

Rise and shine: Tacoma artists group hides glass baubles around town

In the wee hours on Friday, a Tacoma artists group will celebrate Year of the Horse by hiding baubles around town

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Read more here: <http://www.thenewstribune.com/2014/01/31/3021322/rise-and-shine.html#storylink=cpy>



It's hard to believe that Tacomans have been waking up on Asian New Year morning to a treasure hunt of blown glass balls for 11 years now.

But Monkeyshines – the city's quirky, anonymous arts event – began with the Year of the Monkey in 2004, and this year celebrates the Year of the Horse with about 1,000 horse-stamped glass balls made in just two weeks by more than 40 glass blowers. And beginning this weekend, those balls will be hidden around the city for lucky Tacoma residents to find.

"It doesn't take long to make a ball, less than three minutes, and we do them assembly-line style so they go really quick," said a Tacoma glassblower who identified herself only as Ms. Monkey to remain anonymous in keeping with the underground style of the event.

One night this weekend (they don't announce the time in advance) about 30 artists and friends will gather at Ms. Monkey's downtown studio, where the hundreds of balls are stacked. They'll receive their instructions, choose their sections of a big Tacoma map, and start carrying balls out to car trunks. Then, in groups of three or four, they'll spread out around town to hide the multicolor blown-glass that bear the design of a prancing pony. Working by flashlight, they'll slide them under bushes,

balance them in tree forks, pop them inside newspaper boxes. They won't go up steps or too far into front yards, and they'll try to spread them out as much as possible.

The whole enterprise has grown from its homespun beginnings into a movement that's supported by a Tacoma Arts Commission grant, distributes medallions on First Night and gets lots of attention from blogs and social media – despite having no official membership, website or director.

But the real effort behind Monkeyshines happens in local hot shops such as the one at Jason Lee Middle School, where the student Hilltop Artists have been making 500 balls and medallions for three hours a day for the past two weeks.

“It's a fun project,” says one eighth-grader at Jason Lee, who like the other Monkeyshines folks wants to stay anonymous. The student grew up with Monkeyshines: His father designed the first stamp and as a child he would get up early and trek around Tacoma hiding them with his family every year. He started blowing glass when he was 8. This year, he's blowing the monkeyshine balls, and — along with other Jason Lee students in the Hilltop Artists program — he designed one of the metal horse-shaped stamps that's imprinted on the top of the balls.

But hiding monkeyshines has gotten harder over the years as the event gets better known – another reason for keeping names, locations and times secret.

“It's a tough job,” says the student. “People would find out about it on Facebook, get up early and follow us around. We'd hide a ball, and they'd get out of their car and take it. So we'd have to (drive around) and lose them.”

In the Jason Lee hot shop, the Hilltop team spent all of Monday (a school waiver day) making monkeyshines. With choreographic precision they took glass lumps out of the red-hot furnace, rolled them in powdered color, blew bubbles, shaped them, cut them off the pipe, sealed them with a gob of molten glass and stamped the horse design on the top before popping them in the annealer to cool. The team churned out a ball every five minutes.

“It's about just having fun,” sums up the student designer. “It's fun for people to try and find them, like a scavenger hunt.”

Other elements of the scavenger hunt include Beautiful Angle art posters posted around town, and glass marbles independently distributed about the same time.

But Tacomans only have one more year to enjoy the hunt: After next year, says Ms. Monkey, Monkeyshines will have run the course of the Chinese zodiac, and may well come to a halt.

Monkeyshines 2014

When: Sometime after midnight Friday

Where: Anywhere around Tacoma; look in odd places

Cost: Free Other Asian New Year events

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