



Peter Minson
Western Thornbill (detail)
 2012
 Flame worked borosilicate
 28 x 15 x 28 cm

I do things that interest me (and I hope I sell them). That's the main thing that drives me. When people ask me to make things I try to work something into it that interests me. You don't want to do something you hate.

You enjoy solving the technical problems?

As far as I'm concerned if you don't get the technical side under control, then you can't make anything. If you don't understand how to use the glass properly then you are going to have problems. You are going to end up with broken bits.

For me, because I have an industrial glass background, the aesthetics of the job was never the point. It was, "Here's a drawing, make that".

A skills base?

Yes. There is no technical instruction about how to make it. There's a drawing with the dimensions and it's an article that you've got to make. So it becomes problem solving. How do I make that? If you're lucky you might have had another glassmaker who's done it before show you the procedure, but invariably with 90% of the stuff you are going to make, there's no one who's going to help you make it. It is always a problem solving exercise. Even to the point where you are given something extremely difficult (maybe to repair) that is way beyond your skill, or equipment – yet you have to do it.

So you sit down and go through all the things you know. Things you have made, techniques you have used, the problems you encountered in things you have made, then put that all together to fix this problem. A classic example was a big conical piece of apparatus about 600mm across made on a glass lathe originally with glass 20mm thick. I had to put an interchangeable joint onto the side of it. To get another one from England, America or Germany was a six months wait. They asked could I repair one and make a new one (and we don't have a glass lathe). I did it successfully. I didn't

have an annealing oven to anneal it, so I used an old record turntable set at slow speed and a piece of asbestos that the thing sat on. It was hanging over the edge, but it was there. A whole lot of fires were set around it, when it was hot enough I joined bits on. We annealed for hours – gradually turning the fires down until we got carbon on the outside of it (that meant it was annealed).

The classic outcome was, when I finally gave them a price for it, they asked why it cost so much (even though it was cheaper than from overseas).

Going back to what I was saying – *confronted with the problem of how to fix it?* Tom Moore was studying at the School of Art in Canberra while I was doing some teaching there. When we talked he was always asking how do you make that? One day he said, you always answer by saying, “It’s solving problems Tom.” The idea is the easiest part. If it has never been made before, or if you’ve never made it before, how do you make it? So it’s a combination of all the skills that you build up that allow you to do the new things.

Does creativity come from solving a technical problem using your accumulated skills and intuition?

Probably. The thing is, my head’s full of ideas that I want to make – anything in the day – that could be ten things. You hear some saying and you wonder how would I make that in glass? Let’s say there might be a common saying... *like a bird in the bush* – something like that. How would I interpret that in glass? Like my *Pole Dancers* which came out of hearing all the paper and TV talk about Kevin Rudd being caught in a night club and saying, “I came out and rang my wife straight away to say I never looked”. When it is all said and done what the hell. I have people come in the door who teach pole dancing in Canberra as an exercise class. Then you have Howard saying all the time “It’s all about work choices”. So I make a work that is a social comment on two things.

Ideas from everyday life?

Basically. The dreams I had when I had tenus were a different thing again. There are things about that – they in your head all the time and they never go away. They are there daily. There are an endless number of things that come into my head all the time. All those things simulate me.

Is it unfair to say that your work is technically based?

Yes. The technical side is a language to me, but it only allows me to carry out the ideas. Whenever I have an idea about making something (if I think it’s a good idea worth pursuing), then the next thing is how am I going to make it? Then I’ll refer back to my technical knowledge and draw on that vast technical knowledge to put it together. If someone throws an idea to me I can get very excited, but then worried. The moment you say yes, you are committed to doing it, and the last thing I want to do is fail. So I come back to the basic technical language of glass (which underlies everyone who works with glass). The ones who are good have a good technical language, because that allows them to bend the rules.

It’s pretty cut and dried and if you want to go outside those rules you are going to make the glass do something the glass is not going to do easily. Glass doesn’t like it. It

doesn't tolerate it, so there is a whole thing in there that I don't think you are going to do successfully unless you understand the technical language and have a high skill base. Skill allows you to bend the rules, to extend the glass.

What role does the glass itself play in this?

I don't like being restricted by what the glass will allow me to do. The moment I start to have a problem technically, I don't like that restriction. Now I know what that restriction is, so how do I make the glass do something it doesn't want to do so I still get my idea out? That often comes down to procedure. How you make the bits and put them together, or how you arrange the making process.

There is a saying told to me by an old Italian glass blower – *Glass is a one-way street, you can't go back*. Well, that's like waving a red flag to me. I believe you can! However, if you don't understand what you are doing well enough, the moment you try to go back, you lose the whole piece. It's knowing how to bend the rules. Anybody who is good at it (I like to think I am good at it and I'm sure there are people better than me around the world) has come to terms with this same problem of how do you bend the rules.

The *montage technique* we talked about is a highly skilled technique and once you get the technique under control you ask, "How far can I take this?" It's a matter of how many times you can do it to get the effects that you want.

You enjoy 'pushing' the glass?

That's right. Each time you do it you are asking more of the glass. The more you work it, the less it likes being reworked. There is a limit to what you can do. You can't overwork the glass.

What do you call yourself?

Well I haven't come at what I do as an artist, which is in some respects is actually good for me. The term 'artist' worries me because it has connotations. I worry when an artist looks at a work and says, "that's not art" and evaluates and values it as not artistic. Looking at what I have made over thirty-five, or forty years, I accept the fact that I am an artist.

I lot of people go to art school and then say, "I am an artist". They present themselves as an artist to their friends and to the world. They come at it from that point. I never came at it from that angle, I've always felt a bit shy about being called an 'artist'. I went to art school because they had all the equipment there and I could play. For the first time in my life I could make things without having to justify the cost of doing it. For the first time in my life I devoted time to just exploring the artistic, creative side of me without the pressure of justifying the end cost – having to sell it. If it took me a week, or a month to make something I didn't have that constant pressure of justifying how much time I spent.

I stepped out of that box. There are a lot of people who are technical, especially scientific glass blowers who try to make *art* and don't do it very well. I consider the work they make poor artistically, because they are only showing off technique for

technique's sake. I suppose by going to art school I answer the question about making something of value artistically. I could make something of artistic value.

What judgement makes you think work is of value?

I think again it is what you feel yourself. I wrote in a Craft Australia magazine, "You make things for people to use, but you make art for yourself". Inside I still question being an artist. In the end I look at what I make and ask – is it pleasing, is it balanced? I look at my *Pole-Dancers* and technically they are quite good and I like them. There is a story behind them. The little faces on that piece, I look at them and I feel they're interesting, I'd like to do more of that work because it is not like making a wine glass, or test tubes, there is something more, a bit of freedom in there.

Is there any room for accident in what you do?

Yes there is. Some say there is a happy thing that happens. You do something and it doesn't work out. There are things that do come out like that. You ask, "How did that happen?" It might be a colour, or a shape. There are happy accidents. Not that many really, because I am really driven by the idea and I don't want a happy accident happening in the middle of it. But things do happen and that's when you say, that's interesting, where can I take that? I can add that into something else, or use that in something.

At the same time it becomes another problem, because you probably can't repeat it and if you do, you have to do it purposefully. So the happy accident doesn't happen anymore, it becomes part of what you do. You look at it later on and say, "I probably should do more of that, develop it and see where it goes". You probably don't, but if you do, it takes you in another direction again. It's just one little facet of what you do, what you achieve.

The thing is, I like all areas of glass. I'm not fixed in lamp-work. I really enjoyed the lead tubing. Shane [Ferro] knew that [Shane Ferro supported by Richard Clements was taking a workshop Peter attended]. I was the only one in the class that could handle it (and I handled it within 5 minutes of starting to do the work). I know Richard [Clements] said, "Oh Christ, what are we going to teach him?" But I'm interested in all areas of glass and all types of glass. Lead glass was just wonderful. It was like going back forty years. I felt I've missed this. Its fantastic using it in a way we had never done before, because we never had those powders and things. At that time it was only making things out of it technically. Revisiting it was really good.

When I was in the art school it was all about fusing and slumping, so I took Bullseye pieces and put them into the glass (which is what I was on about before I went to art school). I had a furnace going years earlier and was doing something similar in furnace work. It made me realise that I am probably rare in that I cross over between all the areas. Whereas most people are just a lamp-worker, or a furnace-worker, I'm not. Richard [Clements] said he wouldn't ever play with the lead glass, because he was never comfortable with soft glass, whereas I was. The same thing applies to fuse-work, or furnace-work, people learn one set of skills and devote their time to that.

Flame-work is the most demanding?

Yes, it is the most demanding. You talk to anybody who does other areas of glass and they will probably say the same thing. Furnace-workers never really get lamp-working together. There are very few that do. It's the technique and the time factor. It's precise. You've got to use both hands in a way that you don't on a furnace. Fuse and slump-work – the same applies – casting, whatever, you set it all up and the kiln does it.

You were saying you make a hundred, or a thousand of a thing to learn it. Are those skills part of body memory?

They are. They are intuitive things, because you don't have to think about them in the end. The skills are there at your fingertips. You just know how to make things. There is a part of your brain that is doing it.

Like driving a car?

Yes. You know how to change gear – the glass is the same with me. I can be having a full conversation and be making a thing at the same time. Part of my brain is locked in to the conversation and part of my brain is locked in on the process I am doing. If I ever stop talking in the middle of making something, you know that something is going on here that's not right or is difficult. I've got to concentrate on what I'm doing. Once I get it right I'll start talking again. I'll be talking like I am now and half way through a sentence there will be dead silence.

You don't have a chance to stand back and change your mind?

No, you don't. That's the fascination. You have to make decisions now! You can't sit back and think about it for 5 minutes, because if you do, you will lose it. You have to keep moving. It's really cut and dried.

That's why you need body skill?

That's right. You call on it endlessly. You don't even realise you are drawing on it. When some 'happy accident' happens you go, "Oops! What actually made that happen? What did I do there?" The furnace-work was the only thing that got close to lamp-work, but then you can go back in the glory-hole and reheat it anyway.

At Orrefors they insisted I took up copper-wheel engraving. I resisted, but this was very strict craft training. The argument was that you had to understand all these other facets to make your work properly and I did relate very well to copper wheel engraving. It was subtle. You can't make a mistake. It was a delicate touch. It was concentrated effort. I could do the other techniques, but they were tedious. The subtlety of the copper-wheel engraving got me. After my six months I was very glad they had insisted.

Is there a crossover from flame work to engraving through 'hand/body' skill?

Yes, subtlety and a soft touch with no room for mistakes. Living on the edge. There is always that element in it. I was also lucky to meet Goran Waraff, a master glass designer from Costa Boda, Sweden. We met in Sydney – another story.

Where did our contemporary glass movement come from?

The thing is that when I started (I got off the track of scientific glass in '67, '68), I didn't know anybody else existed in glass. I was in complete isolation, just doing what I was doing. Richard Clements came to work for me for about a year after I gave him a job. He was a scientific glass blower. He made a statement to me when he got his job – "I'm going to teach these people in Australia all about glass." He already had in his head what he was going to do. He spent a year with me in the factory and hated scientific glass – although he was a scientific glass blower. I taught him how to make things quickly.

For most of the people who came to work for us it was the same, John Schelman, Mark Elliott, a lot of the flame workers came through our place [Minson Scientific Glass]. Blanch Tiltan (jewellery) was a product of mine through the Canberra School of Art. She makes repetitious parts, 500, 1000 parts to make a necklace and if it takes her five minutes to make each piece, it is going to take forever. Her question to me was, "How can I make this quicker?" She showed me what she was doing and I said that each piece shouldn't take more than 30 seconds.

It's a skill thing. Where you take it is your own thing, but if you haven't got the skill together you can't take it there. Over a period of time I did it for her as I did it for Richard over a short period of time. The same thing applied when a scientific glass blower takes 5 minutes to do something when it shouldn't take more than 45 seconds. Basically I've approached everything along the lines of time and motion study.

What happened that had these people going off to start making 'object'?

Well Ausglass started. I didn't know it existed and I met Goran Waraff in 1974 (I think). He was fascinated to find I had a furnace operating in Sydney. He asked, how I was doing this and why. We became good friends and still are thirty years later. He looked at what I was making (I had made some wine glasses that sold fairly well in an exhibition down in the Rocks in a little gallery Craft Australia had going). I went to pick my work up after the exhibition and the girl at the counter said a Swedish glass designer was here and he commented that your work was the best in the exhibition. That was a rather nice comment. I saw him a month later and I said, thanks for your compliment. He said he liked my wine glasses. "You know there are three parts to a wine glass – a bowl, a stem and a foot. You got one bit right." I replied, "Thank God I got one bit right... Ah, which bit did I get right?"

It's all about design, shape. It's all right to have the skill to make it, but if you don't get the shape right. He was talking about design and balance. If you get that right you will sell a thousand of them, not a hundred, or ten. We talked over a number of years and when I was in Sweden he had all these drawings on his wall. "Every morning I come in and look at the shape I am designing and I rub the line out and draw a new line and when I think I have it right I will have the bowl made up in the factory and we look at the finished article made in clear glass – not coloured glass because nothing distracts you. You see the inside and the outside of the line."

There is his influence in me. He also said you should have a practical side because function sells. Even if it is a non-functional article you still have to balance the stand right. So if you look at my little faces with the stands, the proportions are important.

I met Dick Marquis when he first came to Australia. He was a product of the American exuberance of Harvey Littleton. Most of the product they made that I saw I had very

little time for. It was the 'Technique is cheap' stuff. Then when he came back and spent a year in Hobart Tasmania and that's when Les Brackborough came in. What happened was that he spent a year down there just perfecting his technique. He didn't teach anybody – if you wanted you could watch him work. It took him a year. He could make plates that were perfectly round. When Goran saw the work he said now he could work anywhere in the world with his skill level. That was after one year down there. Les was pottering along beside him. Les was interested in glass and they probably did a bit of stuff together – there must have been some influence there.

Les would have been really grounded in Japanese aesthetic and European craft?

I would say so, but I don't feel confident to talk on that. I know that in that twelve months after they invited him back all he did was blow glass and get his techniques right. If he wanted to make a certain shape teapot, he could make it. He certainly could make a plate that was round, or off-centre if he wanted. I went and saw him down in Hobart. I stayed with him. He produced a poster – typical Marquis – with him sitting on a log in his bloody hat and the title on the poster was '*Technique's not so cheap*'. So what Harvey Littleton was saying with *Technique is cheap* was that you can always get technique sometime in your life. Dick was saying you've got to get your technique together and it's not so cheap.

I laughed and I said to him that's true, because I come from the technique side. That happened about 1975.

The Australia Council started to promote glass in 1974. They were looking at what was happening in the American studio movement and decided there was nothing happening in Australia. They didn't know I existed. They brought out Bill Boyson and Sam Herman and Dick Marquis and gave them parts of Australia to operate in.

Seeding?

Yeah, and Bill Boyson made a comment to Mike Gibson who was a writer for the paper in Sydney saying there is only three glass blowers in Australia and I've come to teach them how to blow glass. I looked at Mark Elliot who was working for me at the time and said, "Well Mark, that's you and me. I wonder who the other bugger is?" Of course Leanora had 40 glass blowers blowing up in Newcastle making lamp shades, and up there was Julio Santos who went to teach in Caulfield with Denis O'Connor out of Wagga. Denis O'Connor was learning design in Leanora with Phillips lighting.

Like Minson Scientific Glass people at Leanora were of high technical competence, and making functional items in glass?

That's right.

The Australia Council decided to bring the Americans over to get something happening in glass, but there was already this European technical competence.

That's right. With Bill Boyson, Corning built the mobile glass trailer, but they couldn't get it to work making glass. They took it north, having failure all the way along until they got to Newcastle where they were in the paper. The head people at Leanora went along and said, "We've got 5 tons of glass up the road. We'll give you some cullet and you might be able to make some decent glass". Then Peter Docherty and Dennis

O'Connor took a holiday and went with them. (Peter is part of the design staff in Corning.) They got their act together then and they turned up back in Sydney at Australia Square where I went down and met them all.

How did the American's react to this technical competence?

They were pretty off-hand about it – 'cowboys'. Like they were the best, but I think it was all good – Nick Mount arose out of that. Boyson met Nick and Nick became his favourite boy, travelled around and became his protégée. He took him back to the states. (He [Nick] started Budgerie Glass.)

Maureen Cahill was probably a very strong influence in starting Ausglass. She came back from studying glass in England and got something started at the college in Sydney [SCA].

Maureen is so exuberant.

Yeah that's right, but she's also technical. She got that in England. Then there were other people like Warren Langley. Stephen [Skillitzi] who was at the cutting edge all the time came back from America – pottery study, got mixed up in glass. He came back and talked the Potters Society into letting him build a small furnace in their alleyway down in Darlinghurst. I went down to have a look at it. I had a furnace virtually up and running by then. We both agree that we started about the same time because (I probably shouldn't say this, but I will anyway) he is very much on about 'I started all this'. I remember him walking into the factory [*Minson's Scientific Glass*] and saying 'I'm building a glass furnace down at the Potters Gallery. He came to see about other stuff (glass) and wanted to see what I was doing at the factory. I said, I've had a furnace I'd built out the back and he went "Oh God! You're already up and running." – that's neither here nor there.

A dynamic time.

Yes. I'd already been to talk with Crown Corning (or Crown Crystal) about building furnaces, because we bought all our soda glass and lead glass tubing there. I said to dad, "I'm going to build a furnace". He said that was a good idea. I was about twenty-eight and I was ignorant. Dad said he'd made glass. He got a little beaker and he heated it with a glass blowing burner and we made glass. He showed me some books he had on furnaces and stuff. These were technical books. They were from British Intelligence. They had been through Germany at the end of the Second World War and pinched all the bloody technical stuff off the Germans. He had some books with formulas. In Germany in those days the formula for making glass was written on a wall with a bit of chalk.

Guild secrets?

Yes, that's right. They kept them to themselves. Nothing was shared, but British intelligence had lobbed into a factory that had been bombed out of existence. You've got to get the industry going again. They looked at this and helped them get started so they wrote all this stuff up. My dad had some of these books – I don't know were they are today.

I read them and said I might go down and ask the glassworks how to build a furnace. They knew me because I bought glass from them.

Corning used a huge industrial furnace.

That's right. I went knock on their door. I didn't know America existed. I just thought it would be nice to make some glass. I ask, "How do you make a furnace?" They said they would need to get permission from the boss. I went back after a week and they said, "No, they couldn't tell me anything." I asked why and they asked me how much glass was I going to make in my furnace? I told them it would be a 50 pound/100 pound furnace and they laughed. They had no concept of that – for them it was how many tons. I told them I only wanted a tiny thing to muck around with.

They said they decided not to tell me anything because you might become good at it and become competition and they would not risk the monopoly they held for 60 years. It was the old story of *Knock Out Smith*, who had got rid of all the competition glass factories around Sydney. That was their answer – nothing! Four years later they are up to their ears helping the Australia Council. It was only when the Australia Council arrived with political influence. That's how that all started basically. 1969 I was talking to them, 1970 I decided to do it anyway, muddled my way through to 1972 running a furnace. Stephen was operating at the same time, but he and I never did anything together.

He was from studio ceramics; you were from industry.

That's right. I looked at books on industrial glass that said this is how you build a furnace and that hasn't changed – cross fires. The American system was all fires on top and I looked at that and said they have got it wrong, you must have cross fires. But the Americans are fantastic once they get the bit between their teeth. They're problem solvers. I relate to that.

They shook up Europe too. Europe was complacent. Then they had to take stock of where they stood in the world of glass.

It's an interesting mix of cultures.

I'm in the middle of all that. Ausglass was good to start.

From the guild system of secrets to open sharing.

Well in Ausglass at the start they wanted a guild approach. There was a bit of talk about that. The thought was that you had to have a certain standard to become a member. Maureen was against this and other people were for it. I was against it because I thought it should be open. If you are going to have strength in an organization when so few can do it anyway (but you want it to grow), it should be open to everybody, amateur or not. America didn't have guilds while the Europeans didn't exchange any information, but they do today. Australia was a mix between the two.

If everybody has access to information what gives you an edge?

That comes from technical competence. Good ideas and the ability to carry them out. The point is the good idea is only the starting point with any form.

You were previously talking about the way people view and judge your work.

I think I'm past that now. Everybody who considers they are artistic has a bit of that in the background. It's insecurity, I suppose. Is it really art? ...I'm comfortable with it. That is where art school was good for me... it gave me permission to some extent. If you have never done anything like that and it isn't in your background, well you not really an artist. People are tied to titles.

You are generous in sharing.

You can only teach people the technical side. I don't think you can teach art.

There are rules in terms of design and form.

...Everything has something like that in it. We are surrounded by that. It's about seeing. If you can't see, then you can't do. People say to me, "Don't you draw?" Well yes, I can draw, but I don't, because it is a waste of time. I see the picture and I make it. If I can see the picture I don't need to draw it. If I did it would only be a sketch.

I was having an exhibition and I said I would like to look at the gallery space, because I would make the work to fit the space. They said that was interesting, because no one had said that before. I map out the number of pieces I am going to make and I scale the pieces. That's an automatic thing. Federation Square [Kirra Gallery] has a lamp working exhibition every year. I'm always conscious of the fact that it has to be something different, something interesting. I know everybody else's work. It sold well and the owner is really pleased, because it turned over. It was pretty practical stuff, but I looked around the gallery and fitted in with everybody else's work. A lot of people don't make anything different. They make the same thing every year. Each year I make totally different work.

I'm frustrated because it takes so long to be good and most people give up. Today there are short cuts, but in the end there is no substitute for doing the work. ...I like all areas. I don't work in one area to the exclusion of all the others.

When you return to your old work, are you surprised?

Sometimes you're annoyed that it's not good enough. I've had people proudly show me my work they have bought and I think, "Christ, that's bloody crap, I wish I could get it back and I could give them something better", because I think it is poor quality work, or isn't good design. At the same time you realise it was probably what you could do then. They loved it for what it was, and they still love it.

If you stop growing you are in trouble. I think I am still growing and the work changes. There is always another idea, the skill level goes up and I understand the materials better. It's what I try to teach people, you have to find this thing inside you that grabs you.

Does time 'disappear' when you are working?

Yeah. Eight hours is nothing. It goes. I'm always surprised it is four hours later and Lindsey is saying we should have some lunch. Time's gone. It could be ten hours later.

You might say after, “God, it took me five hours to do this!” Gary Lisle I find interesting because he works standing up and can’t work for more than two hours at a time. I’d get nothing done in two hours. Even though you are conscious of time and motion – doing it well – it’s a different type of work to making a teapot in 40 minutes. This is the other side. This is the creative side.

Interview recommenced 23/02/09

We talked about how people saw your work only to dismiss it

What we were talking about is the set up at this location. When I worked up behind the tearooms, I had a studio out the back and inside was the gallery. They never related to me as if that was my work [occupation]. They saw me as a hobbyist. At the time I was a drink waiter in a local restaurant. Sometimes we would see the same people at night. I would be giving them drinks in this restaurant. They’d ask what else I did and I say I was a glass blower full time. They’d come past to see. When they saw the work they would see you differently.

The set up we have now is much better – better gallery, better lighting, better display, and there is hardly anybody today who sees this set up as a hobby or asks me what I do for a real job.

I used to be uncomfortable with the term artist, mainly because I never went to art school. So many people go to art school and consider themselves as artists. I never came from that direction. I used to dismiss the term ‘artist’ by saying I was actually a glass blower. That’s an easy way out because you’re not pigeon-holed, or boxed in as an artist, which then leaves you open to someone dismissing your work and saying its not art, it’s only craft. For a long time I put that aside. I came from a technical scientific glass blowing background. Nobody there considers themselves an artist. They’re glass blowers.

Going to art school for three years probably helped enormously. With the work you did, you weren’t looked at as a scientific glass blower. They were looking at you as an artist. The work that you put up in front of people was judged as such – as good artwork.

You shifted context?

Basically yes. Then I became much more comfortable that the work I was making was from the artist’s point of view, not from the technician’s point of view.

You changed?

Yeah. That’s right, because I got some credentials I suppose, which is what you are doing by going to art school for a number of years. You get a piece of paper at the end of it saying you did your time there and that virtually stamps you as an artist. Whether what you are producing is good art is another matter. I had to make a decision as to whether it was an associate diploma, or a full diploma and that came down to time – five days a week when I could only afford two.

A number of makers state they are craftspeople.

This is the old question of craft or art. You put paint on a bit of canvas, or you weld a bit of steel together (not a teapot), then you are automatically considered to be an artist. The moment you make something with your hands that is practical you're considered a craftsman. To be in the crossover between those two areas is very difficult. It is probably one of the few things where there is no well-defined line. I consider the very good design of a functional item art. In years down the track something can be held up as an icon of an era. Then it was a craft object, but it is considered artefact these days – an art object. When did it go from being one to the other? Craft is dismissed as 'only craft'.

Brian Hirst's comment when you got the Churchill fellowship was that it was about time you got some recognition.

That was a fairly off-hand comment – "I suppose you deserve it by now. It's about time."

Are you very conscious of recognition and acceptance?

Aren't we all? I suppose I am because I've come at it from a different area to most people. Most people go to art school. They are trying to make art/craft and most of them fail miserably because they still haven't learnt what function is all about. If you want to make an art object, it still needs a structure. They haven't got that together.

If you take away function you have removed a strong way of accessing a thing.

Yes. Then, if it doesn't sit properly, it can still be classed as art, but it's a useless object. I remember years ago I was asked to bring works down to the Crafts Council gallery in the Rocks. I left it there for their team to access. They were wine glasses and candelabras. They held them for a month, or six weeks. I kept asking for their decision. In the end they said to me they didn't want any of my work. They were reshaping the whole gallery, so everything had to be 'classic design'. I thought, what the hell are they talking about? The stuff I had given them would be classified as classic design. Gorham Waff had said that's it. Under those conditions I walked away thinking I didn't want to sell my work there anyway if they didn't understand what I've given them to look at.

The stuff in the gallery wasn't selling enough to justify what they were doing. So they were going to reshape the gallery to be more commercial. My stuff was selling very well thank you. If that's what they were doing, I thought my work would fit in very well. They dismissed it as not classic design. I walked away thinking they didn't know what they were talking about. I don't think they knew what they wanted. At that stage I hadn't gone through 'am I an artist'. I was just making and selling work. I was making my ideas and putting them out to the public and they were selling very well. In those days I didn't consider myself an artist.

Venue has a lot to do with it, too. Where something is shown. The moment you walk into an art gallery, it's art. Yet you look in the art gallery [ANG] and they have a shop there and they are selling craft objects as far as I'm concerned, that's what the market demands.

I've been asked twice now to make work for blockbuster exhibitions. That was *The Italians* and the *Rembrandt* exhibitions. They came to me and asked if I could make

something for them to sell in their shop? What they wanted was two lots of stuff. All of it had to be representative of the period. They wanted glassware that represented Rembrandt's time, 15th, 16th century, or the Italians 16th century. Could I make them some wine glasses? They gave me a commission of fifty wine glasses and some other bits and pieces.

They displayed them in two different ways. One was really in the shop and the other was like artwork. They didn't understand how to display the work so the public could see it. I went in and I couldn't find the work so I asked where is it? They said it's up on the top shelf there. How are the public going to see that. They sold all the work when they finally got it displayed properly.

They have paintings on the wall with these blockbuster exhibitions and they are selling glassware representative of the period made by me. If that doesn't put me in the art area I don't know what does. If you saw a wine glass in a picture and then there was the actual glass – that was art.

There are two things – what the public wants and what we think is of artistic value.

The first time around there was a classic. I took some wine glasses in (25 or 30) and put them in front of the bloke who had originally asked me to make them, and his opening line was, "Oh, we wanted hand-made wine glasses." I was taken aback by the comment and said, "Well, that's what you got. These are all made by hand." He said, "But these are too good. These look like they are all made by a machine." "Well they aren't." I said, "everyone was individually made by me, by hand without any machine". "Wow", he said. "Yet, they're all the same." "I don't know what you're getting at, of course they're all the same. The Venetians were doing this." Then he put up a dozen in a line and there wasn't a millimetre of difference in height or shape. He asked, "How do you do that?" I said, "That's what I do. That's what I thought you were asking for. You don't want misshapen glasses?" "No we don't want that, but we want them to look like they are hand-made". Eventually I said, "That's how I work. That's the quality and skill level." He said, "This is amazing."

Well the public loved it, because they weren't 'wobbles'. They were perfect. I don't know how to work differently. That's what I bring to my art and my craft.

They saw amateurism as more individual?

It's easier to portray something as handmade if it isn't a perfect shape. If it has some wobbles in it. I'll give you another example. A lady asked me to make six wine glasses for a dinner party she was having. I made six wine glasses and I delivered them and she said (this was the snob value of what she was doing), "They're all the same". I said, "Yes". And she said, "I'm probably going to offend you but could you make me a couple more that obviously aren't as good as this, so when I have my dinner guests at the party, they will see this is why they are worth so much money" (That there are obvious differences between them because they are all individually made).'

As if Venetian masters could not have made standard wine glasses?

So why did Dick Marquis spent a year in Tasmania, not teaching, just perfecting his skills. Because he wanted to be viewed as somebody who had mastered his art, this

craft. If he wanted to make something round, it would be round. It was all skill. You can get too good at it.

Richard [Clements] said you can be tied to the skill.

That's exactly right. You get it off pat. There is not difference. Then you lose the softness of the material. You lose that beautiful way it moves. You become too tight.

Klaus Moje talks about the resistance of the material.

Yes. The thing is that if you lack skill and technique you accept what you make. That's the best that you can do. Years ago when I was learning to be a glass blower and doing scientific glass I could have made a spiral condenser, but it wasn't if it worked alright, or looked alright. The first thing the professor did was take the callipers out and he measured it. If it wasn't within the tolerances given he'd reject it. It would still do the job, but the results he was going to publish needed to refer precisely back to the piece of equipment to get the results, or else his results were invalid.

He wanted you to operate like a machine.

That's right. It had to be exact. It was immaterial that it was well made. They had no interest in the intrinsic artistic value of the article. It's of interest to me that you see so called artists today wearing a stopcock around their neck as a part of a necklace, or they use scientific apparatus as part of their art (with funny liquids inside them). They all say to me I just love those fantastic scientific shapes.

They've shifted the object's context.

Yeah. They put fungi inside it and it becomes art. I'm not dismissing it. I'm just saying if asked, I could make that shape.

Could you ever be stopped by the material?

What a question. Because it is getting out of control and you don't like to lose control of it. So the moment that starts you have to pay attention, or you will lose it completely.

Implying that even with your level of technical skill this material won't let you take it for granted

No. It will always let you know if you're abusing it. If you're outside your comfort zone and you have a problem. If you don't pay attention you will end up with nothing.

A canvas wouldn't do that.

There's a classic comment Klaus [Moje] made. In the school of art in Canberra he had some bowls up for display. In the classic 'art/craft' way some student who was learning to paint said, "It is only a bowl, isn't it?" To Klaus that's a red flag and he asked, "If you make a mistake, what do you do with your canvas?" The student said, "I paint it over and start again." Klaus replied, "Well I can't do that with my bowl. I live with the result."

How many paintings show evidence of five paintings underneath? You can't do that with glass. The best you can do is engrave over it, or etch it.

There's always cold working.

There's always cold work, that's right. You see what I'm getting at. You have to have a sense of humour. If you get too serious, you get bitter and twisted. When it is all said and done, I'm making my ideas for myself initially. Hopefully the public likes it and pays something for it. Then I've got the best of both worlds.

How do you feel about doing work for another person's artwork?

Initially, it's a job. Then you try to understand what they want. The only thing that gets you upset in the end is that they don't give you recognition for what you've done. There have been people I've done work for that everybody raves about, but my name is not there (saying I actually made the work). In a funny way Dale Chilhuly has been fantastic, because when he lost his eye and couldn't do his own work he had to employ people to make his work. He realised the value of that person's skill and gives them equal status. It may be Dale Chilhuly's work, but it is made by (insert name).

In America, particularly, is where the whole game changed. With Harvey Littleton if you didn't think the work up, then make it, the work had no value as art. If you got someone to make the work for you, he was dismissive. Chilhuly, when faced with the problem of never blowing glass again, released us from being skill based.

He had been in Orrefors a month before (I was there), at the art school presenting himself as the world's best glass blower. Sven Eric had walked out in disgust because he was making one of his *basket weaving* series, cylinders were he had pulled all the canes (with help from students). It took forever to make and I was told the story (they didn't know who I was). They had just had this American there and Inval Westman, who ran the department had to stay because he could talk English. It took forever to make the article and Dale probably made it badly. He put it in the kiln and while they were all sitting there a student asked could he use the left over canes. The kid proceeded to make an identical article in a quarter of the time. Chilhuly got rather upset and said that's OK you're a better glass blower than I am, but you've got no ideas. All you did was copy me, which is also valid. Dale knew from that one exercise he would never have been a good glass blower.

After losing his eye he had to employ the best Italians, or the best Czechs. It released him from this American pressure that said if you didn't actually design and make it yourself it had no value. I talked to him in Canberra in '93 when I drove him around. He said he would have never been good enough. He may have not used those words, but that was what he inferred.

I worked with Göran Wärf and Ben Hinds in Costa. (Ben Hinds was the top glass blower in Costa and he worked in the special design department.) He was head of a team of seven. Göran said I gave him a headache because every day I'd come up with a new idea and his opening line would be he couldn't make that. He'd come back later having worried about the idea and say he thought he could make it now he had worked it out. At 72 years of age what an amazing person to be still challenged by the material. He thinks about it endlessly. He is never beaten.

Are you still challenged?

You are never that good. Everyday something happens. You go back and revisit ideas too. You think you have it out of your system and you look at it later and think you can do better. Klaus said that I should get on to something that is my signature piece and stick with that. That is what so many people have done and they just work the same piece over and over again, different shape, different sizes. When they try to break away from that they have great difficulty because they are locked in to that as their production piece. I have a few pieces (like the teapot), but every time I make one there is something nice about it. I still like the shape, but I can never get one good enough. Then there is the *port pipe*. I've made at least 30,000 of that one article. That one is dead. I can't improve on it. That is it.