

*Andy Plummer is a studio glass collector and in collaboration with Maureen Cahill, he instituted the Ranamok Glass Prize.*

*Opens the conversation chatting about two glass objects that make up the first work he purchased.*

The sunlight through the drapes picks that up particularly nicely. You see the lines stretched out on the top of that glass – it's topography. You can see every last little dip and hollow. I like the imperfection in that. I think that artist (Robyn Campbell) was at ANU and she stopped making work to have kids. I haven't heard of her since and haven't seen any more of her work. I have asked and people have said she is off having family.

In twenty years time I imagine that many of the people who actually graduate from college in glass at ANU, or Sydney College will not be doing art and glass because they'll find it hard to make a living, among other things.

*Describe your collection.*

I suppose the guiding principles are grounded in the Ranamok Prize (which was set up as an Australian/New Zealand prize). I wasn't seriously collecting before we put the Prize together. However, I was doing things in glass at Sydney College [SCA]. Lots of short courses and then I went beyond that to become a 'miscellaneous accredited something or other'. They gave me a space and I was an old mascot around the place. I would come down on Tuesday nights and Saturdays and do my own thing. Maureen [Cahill] was there, but I was dealing with Ben Rufi who was a lecturer there in glass. I found Ben an interesting guy and I guess that Ben found what I was trying to do was interesting as well. He took me on because he probably thought anyone who wants to stick around until midnight on Tuesday night must have something driving him. Through that process I got to know some of the Australian artists and their work and from there the glass prize started. The prize was driven by the fact that I was having difficulty with my time demands and I saw it as a way to combine work and play (i.e. a need to leverage my business and that kind of stuff).

It was tied into my own interest in glass, but it leveraged my entertainment dollar. At the time, my business was investment banking and I was competing with all the big banks and their million dollar budgets. They could take clients to the ballet, the football, or the cricket, whatever. I was looking for a way to positively differentiate my business in an overcrowded arena. Having worked in glass I knew what challenges were there. It is technically challenging and there are no short cuts, unless it is by accident. The same things that appeal to me technically with glass, appeal to my commercial sense. It's material based, but then you have ideas and you have to marry techniques and ideas by tricking the material into doing what it naturally doesn't want to do. I think that it also appeals to the people in my business. When I say technically oriented, I am not necessarily talking about a 'science' orientation. Technically trained people think logically, whether as an accountant, lawyer or engineer – the thought process is the same. That thought process lends itself to glass a lot, because there are no shortcuts. If you have an idea and you have a raw material, how do you put all that together so it actually works?

That I found really interesting and I thought if I was interested in it, then the people that I work around will find it interesting as well, even though the males (they are mainly

male) in that area are results oriented and at large are not particularly interested in the arts. But I found that once we got the thing up and they got exposed to it, they actually got drawn into it. Now there are a lot of people who collect glass that I know I have introduced to glass. They do it because they think it is beautiful and because they know some of the artists now. They like the 'hand-crafted-ness', 'the one-of-ness'. They like the process.

You look at the glass community (I have never seen anything quite like it in all the arts) and it's like a posse. The glass community and subsets within the glass community are so strong internationally. They seem to know everybody and it's connected. There is more network and community than I have seen anywhere else in the arts. Nothing seems to have the intensity of the glass community. People know everybody around the world. You have places like Pilchuck. People get obsessed and drawn into it. I like that obsessive quality, even though it is not always fun to fight an obsession.

Glass is a hard thing to do and you've got to be determined and obsessive to do it well. If people think they are just going to start blowing vessels they have no idea what's ahead of them. There was good reason why in the old days you had seven year apprenticeships, then become a journeyman for another ten years and only after twenty, twenty-five years you got to be gaffer. It takes a long time to build the skills up and to understand the material.

The Ranamok Glass Prize was set up specifically for Australia and New Zealand, because that is where we live. If you don't constrain things so people understand where the bounds are, then you end up with a miss-mash. I am really interested in the culture of this country and about this part of the world. There is a very strong work ethos here and a strong cultural imprint of Australia, unlike anywhere else in the world. I wanted to capture that in the Prize. The criterion is that it is contemporary glass in Australia and New Zealand.

After Maureen and I set the prize up, I thought it would be a very good way to start my own collection – by cherry-picking the best in the country. There was some really good glass coming through the prize, so not only did I get a chance to pick and choose, but the commission on the pieces that I bought went back to support the prize. Friends that I bought in as sponsors saw I was buying glass and they thought that they better get on this thing before they got left out, so they start buying glass too.

Deirdre and I together collect Australian and New Zealand glass. It gives us a focus. We've been in Australia for thirty years and would never consider living anywhere but here. As migrants, I think we feel stronger about Australia than many native born Australians. What we are trying to do is capture some of that quintessential 'Australianness' of the place.

*Is there a culture of Australian glass?*

Without doubt, there is a culture within Australian glass. You see these communities being set up. Queanbeyan is an example. You have the ANU close by with all the facilities, plus the Australian Glass Centre. Students go through the ANU and they get connected into the network. They go next door where they are attracted by lower property values and where there are friends they went to college with, or there is some mentor working. That is not unlike what you see in the Pacific North West around Seattle. You get an incredible community of glass people who all know each other and

all start to leverage off each other. Really interesting stuff starts to come out of community and you see it in the big historical glass centres like Murano. Hundreds of years of community where businesses have been built up and you have furnaces everywhere. The minute someone discovers another technique it sweeps through the community and everyone puts their own mark on it.

It can actually get too ingrown. Where 'this is the way it is done' and 'the way it has always been done'. However, you step outside a hide-bound tradition and weird and interesting things come out of it. Thirty years ago in America and Australia (where there wasn't much of a contemporary glass culture) you had a bunch of young guys and women who weren't constrained by tradition and thought anything was possible. So they just started doing things. We see that in Australia a lot. In Australia, I also believe that there is a deeply ingrained sense of inferiority that is part of the culture (and not necessarily a bad thing because people try harder thinking that they are not quite up to the international mark, even though they are way, way up there). It compels people to push themselves more... we have a history in Australia where people don't feel like they've really 'made it' unless they have gone somewhere else (like London or New York) to be recognised.

I think that this is one reason why you see exceptional talent coming from Australia. Australians are determined to step out and prove themselves. There is a risk taking. You see it in Australian expatriate communities around the world. There are Australians everywhere. That's because they are pushing out. You find guys that are at the top of their fields in mining and finance. They're all over the place. You get the same kind of thing in glass. Australians 'box' way above their weight.

*What attracted you to the first glass you collected?*

That's not an easy question actually. The simple answer is that Deirdre and I buy a work because we like it. There is something about it that appeals. We tend not to be obsessive about a particular artist and collect only them, but that said, there are some people that we have two or more pieces from. It tends to be a bit of a mix. Some of the pieces you see around the place are done by really well known people, but they may not have been well known when we bought them. As they get more well known we tend not to buy as much. As an example there are a couple of pieces up there by Giles Bettison. I think that little bowl there is an exquisite piece and it is very, very fine in its detail. I follow and appreciate what Giles is doing, but I think that piece he did fifteen years ago is just stunning and as good as any of his later work that I've seen.

His skill today has to be greater than it was back then, but what appeals to me in that particular piece is the fineness in the work. Glass as you take it bigger, has the risk of blowing out and getting muddy and indistinct. On the other hand, with glass you can also get high precision so that it looks like it was made by a machine... sometimes that look does not appeal to me either.

*What attracts you to 'a piece' in a gallery?*

The fineness is one thing, the craftsmanship, the workmanship – all that stuff is a given. If there is something that has a good idea embedded in it, but there is not that 'craft' ethos behind it, then I am not that interested.

It is really hard to define what appeals to us. There is a cameo piece there that I feel is one of the best pieces we have. I am not talking about it being worth more or less than other pieces. I don't know what it is worth and don't really care. It appeals to me because it takes a classic form (a Greek vase), a classic technique (Roman cameo) and it interposes a modern Australian thing – it's about aboriginal missionaries and nuns. It's a such a finely done piece, but it's not done by someone who has been working at Steuben glass for forty years and you can see 'mistakes'. It's got a fresh feel about it. It has heart. It may have taken weeks, or months (I don't know how long – but it was a lot).

*You're looking for a sincere response on the glass by the maker?*

On a lot of the pieces that we have, that might be a common theme. Some of the stuff is more decorative, more dramatic, and there is a place for that.

*There is also the narrative of 'place'?*

'Australianness' is important to us. With the first pieces we looked at, they were just quiet pieces that talked to each other. They would not be nearly as interesting if they were just one piece. They change colour with the light because they're made of dichroic glass. At night with fluorescent light, they turn blue. With strong sunlight they turn violet and in weak light they look green. With light underneath, it's different again. You see the internal stuff coming through. I also like it that you can see the hand-marks. It could be carved wood and each one of those marks is something done on a wheel. It's the same with the Edols/Elliott work. I know with each one of those marks, Kathy has had it on the wheel. There is that 'hand-madness' which really means a lot to us. This blue piece (which is lovely) with its flamed surface, does not have that same appeal for me. I don't like sandblasted surfaces quite as much either.

*The maker's touch is important?*

Yes it is. That little basket up there [Jane Gavin bead work] – how many hours did she spend making that thing? It's made out of glass, but you could throw it up against the wall and it won't hurt it. There is Wendy Fairclough work – we love all her work (we could probably collect more) and there is always a narrative. It is very quiet and that appeals, because glass can shout (and a lot of it does) and look pretty lairy. I don't like that stuff much.

I'm way beyond the 'it's big and it's red' that attracted me at first. I started collecting books before I collected glass pieces and there was a book by Susan Franz about the contemporary glass collection in Corning. There was some really terrific work in there that blew me away, particularly stuff that Dale Chilhuly had done. Very theatrical and that's what brought me in. As I actually started producing my own work and critically looking at others' work, my sensitivities and sensibilities changed. I found myself more attracted to the things that don't necessarily shout.

Never the less, look at that piece of lamp work and pate de verre over there [by Nudibranch], I like that because it is 'so out there'. That's a really interesting counterpoint to everything else going on in here. I brought another of their pieces (orchids) because it surprises people. It surprises me and makes me smile when I look at it. Glass doesn't all have to be 'serious' stuff.

*It is as though you are looking for conversations with the glass?*

That could be one way of putting it. That piece by Richard Whiteley over here (which I think is a wonderful piece), I don't think it looks like a lot of Richard's work. On the outside it doesn't seem to be as finely done. There is stuff going on in the glass. There are imperfections (and I know Richard well enough to know he strives for perfection), but sometimes it is harder for a maker to see imperfection and back away from that and let it be. I can almost see the fingerprints in that and I feel that is really interesting from Richard, because you don't see a lot of fingerprints in Richard's work. You can almost see where he was working the clay model and he just let it be, and I think that is really cool.

To be able to do it, but not to do it, means moving into another space. I find that really interesting. You see it in some of Klaus Moje's work. You see it in the progression of his work, particularly since he got to Australia, where he gets a bit looser. Without a doubt he is a technically superb craftsman, but you get to a point where you say I have done that, now I choose not to. I will let myself loose a little bit – I think that's really interesting.

*What about Cobi's work up there?*

I like it because it is really quiet. Not only that, but there is pretty strong stuff there. She is expressing herself in a really cogent way. It is not about 'saving the whales' and 'global warming' mixed together as muddled things. It's very concise. She has something in her mind that you can put a narrative around and she does it.

*Are Wendy, Richard and Cobi moving toward something?*

Cobi's work is great and again we have two pieces of her work that we brought separately, but like these two pieces [the first piece of studio glass he bought was bought as two pieces making up one work], which were bought as a pair, I actually believe they belong together. The one supports the other. Each would be weaker without the other.

I think the same thing applies to this collection. The array of Edols/Elliott stuff in the background – I actually had fun putting that together because the whole is stronger than the individual parts in my view.

*As a group are they collectively talking about something?*

A bit of that, but I'm not sure talking is the right word. I know the people who make this stuff are all committed people. They work really hard. They come from different directions, but it is almost like you have little pieces of them in here – like you have your own party going on. I dare say there might be very few pieces of glass that I have where I have not met the maker. Some of them, I have more than met the maker – I am friends with them. It means more to me if I have a piece by someone I know and like. I know how hard they work. I know what they are thinking about. I know how earnest they are in producing their work.

*It is not just a matter of supporting someone you really like? You would have to really like the work?*

Without a doubt, if we didn't like what they were doing then we would not buy their work. I am not taking on a crusade for anybody. We buy what we buy because we like the way it is. It is almost like when we buy things we ask ourselves... will they fit in at the party, because there is a bit of a conversation going on here.

I'm so use to seeing what I have here that it is hard to come at it fresh and see whether there is any coherence. With all the glass here (and there is more in the back) the same two people have been buying this for fifteen years. There is probably a common theme reflecting the way we think and the way our thinking has evolved over time. In the sensibility and the sensitivity we have to the material, we are much more discerning. Our buying has tended to slow down, because I don't see a lot that I'm attracted to.

*And the attraction is?*

It tends to be people who are coming into the scene new – a fresh thing. I have been involved now for fifteen or twenty years. Established artists have a practice to maintain, so you see the same things coming out year after year. It gets more refined with time, but in my view sometimes refined does not mean better. New ideas and new ways of looking at things – that is what I find interesting. Some of the work of new people coming out of uni is really interesting. The technical skills may not be up to someone who has been around for twenty years, but the ideas can be really fresh.

There is stuff in Ranamok (without naming who they are) where I think that is really interesting, but with the execution they need more time and skill to work on this. But they have got my attention. They have something, but now the challenge is to stay the course and to deal with all the hard-core technical issues that they will have to deal with and still come out with those great ideas.

*Do you carry those ideals across when you are on the selection panel of the Ranamok?*

Without a doubt I do. I have my own aesthetic, but I'm very careful about how I deal with it. I don't want the prize to ever be seen as a proxy for my own taste. Even though I have been told I can be strong willed, I try to back away when it comes to this and I let things take their course. Occasionally, there is a piece that doesn't get into Ranamok where I feel it is a big mistake. However, if I feel 'a piece' really should be in the exhibition, I will take a stand. That does not mean they have a chance of winning, but they are so unusual, or 'counterpoint-ish', they need to be there.

There is a conversation going on in the Ranamok too. There are a lot of weird things mixed together. You can go from a cast piece, to a formed piece, to a painted piece, to a blown piece, to lamp work. It's like a very strange cocktail party and they are all taking to each other (some louder than others). In my view that's what makes Ranamok really interesting. Rather than seeing through the eyes of a curator who is putting it together, you are seeing through the eyes of four people and you can end up with a tossed salad.

You go from one plinth to another and say, "Geez, where did that come from?" When it's opening in Canberra, it's interesting hearing the dialogue going on. People get excited and they're asking not only "How did they do that?", but they are saying "I don't

like that” or “I love that”. Utter strangers are having these conversations with one another as they are wandering around.

*The last piece you purchased?*

I don't have it here, but it was the orchids [by Nudibranch], two different techniques going on there, lamp work and pate de verre. I know the people. I have brought other things from them. They are both very skilled and their work is really funky. They are thinking about things that I would never have thought about.

In someone else's house, if that were the centre of their collection, you would wonder where these guys coming from, but that is not the case here. It is a counterpoint to all the quiet stuff that is going on around the walls. It's full of life, sex and rock and roll. It's like someone on drugs was doing it, but they did it really well. It has been executed really well. Christian [Arnold] is a very good lamp worker. A lot of his work is this 'off the wall' stuff. He is clearly not interested in stuff that appeals to other people. He is doing his own thing. It works for me.

When we put the glass up, we don't just lump it all in. We actually think about where everything is going to go. That is about the pieces interacting with one another and about how we feel they interact. That may not be the same way that anybody else might arrange things. Deirdre and I debate it a lot. At this time and in this space, this is how we feel these things relate.

*That's between the pieces. There is something that happens between you and the piece. There is something that happens between you and the artist. These are complex relationships.*

Yes. We are not 'trophy hunting' either. Having been associated with glass over twenty years you do see ferocious trophy hunting where collectors have to have 'that piece'. We are not into that. In fact we shy away from that. There is a monetary value put on things and that does not appeal to me at all. With us, there is never any idea of selling things. We are not collecting for that reason.

The cocktail party is an interesting concept, but there are space limitations going on as well. We are not going to buy a piece that is six feet tall, because this is not that kind of space, and we are both quieter than those monumental things.

*I asked where your response is coming from.*

Without doubt it's an emotional thing. Some of the stuff I never get tired of looking at. Some times it links back to remembering when I bought it. A lot of stuff comes out of Ranamok finalists. It connects back to that time.

There are some pieces that, if there were an earthquake, I would say "Oh well, shit happens", but there are a few pieces where I would be really upset, because they are irreplaceable, even if you went back to the same person and asked, "Please do it again".

The pieces that we first bought lend 'a calmness' to the room. Richard's piece does the same thing. It is very solid. It's there and it changes as the light sweeps around and lends different aspects to the thing. They give the space that we live in a quality that is

important to us. It makes the space peaceful and more serene I think. It makes it easier for us to live in it.

Funny, even though our taste has gotten more discriminating, the first glass piece that we ever bought is one of my favourite things. We come back to the start and there are things that never change. If you think of all of the things that you could do with glass, then that is a really quiet piece. There are probably more 'quiet pieces' in this collection than there are 'wild pieces'.

*Are there pieces that you find people reading differently?*

The Nudibranch piece we are enthusiastic about and we really like it, but you can tell with some people that they wouldn't have this thing in their house. That's all right, but then there are things that friends buy and collect that are not to our taste. That's okay too. It's a big world. These are saying things to them that are different to what they are saying to us I guess. It's about putting things in your environment that make you feel better.

*How influential are 'the supports' that surround a work – articles that you have read, the comments of an articulate gallery owner?*

They can have influence. I hear what gallery owners have to say here and overseas. There are some I respect more than others, but I have strong opinions myself. Just because someone says 'so and so' is an up and comer or 'so and so' is buying his work, I couldn't give a stuff, it is not what drives me. In fact, if anything that will drive me away from the work. But the more you know – if something is written about the work, particularly by the artist, rather than somebody else, then I am interested.

The way something is presented in a gallery – of course that can influence us. But we have bought things out of storerooms too. I bought that Klaus Moje piece from Heller Galleries from a shelf in a storeroom, but I loved it. I think that was on consignment from someone else's collection.

*You don't have a problem separating a piece from its context?*

Not really. If it is a great piece sitting on a storeroom shelf with fifty other pieces, it can work for me.

We are accidental collectors of glass. Deirdre and I have never gone out saying let's build a collection of glass. We don't want to be lumped under that 'collector' label. We're not out there collecting trophies. Deirdre and I assemble things because they appeal to us. It doesn't really matter to us whether they appeal to anybody else. Looking around and reflecting on it, I think that there is almost a feminine edge to what we have assembled here. It tends to be understated. If you had to characterise the assemblage and made a hipshot, would you call this a male or female collection? I'm asking you.

*I would never have considered a 'gender' base.*

There are some really interesting pieces. The Brenden French piece is not to everybody's taste, but I love his work. He is one of those guys who knows his material really well, but he chooses not to take it to that refined place. Clearly he is rejecting

some of the craft ethos, because there is a child-like thing going on, but don't let that deceive you. He is thinking hard about what he is doing. He resolutely chooses a different path. He uses paint on glass and the effect looks accidental, but it's not.

We could have decorated this place in many different ways, but we chose this. The tranquillity, the serenity, that's an important thing for us, because sometimes outside life is not always tranquil. It's nice to have a quiet place of refuge (that's not to say it's always tranquil around here). It adds to the ambience. It's almost a projection of what we want it to be.