



Jeffrey Hamilton
Untitled
 1990
 278 x 146 cm

You were on the Ausglass committee back in the early nineties?

That's interesting because I'm writing a little article for the next magazine, a vale for Cherry Phillips who died just recently. I'm writing that she was at the first Ausglass conference, as was I, before there was an Ausglass. Warren Langley and Maureen Cahill convened this conference of people to form an association and Ausglass was the outcome. Stephen Moore sent me as the apprentice. I was working with him at the time. He attended, but was very dismissive of the whole idea of getting together. He came to dinner and I sat next to Kevin Little. Stephen was on the other side and there were all these other important people around and he was totally disparaging – unless it was important to him and he was going to be the star of the show (laughs).

His was a 'guild culture'?

Yeah, although David Saunders did give an address and he started to speak fairly intimately about his practice. David ran *Eroica Studios*, a stained glass workshop in the Rocks for many years. He was of the same vintage as Stephen Moor, Philip Handel and Kevin Little.

These people would have been practicing through the fifties and sixties?

Oh Philip much longer. He is now in his late seventies and not very well. He was actually apprenticed to his father as a stained glass artist.

Like Peter Minson – going back generations?

Yes and they all brought preconceptions to that meeting. Anne Dybka was there and she was very open and welcoming. I had an immediate repour with her.

A combination of things came at the same time. One of those was changed attitude to sharing ideas?

You are very much on the button I think. Certainly in the flat glass trade secrecy was endemic. It was part of the business, even to the extent that when I was working with Stephen somebody rapped on the door to come in and have a look. He said, "No, no, no" in his Germanic voice. "It is a private studio and you are not welcome. Thank you very much, good bye." (Laughs)

Even to the point when he was aware of this change. This is a man who came through that generation where he was teaching stained glass in the Budapest Academy prior to the war and followed very strictly the European hierarchy of the master and the subservient craftsman, and breaking up all the different aspects of the trade. There was the glasscutter and the pattern maker and they weren't necessarily the same as the painter and the designer. They were all different parts...

Like factory units?

Yes. He was becoming aware of a change. People like Warren Langley were being featured in *Craft Australia* magazine. I remember a very funny comment, "Annie won't go to the mountain!". He was talking about a semi abstract piece of his girl friend Annie. He was so dismissive of the whole studio glass movement. I think he felt threatened. In his lifetime he didn't achieve the recognition that he thought he deserved. He was always a painter in his spare time. He painted in a very heavy-handed Germanic expressionist manner, but where are these works now? They were never purchased by the galleries.

He was producing stained glass commissions?

The church was his biggest customer. The Catholic, the Protestant and the Jewish institutions were his main clients. The domestic work was that little extra.

Before I forget this point – he put an add in *Craft Australia* magazine, a whole page with the banner headline 'We don't teach', because there were all these hobby classes coming on line with people like Langley teaching stained glass. He was reinforcing the 'individual artisan', the prominence of that as a viable institution. 'We don't teach! That's beneath us, but we do offer the very best service.'

There seemed to be two other influences for change – the art/craft funding bodies and craft magazines?

Craft Australia, yes.

And Moore wouldn't have sought funding from the Government?

Certainly not, I think it fell into that same category – in that he didn't think it was a valid path to follow. You either stood up in the market place and people came and spent money with you to commission work, or it didn't happen. There was no other way. I'm pretty sure that's how he saw it.

Did that funding shift things?

Not for me personally. I have never been successful in getting grants, but then I have hardly applied. I've followed the path of a commissioned artist and it has modelled me. Of putting yourself in the market place and offering that service – “Here I am as Jeffery Hamilton. Give me a commission and I will do something remarkable for you”, that has fed into my own art practice

That comes back to how you see yourself?

If I might mention Stephen's attitude to that, he took a very disparaging view of that phrase 'glass artist'. “What's that? What's a glass artist? You're an artist! 'Stained glass artist' that's even worse!” (laughs). I don't necessarily think that way. Look, I do call myself a 'stained glass artist', because it's just easier. At least it gives rise to a discussion. In the yellow pages, or the white pages I have, in years gone by, a little description. You pay an extra hundred dollars and you can call yourself a glass artist.

What does it imply?

Yes exactly. An interesting anecdote comes to mind. Warren's brother, Michael Langley was looking up my name and just made that comment – “Jeffery Hamilton, 'glass artist!'” Almost in brackets – “The hide of you!”

Maybe I'm guessing. I'm not quite sure what he was getting at there. He worked with Warren a lot, but he was a restaurateur. He was a very good chef who then came on board and worked with Warren in *Ozone Glass*.

'Artist' implies an autonomy?

I think so. Labelling yourself a glass artist has a restriction implied – that you can't work in paper. In fact I made that point in my very first solo exhibition, my debut exhibition back in '82, and I made that point by filling a whole room with drawings so people could see – “Oh, he can draw. He doesn't just make lead lights.”

Your drawing and design are incredibly strong.

It always has been, and it is very important to me. I value it more now than I did then, I think. This afternoon I just went out to Croydon to look at the Adelaide Perry Drawing Prize just so I could see it. I had never been to the Adelaide Perry Gallery and it's a lovely gallery, it's the old Croydon Hotel and the PLC, the Presbyterian Ladies College have taken it over. That's their art room and workshop, and it's a gallery.

Has stained glass made that jump from the culture of the old craft masters to autonomy of the artist?

Yes it has, and there is a strong history of artists doing just that.

Is that what Warren was calling the autonomous panel?

Yes, but it greatly predates Langley - the great artists of the twentieth century, Picasso, Matisse, Chagall obviously. As well, Rouel was actually a stained glass apprentice as a young man. Burn Jones the Pre Raphaelite was a very fine painter, and on the strength of that he was brought on board with William Morris. They formed that partnership on the strength of Burn Jones's painted work and his drawing skills basically. That partnership created some of the greatest stained glass of the period.

The understanding is that people came through stained glass to move on to more creative glass, but your saying that stained glass has an old and strong tradition of creative artistry?

It absolutely has and that misunderstanding is there. You come up against it and I don't know how that comes about. Possibly it has grown out of the extensive growth of hobby stained glass practice that happened through the seventies and eighties (sixties in the states) and then became viewed by the curatorial/academic groups as a lesser form. That's how I read it anyhow.

I'm seen as a purist because I'm still practicing stained glass after all this time.

I hear that institutions like the NSW Art Gallery are dismissive of decorative glass as a valid art form where as that is not the case in Victoria. Jeffrey Edwards [now Director, Geelong Gallery] for instance, praises glass art as a highly expressive and valid art form. I have definitely been considering entering a painted glass portrait in the Archibald in traditional stained glass technique. Whether it gets past the post remains to be seen. (Laughs)

Your training was in graphics?

In interior design actually, I hold a diploma with TAFE. It was a four-year diploma course under the auspices of the National Art School prior to the separation of the design strands and the formation of Sydney College of the Arts and COFA. It had a very strong graphics content. There were three design strands – graphics, industrial and interior. They had a common base year. On the strength of that I then worked in graphics for the next three years.

Do you think as a designer?

Not consciously, but I think it's unavoidable. It is very much about form and balance. The conversation is all about the elements of design. How I read the work depends on where the work originates. If it's a commission, it has an end point. It has a function to serve, or it's one of my private art works, it's something I want to convey.

You work to the brief.

Or we form the brief together along the way. Then there is a whole range of design skills that are brought to bear to achieve a certain end and it's a formal process. There is also an expressive thread running through there.

Your expressive signature?

And the way of making the statement...

You're gesturing with your hand – a thrust. It's like empowering the work.

That's interesting. Yeah I did. Unconsciously but... yes.

Your personal treatment of the elements has energy.

Yes, you're right. You get a result. You give birth to something. You inseminate that piece.

And with your own work?

I'm still conveying a message and it's expressing an inner surge [he gestures up from his chest]. All my work is related to what I carry with me every day.

You're talking about an emotive aesthetic response?

Definitely. There is an intellectual content there, but it is guided by that in the process of getting it onto paper, or making it in glass. Even choosing the colours, the textures of a piece of glass, is as much an emotional response. I've talked about even hearing the qualities of a piece of glass. When I'm composing a piece it is sometimes a musical event for me. The texture and the colour evoke those sorts of vibrations (not physically. I know of synesthesia, and no I don't have that). There is definitely a musicality.

It does get beyond verbal language. There are reams and reams written about art, but in the end it's a picture on paper, or a painting on canvas. Why would you do it if you could write it?

The other question is why do it in glass?

Indeed (laughs). Glass has a quality that nothing else has. For me it's the transmission of light. Clearly here [points to piece] I'm using it in a reflective sense, but still a piece of paper can't do that. Sure you can use neon and put light into a work. Many have done that.

There is a change from how you perceived a work from that early master/apprentice period.

I've had quite a journey. I discovered contemporary glass while I was still in Stephen's employ. I had the good fortune to go to the states in '81. He actually paid for my airfare at the time. It was kind of a research trip. I was trying to find a source for coloured sheet glass (I never did) in Mexico. He had made this promise and he was good with his promise. My wife and I took our little baby and we had a holiday as a pilgrimage of Frank Lloyd Wright, something I had always wanted to do. I discovered then (which I never knew in design college and I had studied Wright) how important glass was in every one of his buildings, certainly in his domestic work. Lead lighting was an integral part from the interior and from the exterior from an architectural perspective. That was quite a revelation.

I happened upon a book from an exhibition on contemporary studio glass in America. It was at that time it was just coming to the surface. I didn't actually catch the exhibition, but I bought this catalogue of blown forms (not kiln formed). There was Harvey Littleton and all those people, and it was a whole new world that I had not been aware of.

What was the difference in approach between the world you came from and the world you saw?

I hadn't been aware of it as a medium of art expression. Yeah, I was still on the up ramp of learning. At that stage I don't think I was aware of Lalique, although I knew of

Tiffany very well. I was lucky enough to see an exhibition of his in Los Angeles. That was a joy.

That was the same period of time that I went to that first *Ausglass* conference. Up until I joined the studio of Stephen Moore I wasn't even remotely aware of stained glass as a trade, as a craft, or as an art really, except in terms of medieval glass. That's not true, I was aware of Chagall's windows, and Roual, yes. I didn't know about Picasso at the time, but I did know of Matisse's windows, yes. So I was aware of some modernism in glass.

This is a collision of world's.

Yes, that was my eye opener. For a Bankstown boy that was my first trip out into the world.

This wasn't funded by the Craft's Council?

No, not at all, that was my boss. I got to fly in a 747 over the ocean. (Laughs) It was exciting. It was exhilarating, for a kid from the western suburbs to do that.

While I was overseas, Stephen had a stroke and when I got back there was a letter of dismissal waiting for me. I had a pregnant wife and a bankcard debt so I registered for the dole, and the next day I registered as a private business. I've been self-employed ever since with the attitude that nobody is going to do that to me again.

It is the best thing that could of happened, because he threw me out in the deep end. I was desperate I didn't know what to do to earn a living. I searched around for different jobs. I set up this design business. I established *Hamilton Design*, registered the name and got some gardening work and landscape design and exhibition design. That was all on my card – exhibition design and stained glass design and teaching. I called up all my friends. Warren was one of my referees that got me a job at the cottage at Mosman.

So I started teaching stained glass and I had to stay a step ahead of my students, because up until then I hadn't actually made anything. I was a glass painter. We didn't make lead light. The guys next door made all the lead light. We designed, cut, painted and fired, then shifted it all next door in trays for Boulton Glass to lead-up and take out and install. So I had to learn that. My first class for students was a slide show. I had just come back from the States and showed them all this wonderful stuff, then I rang up my friend in Boulton Glass and said, how do you make this? (Laughs)

You put yourself in these positions and it is good for you. You learn fast.

From a 'factory' to standing with a glasscutter in your hand and a pile of glass at your feet.

Exactly!

You shifted from one category into another?

I think you are right and the marketplace (if you want to put it in those terms) supported it. They bought it. They turned around and commissioned pieces for their homes, and Warren Langley and Cherry Phillips – lots of people, were making work for a number of

decades, and I was one of them. Ace Lead-lights, Cedar Prest, and it wasn't just domestic clients. There were institutions like the private schools, Newington College at Stanmore have a very contemporary Langley in their chapel. Then I came along and did some much more traditional work much later. Pel Fesk, she was on the Ausglass committee too and Lance Feeny.

Then there was a very strong stained glass faction in Ausglass?

At one stage, the president and both vice presidents were stained glass people. Mark Grunseit and Lance Feeny and myself were the vice presidents.

You feel that stained glass had been relegated?

Well it had been and that's why that Wagga exhibition was so important. That was in 2007. There had been this long hiatus. There had not been an exhibition of that nature since Klaus Zimmer brought Europeans and his own students to the Sydney Opera House in '83 or '84.

The Crafts Council of the time supported it, because I remember there was a travelling exhibition where they actually commissioned David Saunders, Paddy Robinson and me. There were eight artists all-together who were paid a commercial rate to make a stained glass window, 500x500 or 700x700. That became a travelling exhibition.

Like a series of paintings?

Yes, but then it disappeared after that.

Fashion?

I think that is fairly accurate. Looking at the next new thing. You have to say that's what it comes down to. You have to present a new exhibition to the public. I guess that curators always have to be looking to push themselves forward within their bureaucracy, so they are looking for the next wave. I think that's the reality of it.

The old stuff doesn't go away. It is still quite strong and valid and there are those that recognise that, but it is not riding the crest of the wave.

Is there room for different interpretations of your work?

That's inevitable unless you are working literally in representational stuff. If it is abstract, or even symbolic, it is inevitable there are going to be different interpretations. The artist's intention hardly ever gets to the viewer intact. Hopefully there are some threads that will carry across.

I have had some feedback. I can give you a specific example where it has succeeded, where my conception has been conveyed and is, in the situation, doing what it was intended to do. I rank this work as one of my best. It is a window in the contemplation room in the chapel of St Catherine's High School, Waverley. It is going back a few years, because it was commissioned around '87. It was an interesting process for me, because they really pushed me. The brief was to create a work, which would provide a journey for the girls struggling with some emotional difficulty. It was a small room off the chapel and this was the only window in what used to be called the 'crying room' in an Anglican church. In an abstract manner, using all the tools at my disposal, that's

what I achieved. I am told it does do precisely that. Girls in emotional distress will come to that room and sit and reach a point of peace.

An emotional reaction to your structured formal elements?

That's the intention of the work and it achieves that intention. When I say they pushed me, they said with the first design, this is good, but we think you can do better. Here is another seven hundred dollars, submit another design. That is the first client that has ever said that to me. It was interesting to rise to that challenge.

A reaction to light, colour and other formal elements – an emotional response?

Stained glass has always resided there. With medieval art you walk into this soaring space of colour and you can't help but be overwhelmed with a sense of... what, the presence of God?

You are into the sublime.

That was its intention and it achieves that.

Something that goes to your centre and makes you ache.

Music will do that. A poem will do that. Deep art will do that.

It's intriguing then that stained glass is out of fashion.

I think that's a normal process.

Maybe galleries can't accommodate it?

And that too, yes it's a difficult medium to display in a gallery situation – dreadfully hard. For a start it works on transmitted light. How many galleries have windows? How many gallery openings are there in the daytime? They have walls and the openings are at night-time when it is dark outside. So you can't display a stained glass window unless you do it artificially. The bottom line is it's a medium that responds to daylight.

That limited the autonomous panel?

I guess it limited where it was going to be shown. There are some galleries that have windows and window spaces. Raglan Gallery at Manly was beautiful, two sides were glass and with the piece I made for the Wagga exhibition I tailor-made that to fit into Raglan Gallery after the Wagga show.

It's a marketing issue.

Yes, I think you are right.

A function of the market? The only path for a gallery in stained glass is to act as an agent for commission work.

Which works, yes. And you get situations where there was the rise of the craft emporium. I remember Michael Bogle coining that word in one of his articles through

the seventies, eighties and nineties. Where did they sit, they weren't exactly galleries? Yet they were more than a pottery shop.

Areas where they show work that can be commissioned?

Yes, and usually they have a shop window and you could hang an autonomous window in that.

Then you are back to working to a brief. You're not quite the autonomous artist.

I had an exhibition up at Global Gallery late last year and the director said just that. I'm hanging these great big stained glass pieces around the place and he asked, but where do you think they will go? Who do you see buying these works? And I said, frankly Michael, that's not actually part of the equation for why I make them. In this case these are art pieces that I need to make.

What he is asking is how was he going to sell them, and of course he didn't. None sold.

The public have problems?

Yes. It's beautiful, but what am I going to do with it. Then you get a remarkable client like the women who saw the piece I left with Kirra Gallery in Federation Square. On the way back from Adelaide I left a piece with them. The woman at the gallery liked my work. She took the punt and hung the piece in the window. It was there ten days and a woman from Ballarat – came in and said it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She must have it. What was she going to do with it? She'd have to talk to her architect. She was building at the time and it was a debate whether he was going to build it in, or hang it. She bought it, but talking to you about it now, I still don't know whether she built it in, or hung it.

Is it important for you to name the work?

At times it's important. That importance is in that it conveys a bit of the idea to the viewer. I know myself as a viewer walking around in a gallery I like to be able to read a title at least as a doorway into what the artist is thinking. It is an opportunity for the artist to give a clue and for me to remember the piece through the years. You have all these pieces. You can't have hundreds of untitled.

More so, as I am drawing the name is generated as I work. Rather than having a preconceived name, (I hardly ever do that) when I am making a work over a period weeks, that's when the name comes usually. It presents itself and it's, "Yes of course that's what it is".

Sometimes, like this pastel drawing behind you, I will search, I know what it needs to be, but I can quite put my finger on it. I did a Google (my Italian is pretty poor, but it's enough to know that 's a useful language) and I looked for the word to purvey that vivacity. It's called Combreo and that's sometimes used as a musical term – with gusto.

The musicality thing again?

A lot of my work is named after musical terms.

Music is a formal abstraction.

Very much so. I finished a street piece last night and I realised how much of a signature piece it was. I have been illustrating a book over the last year and each page is a new drawing and it's literally playing with form, with elements of design, with shape, colour, line and they refer to each other, all those bits have a conversation. That stroke talks to this wave of colour and this spattering carries energy across because that's your eye travelling around. That's almost an audio experience.

Are your works open to change in your interpretation over time?

My body of work is changing. My style is changing. The works themselves are of their time. I may have moved on, but I recognise where I was then and I can read it.

Interesting, they are you in time like the death of JFK?

Yes, those important seminal events in history where you remember where you were and what music was playing on the radio. Works of art are like that for me. I put so much into them usually and they are of their environment. All the stuff that I do is stuff going on at that time.

Almost time locks.

Yes.

They take you back. In them you can read yourself (at a point in time).

Umm.

Other people see different things in them.

Now that has happened. I've looked at something sometime later, years later and it is a revelation. I see things that I didn't see when I was making the work.

Related to that some people have things reveal to them when others see things in the work.

Something else. Yeah I've had that happen to me as well.

Relating to the discussion of music, off tape Jeff spoke about his love of dancing. He related this to my commenting on his fairly dramatic subconscious movement when he was talking of expressing forces in his work by organising elements on the glass. He pointed out that when he was painting his large street pieces he was moving as in a dance with his full body surging up with the paint roller's action on the canvas.

When he is composing his glass works, he works in black and white on paper using very bold, gestural movements [expressive of forces]. He then has to translate them into the glass, but they are not easily transferred because the sweeps and the cuts and the movements that are almost as a dance. (He created one of his huge pastel works when he came back from an all night dance party.) These works carry an embodied movement.

The interest is in the gesture of the embodied dance move as the expression of forces and in translation coming up against the resistance of the glass to be cut and composed. This translation is challenging and took him into areas where his cut is conceived before the gesture hits the glass.