

# Scientific Studies

Artists Leslie Davis and Alia Manetta find inspiration in an unexpected discipline.

BY ASHLEY RYAN



Artist Leslie Davis



COVID Crisis, by Davis, installed on the front gate of her Laguna Beach home in 2020

## GLASS GIFTS

From the age of 14, Leslie Davis was enthralled with stained glass. “Walking home from school, I always passed this antique shop and they had all these leaded glass lampshades,” she explains. “All I did was talk about them. But we were so broke. ... From then on, I read about stained glass, how to do it, but it wasn’t in the cards for me,” she says. At least not yet.

As a young girl, she found a job in order to help her mother, then studied journalism at Orange Coast College, ran some small businesses, worked as a professional dancer and even spent 10 years in space flight operations at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory. But it all led her back to a career in glass.

After leaving JPL, Davis and her then-husband moved to Laguna Beach and, three months later, she launched a successful stained glass business that she ran for 25 years. Then, she took a leap and applied to the Pilchuck Glass School, located an hour north of Seattle and co-founded by glass giant Dale Chihuly. She was accepted into a lampworking program—doing scientific glassblowing, heating glass with a torch—where she herself started from scratch, but learned alongside third-generation lampworkers.

With her newfound skills, Davis designed her first exhibit in 2006 at the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art in Santa Ana. But she wasn’t creating vases or lampshades. Instead, she explored a more scientific topic.

“I would have loved to have been a scientist, but I have absolutely zero math skills,” Davis notes. “But I have a creative mind. ... Back 200 years ago, a scientist was considered an artist. It was interlocked; it wasn’t separate. It’s the way you use your mind to think outside of the box.”

The art show, titled “Worlds in Collision,” focused on four illnesses—malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and breast cancer—as she attempted to put a face to serious ailments affecting people all over the world. It was a multifaceted exhibit, as Davis crafted four sculptures, one for each disease.

For malaria, Davis made an 11-foot mosquito called Anopheles using steel, wire, torch-worked glass and kiln-cast dichroic glass. Within the wings

are faces of men, women and children, representing the many people who have been lost to malaria worldwide, all formed from molds she created herself. The tuberculosis sculpture—TB Man, a deep blue skeleton with red lungs—features lights inside the lungs that flicker to showcase effects of the illness. Her HIV/AIDS piece depicts circling HIV particles that are prevented from entering a modified host cell in a message of hope. The final sculpture represents a large breast cancer tumor made using torch-worked and kiln-cast glass along with steel, clay and paper mache, fabric and twine.

“From about 2005 on, I started with the part of my life that I wanted to educate and give back—I wanted the art to help make situations better,” she explains.

Davis has created other large-scale pieces as well, including an hourglass sculpture called The Vanishing Point that uses slices of MRI scans to emphasize the degeneration of an Alzheimer’s patient’s brain for a Mission Hospital/OCCCA exhibit, five works of art for the opening of UC Irvine’s Sue & Bill Gross Stem Cell Research Center, and a double lockup gate for an exhibit on incarceration, a collaboration with her brother, painter Gregg Stone. She also installed a glass sculpture called COVID Crisis on the front gate of her Laguna home in 2020.

“What’s most important to me is to reach someone on an emotional level—that they have a connection [with the art],” she explains. “... So that they become educated.”

Now, she plans to transition from the large-scale art pieces back to stained glass work—though she used pandemic time at home creating a steel, ceramic and fiberglass mermaid with glass jewel scales on her tail. Davis is also working on another project with her brother, making life-size Mayan and Aztec guardian sculptures, and hopes to find a client for which to create a stained glass window inspired by a colorful slice of an asteroid, which she says would be the peak of her career.

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Left: Alia Manetta with her “Koi Pond” piece; middle: her mural near The Claremont Colleges; right: a close-up of the stickers she made for “Koi Pond”



## MEDICAL MARVEL

While many opt to study art or science, it’s rare that the two combine as perfectly as with Alia Manetta. Her skill sets range from neuroscience, health care consulting and biotech business administration to painting, design and philanthropy.

“Art is vital to the study of science. And science is vital to further developing impactful and inspiring art,” she says. “I have seen many people assume that the arts and sciences are at odds with one another. I think that is a very damaging concept. ... One of my personal missions is to further bridge the gap between empirical sciences and the subjectivity of the human experience.”

Manetta, who was raised in Laguna Beach, would sift through trash cans in Bluebird Canyon on walks with her mother, looking for rubbish to turn into treasure. As a fifth grader at Top of the World Elementary School, she developed “Trash Dressing,” a fashion show with gowns made from garbage that were later purchased by Waste Management for display in the company’s Texas headquarters.

Upon graduating from Laguna Beach High School in 2013, she also earned 11 different scholarships, one of which was granted to her by Festival of Arts for achievement in the visual arts.

But it wasn’t until attending UCLA that Manetta was truly able to explore her two passions. After taking a course called Biotech & Art, she began thinking outside the box. “In my research, I explored how bio-artists used cells, DNA molecules, proteins and living tissues to bring to life ethical, social and aesthetic issues of science,” she explains. “[Ever since,] I have been developing my own bio-art passion projects and research.”

Last year, Manetta created a mixed media piece for the Newport Beach headquarters of OnSite Waste Technologies, a medical waste company known for its innovative disposable bricks. “The goal of the art piece was to capture the company’s incredible spirit and scientific mission, while also bringing more energy, personality and style to the space,” she notes.

Manetta photographed a number of OnSite’s medical bricks, which combine everything from COVID-19 vaccine waste to glass vials and diabetes products, then converted the images into custom stickers in the same size and color scheme as the original brick. She layered the stickers on her canvas, glossed and painted it, then put a protective coating of enamel to finish the piece. The company’s slogan, “Right Here, Right Now,” was added to the middle. From afar, “Koi Pond” resembles a body of water with colored fish swimming

throughout; you have to get up close to see the stickers. All proceeds went to the American Cancer Society.

In another display of science within art, Manetta recently designed and painted a mural for a student housing complex near The Claremont Colleges. “The piece includes a range of vibrant colors, abstract scientific symbols, DNA helicases, blood platelets, nature designs from the local surrounding area and many other hidden details highlighting the vivacity, scientific passions and creative spirit of the 2021 graduating class,” she says.

“My generation will continue to encounter new diseases and new natural perils,” Manetta says. “... We need to have faith in the beauty of our scientific institutions, to leverage our empirical toolboxes and not be quick to dismiss the significance of an individual experience. I realize that COVID is on the front of everyone’s mind right now. It is such a complex and multifaceted problem. But I’m hopeful through a combination of science, compassion and creative solutions, we can continue to bring light and awareness to communities globally.”

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COURTESY OF ALIA MANETTA