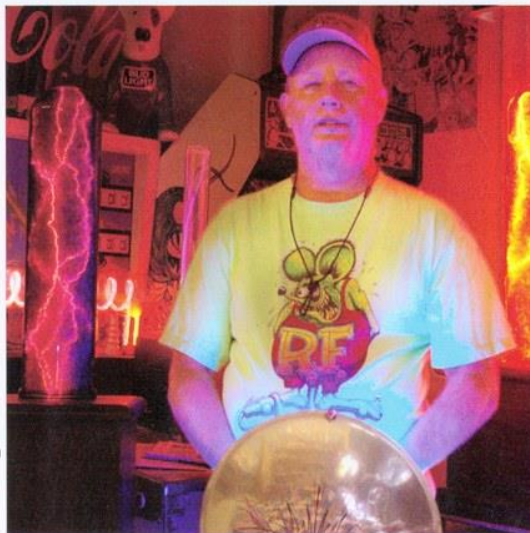
age through the tube, burning out water, and letting in the rare gas. When all of the pieces are perfect, they are assembled together as one work of art.

It takes patience, a quality that Suba has perfected after many years of playing with his toys.

See Bruce Suba's work all over town and online at www.subaneon.com

Catarina Hosler, who was born in Mexico of an Indian father and Irish-German mother, started sculpting when she was 12 and living in Peterborough, New Hampshire. She took a class at an arts center, created a clay sculpture, and promptly sold it for \$10. It was the start of her artistic career.

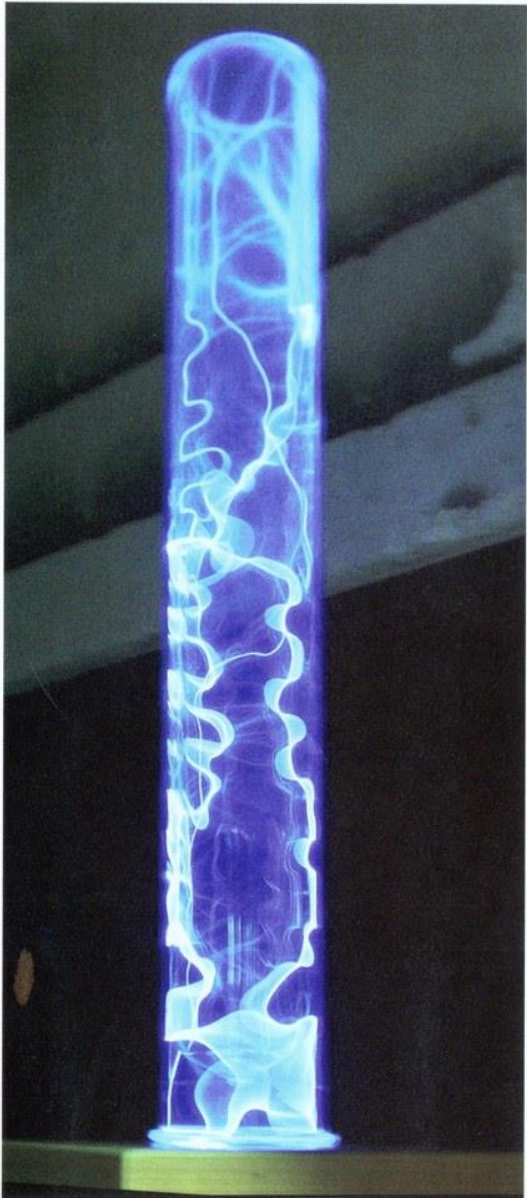
Hosler eventually left New England to study at the Portland School of Art in Oregon and the Academy of Art in San Francisco. It was in the city that she first took a neon class and discovered "what could be done with light."



Surrounded by neon, artist Bruce Suba appears to glow in his Scotts Valley workshop.

"I was hooked," recalled Hosler. In San Francisco she studied with internationally acclaimed neon artist Christian Schiess and then apprenticed with a South of Market neon sign bender, where she immersed herself in the craft.

"When you take a piece of neon, you rotate it like a rotisserie chicken over a flame,



A neon crackletube, a type of plasma lamp, by Bruce Suba.

and then make it bend," she explained of the complex process. "Long curves are the bane of most benders, and they can get bumps in glass. I wanted to have complete control over my curves."

Hosler thinks of herself primarily as a figurative artist, even when she works in neon, which she has done for some twenty years.

"I take the human form and reduce it to a series of simplistic, minimalistic lines of light," she said. "Neon is very sexy."



Photo: ©Catarina Hosler

Catarina Hosler's "Winged Double Love."

These days Hosler does a lot of metal work along with her numerous neon art commissions. Her fashion art garments and steampunk jewelry were showcased in 2012 and 2013 at Santa Cruz's epic annual runway show, FashionART, at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium.

To create her extravagant fashion pieces, Hosler takes quarter-inch stainless steel mesh and weaves ribbon through it. She then spends hours manipulating the mesh and pounding it into shapes that become chic, shiny wearable art. Form-fitting mesh bustier tops might be paired with whimsical skirts made of mesh and ribbon petals. Hosler's piece in this year's FashionART—a plasma-cut tiara and a dress that changed colors—was inspired by her love of ballet, she said.

"I like anything that lights up and glows," she says. "It's that magical feeling of being a kid in the summertime, trying to catch a firefly."

See Catarina Hosler's work in the Rittenhouse Building window displays and online at caterinahosler.com. ♣

Photo: © Bruce Suba



Photo: ©Catarina Hosler

"Double Love" by Catarina Hosler.



Photo: ©Catarina Hosler

Catarina Hosler performs metal cutting with a plasma cutter on a neon sculpture in her Santa Cruz studio.

SEE THE LIGHTS

Bruce Suba - www.subaneon.com
Catarina Hosler - www.catarinahosler.com