

# An Electric Design

**Donna Erwin, winner of the 2015 Tru Vue design contest, transformed a good frame design into an amazing one, incorporating acrylic frames, fabric-wrapped mats, and LED lights**

When Tru Vue announced the theme for its 2015 framing competition, it was difficult for Donna Erwin of Columbia River Gallery in Troutdale, OR, to choose which piece she wanted to reframe. The contest's theme was "Rethink, Renew, Restore," and the focus was on updating an existing wall display piece to create an entirely new look through framing. Erwin, who has nearly 30 years of experience in custom framing, 17 as the owner of Columbia River Gallery, had a wide selection to choose from.

"There were so many frames I wanted to work on," says Erwin. "But with a size limit of 24"x24", it soon became clear which piece presented the greatest opportunity—a colorful photograph in a simple black frame and a white mat. Although the existing framing package the photographer had used was fine, the competition provided an opportunity to transform it into something kind of wild that would match the photo's subject. The image of a neon sign at Voodoo Doughnut, an iconic 24-hour 'Portland weird' spot, called for something else."

Erwin remembered a Prisma® acrylic frame presentation from when she had attended at the National Conference in Las Vegas the year before. While she had yet to work with the acrylic frame samples she had picked up during the session, one thing stuck out in her mind. One of the company representatives had held up an LED light strip to one of the

frames to demonstrate how the moulding could be enhanced by light. Recalling that presentation sparked an idea in Erwin; she wanted to create a glowing frame for the photograph of the Voodoo Doughnut sign.

Her plan was to use Prisma frames with lights to make it seem as if the neon sign was actually illuminating the framing structure. Museum Glass® was essential to the design, allowing the details and vibrancy of the photograph to stand out in the absence of reflection.

With the number of colors and patterns available, Erwin

found that the Prisma frames offered a good fit for the project. The rounded corners mimicked the perimeter of the Voodoo Doughnut sign in the photograph, and the bright colors and patterns of the moulding matched the design elements in neon sign image.

The inside frame she chose was a panel shape in fuchsia with a candy mosaic pattern and a pink lip. The outside frame was an Art Nouveau design, one that dipped in at the middle of each side, and was violet with a midnight blue pattern and a pink lip. Both choices were a close match to the pinks and the pattern of the Voodoo Doughnut sign.



*A photo in a plain black frame was surrounded by stacked acrylic frames and illuminated by LED lights to give the final result an exciting visual impact.*

The thematic color continued with the mats. For the top mat, Erwin chose black with a Britecore blue bevel, which rests on top of the old modified wood frame. The bottom layer, a white mat from the original framing package, was wrapped in a royal blue antique silk remnant. The combination of mat colors reflected the contrasts of black and blue in the photo, with its twilight sky, bare trees, and shadowed brick

building in the background. The use of colors gives the image movement, as the photograph seems to transition smoothly into the frame. Erwin says she calls those her “voodoo lines.”

One tool that Erwin says she found invaluable was the Prisma Visualizer, an online feature that allows a user to sample numerous combinations of size, shape, pattern, and color with an uploaded image. “Several rounds with the Visualizer helped refine my choice of materials,” she says. “The Prisma colors, shapes, and patterns really gave me the freedom to play with the design, but there were also several challenges in putting it all together.”

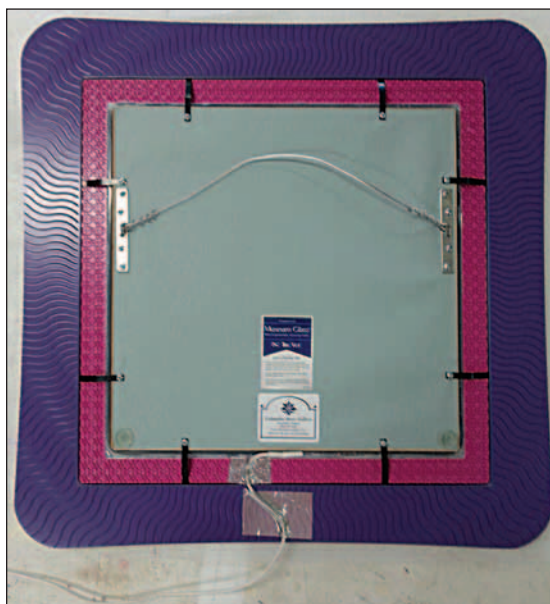
Among these, she says, was the fact that the frames were not made to stack, something that required keeping and resizing the original frame to accommodate the hanging hardware. The original frame also played an important role in holding the two Prisma frames together.

Erwin found that extending the matting beyond the outside edge of the frame provided a hiding space on which to affix a strip of LED lights for the illumination. “The rabbet depth needed was very specific, and it took a few calls to Prisma to determine what measurements to design around,” she says.

One of the biggest complications came from the paint on the rabbet. “Prisma was unable to provide a painted frame with an unpainted rabbet,” Erwin says. “So finding the best way to remove the paint was essential because the lights have to shine through both of the rabbets to illuminate the piece. This turned into an arduous, trial-and-error process. Paint thinner would not work as it would eat into the masking tape and even the frame itself. A Dremel tool was too difficult to control to get the precision necessary to remove the rabbet paint, as removing even the slightest amount beyond the boundary would affect how the light was dispersed.”



*(Above) A strip of LED lights was wrapped around the original black frame, now with rounded corners. (Below) The back of the finished frame shows the hanging hardware, spring clips holding on the backing board, and the wiring going to the LED lights.*



The final solution for Erwin was using acetone as a paint stripper, protecting the edge of the color with aluminum masking tape, and removing the paint with a scraper and paper towels. This took her more than 10 hours to complete.

Affixing the frames was also a challenge. “With this design, there was no room left for the backing board,” she says. “Fortunately, stiff spring clips did the job. They were slim enough to fit into the groove on the outside purple Prisma frame, jump over the back of the interior pink frame, and screw into the original structure.” A small bead of clear epoxy between the two frames was required to make the hardware completely secure.

“Custom framers can create a powerful aesthetic that transforms a piece of art, a photograph, or even an everyday object into something truly amazing,” Erwin says. “Many times framers are limited by a customer’s tastes and budget. In the case of a contest

like the Tru Vue Framing Competition, there was an opportunity to go beyond the typical approaches because of the financial support provided for semi-finalists to create their pieces.”

Erwin’s project provided her with the perfect opportunity to work with different materials and stretch her imagination and skills. “With most customers’ projects, framers aren’t able to push the boundaries because a client’s personal taste and budget influence the design,” she says. “The experience of creating my own piece from concept to completion was a reward in itself. Winning was an added bonus.” ■

For the past three years, Tru Vue® has held an annual framing contest culminating at the West Coast Art & Frame Expo, where finalists compete for top prizes. This year, Donna Erwin, owner of Columbia River Gallery in Troutdale, OR, took home Grand Prize with her entry, “Do That Voodoo That You Do.”