



Stephen Skillitzi
Snappy Thoughts – A Self-Portrait
 1996
 lost wax cast glass, gold and copper electroform
 40 x 20 cm

I did a similar interview to this three or four years ago with the Canberra National Library. They have taken about three hours of audio. That was transcribed and is now in the library under the *Eminent Persons Program* along with hundreds of others. You need to be aware of that resource, because they do lend those out.

Studio glass culture in Australia evolved within one generation?

It is little younger than Australian pottery. That goes back before World War II, but perhaps you could start that after WWII with Peter Rushforth returning as a Japanese prisoner of war and picking up pottery as a therapy. He developed his pottery from there. So in a way we are on a par with the clay workers. They preceded us by ten years or so.

Ceramics go back much further.

Yes, art deco ceramics and before there were many backyard potters and kitchen table potters, and there were the Boyds (with Merrick out at Heidelberg). That didn't influence me much, because it was involved with Australiana and kitsch (by today's standards), but I admired it as experimentation – its pioneering qualities.

Experimentation – is that how it started with Australian glass?

It came from many different sources. I emphasised the American prototype, but there is someone like Douglas Annand. He was a family friend. His house was in Killara in Sydney and between the two wars he had a very important practice, not so much in glass, but in design – furniture, jewellery and particularly in graphic advertising material. A year or two ago there was a retrospective of his career in the National Gallery. He died around 1975. He was important to me in high school. I was aware of his career and visited his studio.

When I came back from USA in August '70, he was right there encouraging me, aware of my glass blowing. He was there at my first exhibition at the Potters Society Gallery next to my studio in Woolloomooloo. I have no photos, and that's always a regret for us old timers. Why didn't we get the camera out? If and when we did, we were always behind the lens.

I see you as a caster.

Well I've gone back to blowing in the last five years. I wanted to rediscover my roots in glass. I started out with blowing in America. Certainly before then I was doing some melting of glass and doing some very ordinary, basic things in kiln-formed glass in my pottery kiln from age 13 or so. For a couple of decades I left off blowing almost entirely – particularly after I left off doing open-air demonstrations around the place. Then I concentrated more on kiln casting, installation work and performance – not so vessel oriented. I've always had the motivation of a sculptor, rather than a vessel maker. I think that's a fair statement, three dimensional, rather than utility.

I was making from a very early age. I have a photo of me making plasticine animals/human heads when I was five. My first ceramic piece was called 'Duck' with wings extended, which I did when aged about nine in the art class. I still have that to this day. The class ended and I wasn't able to finish that right wing, it was misshapen. [laughs] It would never fly. I mean it's fired and glazed, and fifty years later it's accusing me, "Why did you make me a thalidomide bird?"

Emma Varga talked about childhood episodes that affect you for the rest of your life. That might be your moment.

Frustrations are part of the game

You see yourself as a sculptor?

Yes, and more of an adder rather than a subtracter. Sculptors are in two categories. The great Michelangelo hacks away at the stone. I was an adder. You start with a core and you build up, rather than with a block and discovering what is inside of it. They are very different mentalities and that is often overlooked. In a sense it is how you are hardwired. From a very early age I felt that I was hardwired into the sort of work that I do.

I like to think that what I do is enjoyable without having to convince myself too hard. If there is some humour there, then that's a condition of the work. It doesn't have to be cold stone hard and rational. One quote from Bernard Shaw I'm reminded of is, "Long live the eccentrics, if the eccentrics of the world die out, so does humanity", or words to that affect. The fact that eccentricity is part of history, part of culture, reflects that we can think laterally. We don't all conform to the moulds.

I've had some critics say, "He was experimenting with glass." Often there is this pejorative thing about 'playing' and then you discover your style and become a 'mature' artist. In some ways it locks artists into a mould where they find it hard to break free. It may be pressures from a gallery, or from their peers – that they have to live up to standards and not to go off in directions that may not be productive. For collectors this might undermine what they have collected as the signature piece. I did allude to that as the games people play, in the art community 'Rat Race' game.

The artist becomes a narrative?

Yes and you have to be true to that narrative, otherwise you betray your public who are following you. I like to step away from that as much as possible and just disappoint people who think they have got me tagged.

Do these new directions come out of playing with the material?

With me it doesn't often come manipulating the material. It's very much a cerebral activity, but not at my desk. My most creative time is between 3 am and 5 am, when I've done with my consciousness and I'm into my alpha waves, or whatever you call them and I find I can articulate ideas clearly in my head, without any stuttering or hesitation and those ideas flow. When I'm half awake, rather than fully awake, I can rotate this three-dimensional virtual sculpture in my head, as you can sometimes do in a computer program and refine it. It is a very liberating time, because when I'm fully conscious as I am now, I'm about half as smart.

Because your working with the constraints of logic.

Yes and to be fully awake is a stultifying thing for a dreamer. I like to think of myself as a dreamer, and probably not as commercially successful as I should be.

It's an interesting way to frame yourself. It reveals a lot about the way you work. A lot surfaces from your subconscious.

I think that's fairly true. *The Abstract Expressionists* and the *Action Painters* and the people who deal with automatic writing – Cy Twombly is one as a painter. It's just consciously avoiding rationality to allow something else to arrive. Sometimes people like Salvador Dali have said a little. I remember him being mentioned by Jenny Zimmer in an article she wrote about my *Mind Games* in a *Craft Australia* magazine some years back.

Your work has more freedom than that.

In many ways I'm totally dissimilar. I admire his free association. A lot of things that go through my head don't materialise. There are performances and street theatre, which run through in my head, but there is no appropriate venue, or I haven't got time to organise it, or it may be inappropriate for the audience. So a very small fraction of what I think about comes to fruition.

Yours appears a literary approach.

A lot of it is narrative, but I haven't published a great deal of it. On occasion I do exhibition catalogues. Many of my sculptures particularly (in the 80's and 90's) were tableaux of figures engaged in various activities. A lot of them went to America and were exhibited there. Each of them had a paragraph or two written in a boiled down, almost telegraphic style and was a bit too dense to read. To me that was an interaction between words and the piece. I'd write something and that would influence what I actually did in the clay or the wax before it went into the glass. In glass it is hard to modify.

I am a reasonably literary individual and I do write articles about a whole range of things and have them published. The speech I presented [keynote address Ausglass '09, Hobart] was a cathartic experience in many ways, because it meant I had to focus on things long gone and dig up those old photographs, rationalise them and rue the fact there weren't more. Peter [Minson] mentioned that – "Where were the photographs of his early work?" He was busy making and the same with Warren [Langley] and me. In a sense it's inexcusable, because we knew that if the world kept going without blowing itself to bits, we would have to show this material 40 years down the track.

Describe the culture you saw developing.

That's important to me. I did react to the Vietnam war. In a sense it was my war. My brother got called up. He excused himself on the basis of a fake back injury. I illustrated him in the talk as the mad cosmologist/scientist... I went overseas before my marble got put into the jar [conscription lottery] and sailed for England. I would not have coped. I would have been a conscientious objector.

Again it seems there are strong literary traces that flowed into your work.

For me my important work is 'purpose driven' rather than commercially driven. Because I was involved with a group of people who were being called up in Australia and also in America... in many ways it polarised me and a lot of the work that I have done has been to do with war and with conflict.

I did a whole series of *Ground Zero* nuclear games written up in the Crafts Art mags. I got to version 7. These are playable games with different formats. We got dressed up playing out the game. In the first Ausglass exhibition in the JamFactory in 1980 or '81 I had a ground zero nuclear game and got a lot of people involved. Gerry King was there... I've got a couple of dozen games, fully playable with rules written up. That's a whole era that has come and gone. At one exhibition in Melbourne I almost had more written material on the walls than objects on the floor.

Tangible objects?

Yes clay, or more likely in glass. Boards with peg holes in them, and cast or blown pieces. One – *The Ecology Game*, was purchased by David Wright, the glass man of great note. That was turtles and jellyfish in white blown glass. The basis of that was that turtles sometimes swallow plastic bags in the ocean thinking they are jellyfish and choke to death. This is a huge tragedy. So I made a game on the basis of what I read in the newspaper. That game (and many others) is a reaction to the world around me.

It wasn't that I thought I could change the world, or reform people through my art. You don't expect art to change human nature. It was a protest that those with sensibility would pick up on, something I needed to say. In some way it might endure. Some poetry endures beyond the newspaper article. As far as getting the didactic point across, you can't beat a newspaper or a newsreel. They are one to one, whereas art has a lot of 'flowery' non-essentials, which are hard to interpret or are ambiguous. In terms of getting a point across you can't beat the written word.

But ambiguity leaves room for the participant.

That's the saving grace for art. You can interact; you can dialogue with the work. It isn't spoon-feeding.

Is it a questioning where one's response can be on going?

I agree. I thought about questions a lot. The thing about asking a question is that you remain in control, because you are asking somebody to respond. They can walk away, but you are, in fact, leading the conversation, guiding it through your questions. It maybe a rhetorical question, but if it isn't, you hang around waiting for a response. It reveals a person far more than if they were sitting in a chair smiling back at you. A good lecturer will interact with the students and get the sleepy ones up the back to wake up by asking a question. It really does give the lecturer some idea whether he's effective or not.

What do you see your work doing when you have gone?

It's from A to Z really, because some works require rules to interface with them.

They cease to be effective without the rules?

That's part of the work. There have been quite a few shows I've had where the games have been the predominant exhibit. There have been a few things sitting on a plinth here and there. That's one extreme – I have a specific target and that is the way you do it or it doesn't work. Right through to things where you make a bowl and it can be used as an implement of Zen meditation and you can fill it with water, or eat your porridge out of it. Anything goes. It's an open exercise. There are no rules. That whole spectrum is open for exploration.

What's the thing that drives your aesthetic?

The more important work I mentioned. It's that old, old struggle with myself being at odds with the world systems and yet I'm obliged to politely conform.

Social criticism?

I have a great unease about how things are run. I'm not saying I'd do it better. Even within the art world, the pricing system drives me crazy sometimes. One person can be elevated (as it were) and you put another couple of zeros on their prices, while I could have done that, and done it better, yet charged one hundredth of the amount. Why does that have credibility in the art world? Why are collectors so sheepish that they require someone anointed as their advisor to tell them how to spend their money? What do they get at the end? Why isn't there a closer relationship between cost/benefit – time spent, richness of material, artistic integrity and innovation in the idea? Why is it that the people who have picked up on someone else's idea (and have got the right gallery contacts) are able to elevate themselves above those who started things? These are questions that I forever asked myself.

It's a bit 'shonky'?

Absolutely. I don't think it has any integrity that can be sustained under questioning. I think the whole 'gallery system', the 'auction system', the 'status chasing' – the ways of going about things that get artists sucked in – the 'status game', is ethically wrong, yet it is politically unassailable.

How about creatively?

It does affect creativity. There are practical reasons why you can't just make anything that comes into mind in glass. One main thing is that you've got to pack it and freight it. I'm thinking I can't put that arm there because TNT [transport company] will knock it off. Therefore my creativity can't go where I want it to go. I have to think about stability on the plinth.

Marketing?

I came to grips with that really early on, because in the 60's I had some Japanese tea-bowl makers thrust under my nose by Peter Rushforth. They really had to be very careful to not get into a pottery studio and start making things, because they would ruin their market. It's like a *penny-black postage stamp* being reproduced all over the place. What does that do to the value of the *penny-black*?

I grew up with the clay mentality and clay and glass are sister crafts. They are dealing with hollow vessels and they are dealing with fused silica. I see a lot of commonality between pottery and blown glass, more so then with blown glass and stained glass or architectural glass, or cast glass. In the early days, (my seminal period) we exhibited blown glass along with pottery in the same craft shops on bales of hay. I can't divorce the link.

Coming back to the Japanese tea-bowl makers, their creativity was stifled by all the hangers on – the gallery directors, all the collectors. Once they were up there in that niche they were imprisoned. What has guided me is I don't want to be imprisoned, and I could have been imprisoned if I had pushed a certain direction too far and become too successful with that signature style. That would have brought smiles to the faces of the gallery directors, because they then know where they are 'pigeonholing' you. They can promote you and not be surprised when they open the next crate. They can 'on-sell'. This is part of my distrust of the system. The system locks people in and stifles their creativity. You can't react the same way you do in life – where you go here and there and it is a free country. I see a lot of successful artists trapped by their reputation, and I would have thought that comes back to creativity.

It's 'keep your day job' or 'have a bread and butter line'.

Well yes and no. In some ways, in this country with its economic safety net (Centerlink and so on), you can afford to bump along the bottom and you won't starve. You can have your creativity. The grant system is a major factor in creativity.

Talking about that framework – I remember before grants came in there wasn't any feeling that you had to articulate and sell your ideas to some third party. You made something and you sold it, or you didn't sell it – a really simple exercise. I remember having a conversation with Peter Rushforth at the very start (around 1970) about this thing that hadn't yet come about – 'Craft Council grant'. He was a bit concerned. What did that mean, were we on baby's milk? How will creativity be affected? Did it mean we would have to conform to governmental constraints? That grants were 'the way to go' wasn't an easy sell to the craft world, but I talk to people about grants and there are people whose lives have been immensely improved based on their ability to write grant applications. They are so successful.

I've gave up writing for grants quite a long time ago, but just the other week I talked to someone I won't name and she had a couple of Australia Council grants this year. She

is always running up against applying too soon after previous awards. She knows the 'buzzwords' and how to tweak the application. This has nothing to do with the creativity of the objects being made, but it is to do with how it's presented.

Warren said something about that the other day to a question from the floor. They (the teachers in the tertiary education sector), don't emphasis the presentation for big commissions enough in their teaching. You're one of three hundred people – how do you get onto the short list on the basis of your presentation? The words that surround it, the ambience that you can create, the illusion you can create in the mind of somebody who has you on strings like a marionette.

That's part of my distrust. You create an illusion like a carrot in front of a donkey and lead people along. Here I've mentioned two or three constraints on creativity that I am unhappy about, but cannot change.

How important are the words you put around a work?

It depends. If I'm there and doing a bit of street theatre (as I've often done in gallery openings) words are important, verbal as well as written ones. Often I reinvent what I have done. It goes back into my storage shed and I cannibalise it for something else, or re-invent it. Sometimes I change the title on something from one show to the next, which might get confusing to people cataloguing.

Do you read the work differently?

I'm putting it into a different context, a different show, or there's a requirement that work in this particular group show has a certain flavour. So I say, "I can make that work". It may be a bit of a furphy, but in a way it's not because if you think about putting a word into a different sentence – it can mean an entirely different thing. Why can't this visual 'word' be reinterpreted in this sentence within a larger context? I look at it that way.

You've shifted the nature of a work by shifting its context.

Yeah, the context in many ways does determine the way it is viewed. Even a word like *mechanic*, I'm thinking of the way that is spelt. It should be '*markanic*', but we automatically reinterpret things, because of our structures make sense within context.

So your works change over time, even a short time?

Oh yes. There are some things that I am exhibiting 'fresh', which I once exhibited twenty, or thirty years ago. They had been sitting there and I may have lopped something off it, or glued something on. A lot of my stuff is stacked up and a lot of the time what I have intended to be the end product, hasn't been. It has been part of a batch. A dozen spheres and I put them on the shelf. I grab one and use it as a found object in my studio. There is reinterpretation all the time.

We can interpret our surroundings and make intuitive judgements. We have depth perception. We can see ourselves in space. We see an object over there and know exactly what it is, but you try and program a computer to go over there and grab something. You'd need an army of scientists to do it. But we do it instinctively, because we have this marvellous computer up there (points to his head), which is surpassing anything we could construct with human hands.

A work you did five years ago can be a totally different work now.

Yeah and I think that's refreshing. I don't think it's locked in space forever. If it goes into a museum behind a glass showcase, then you don't have much say about it, but as long as it is my property, I can treat it with great disdain.

In the showcase it becomes 'who has the job of labelling it'?

That's right. I can say, "You've got it wrong there, change the title", but that's hard to do when it's somebody else's property. They do what they like.

Are you ever surprised by the way other people perceive a piece?

I allow them the latitude to do that, because I want that when I look at their work. But the things that are important to me in a work are often not of importance to others, particularly those who are schooled in the Bauhaus, or minimalism. They see any additional excrement as being superfluous. Some of those people have selected from my work the thing that is monochrome, it hasn't got much colour, it's just a simple form. I see that differently. I am drawn more to the decorative side – to the Rococo or the Baroque.

Surface texture, enrichment and cramming as much information as I can into what I do, that is why a lot of what I write is said by others to be 'purple prose'. It's over-loaded, it's too dense, but if there is a gap I will try to fill it with something interesting. That's against the aesthetic of the land, because you have this 'bare-bones' approach to architecture, this *art brute* (as they use to call those concrete structures with just a cut out window). Mies van der Rohe and his ilk just stripped away everything I loved. Gaudi is up my street, but van der Rohe and Le Corbusier are not.

Late Victorian?

That and earlier. I like embellishment.

That richness does not seem to fit into the perception of what glass should be.

Yes. They look at colour and they look at light refraction and light transmission. They also look at how quickly they can grasp a piece. Often I have been frustrated with competitions that say send us a photo of the item, and if you're lucky, a detail. A lot of what I do can't be explained, unless I have six photographs from different angles.

Many of my contemporaries (and good luck to them) do better with their work, because you see an image (its one photograph) and you understand the piece. It is so simple. There is nothing important hidden around the back. That's another constraint on creativity – how will it be photographed and accepted and elevated to the Ranamok [Glass Prize], or these other shows? In this age [clicks fingers] that's about as much time you're allowed before they move onto something else. Everyone has too much on their agenda, too much information. They don't want to be loaded down with something that they are required to sit and think about for too long.

You can't afford it time-wise. Whilst people outside of the game think artists are free and can do anything they like, there are constraints in order to get through the day and

end up with a decent reputation. Which is why I said creative integrity should rule over moneyed status. That's a loaded statement if you think about it.

The ways things are framed aren't always the right ways?

[nods] Yes. The constraints that artists have been put under because of the system are not ideal in my view. But it would be hard to imagine my ideal working in the real world – because it is the interface with the commercial realities of the art business that put those constraints on you.

Is that your reading of the glass culture when comparing its beginnings against where we are now?

I think there was an element in the early stages [of the glass culture] of carefree frivolity and not taking yourself too seriously in the experimentation and sharing of early discoveries. The Abstract Expressionists (so I have read) got locked into a gallery system and competed with each other over prices of works being sold. The camaraderie and free discussion that was said to occur in the cafes of New York City in the fifties evaporated as they hunkered down in their studios and got on the phone to their agents. So the essence, the life of that movement evaporated.

I see that in glass to an extent. I don't want to be crotchety, and others would disagree of course. I think everyone needs to be reminded where we came from, which is the essence of this conference [Ausglass 09, Glass Roots]. There was a time when things were much freer and there weren't so many repercussions for doing something. People could be forgiven for making a lousy job and putting it on show. You didn't get nailed to the wall.

Where did that come shift come from?

I think it was a natural progression. People become successful and the filthy lucre of money and the enticement of keeping up with someone who made more of a 'killing' than you. 'They' say, "Narrow things down", "Find a particular style and hammer away at it". That's much more of a temptation in the USA, because there is a large market. You can specialise in one very narrow area of studio glass and never run out of galleries around the country to show them. Whereas here in Australia you have half a dozen galleries and you can't be hammering away for decades on one particular body of work, which is what many of the top people in glass do in the USA. You compare their work from 1980 to 2009. Where's the difference?

No depth?

They may be going deeper, but it is a very narrow perspective. Coming back to Peter Rushforth, I was talking to him about his delight in celadons [specific glaze] and ash glazes and he said he could spend his whole life doing celadons and not repeat himself. I can understand that, but an outsider will say, "It's green, it's green and it's green – light and dark green, it's a celadon".

In other cases there may not be Peter's integrity?

I suspect so, particularly if you have an expansive personality that sees you running all over the place. When I see them locked into a particular 'style', then I think suspicion should be aroused, because where is the rest of their personality?

It's not reflecting a personality?

I think that's an important point. Art should be a reflection of what's inside. It may paint me as a bit of a 'scatterbrain', because I go all over the place, but I don't mind that. I think of myself as sort of a medical 'general practitioner', a 'jack of all trades' as it were, whereas you have the ear/nose and throat 'specialist'. Specialisation in all fields (not least science) has meant that people are pigeonholed. They are trapped.

There is that cage again. The Renaissance artist didn't have that. There are some people who are Renaissance artists in the glass world, Finn Lynggaard from Denmark, is one I regard as being more universally adept.

'One-trick ponies' through to enthusiastic explorers of a medium?

Yes, and that may be a natural progression. Some would say that is the maturing process. You fluff around until you find where you are meant to be. That has been put in various ways to me, but I've resisted it. I'm saying there is a downside. I can see very clearly that it is commercially viable to do that, but it's a treacherous commercial frame that can stifle creativity.

You have talked about strong drivers for yourself.

Another source could be the natural world. I wandered around the Botanic Gardens the other day and got myself mesmerised by plants and flowers and so on. I do that habitually when I go to a city. I head for the botanic gardens.

Man-made things?

I see that as another separate driver.... the man-made world. There is an internal logic to both and a language of form with both. That has been influential and important to me. The language of form, how things grow, you have a central core, then branching out. There is a structure, continuity I suppose. An organic logic – wider at the base, then branching out, a lot of my work does reference plants and organic forms. That's as well as the more cerebral, or human derived things.

A 'holistic' approach people have said. I do street theatre and performance work, which is very much like three-dimensional sculpture where you add time. You can understand the work only if you have a movie camera.

Interesting because your works are temporal and they shift with context.

Yes, through time – it is not three-dimensions, it is four. If you count others it may be more – the spiritual dimension.

That's in the reading of the work.

The reading of the work is what you've been talking about.

Stephen Skillitzi interview 21/10/09

Often you appear to be breaking convention.

I don't try to, but what needs to be done, I do.

You moved from ceramics to glass?

Yes, I guess I was an opportunist in some respects. It was (in the sixties) what appeared to be the next thing to do. It was a natural progression. In early '67 I'd seen (at the Royal College in London) Sam Herman's little (and very humble) blown bottles. He had just been appointed, but hadn't set up his glass facility there. Then I went to America, via Expo '67 in Montreal, where I saw the Czechoslovakian glass. It was big cast glass by Stan Libensky, but also some blown work. Years later I met Stan Melis who told me he was part of the team that had produced the blown work for the Czechoslovakian Pavilion.

In Australia I had made ceramics kilns at age 13 with my dad who was an electrical engineer. I had melted coloured bottles into clay forms and I was incorporating glass in my mixed-media sculptures before I went overseas at nineteen. I went to New York on a ceramics scholarship. I was already predisposed to glass as a wonderful material. Its colour, you could see through it and you could melt it.

I had basic knowledge of kiln forming. I picked up on glass blowing with Dale Chilhuly in the Haystack School in '68... his first teaching gig. That was the start and I got into the culture of glass, rather than just the technicalities of glass. Via Dale I knew about these other people who were doing wonderful things.... Littleton, Lipofsky, Marquis, Myers etc.

For many years I kept up ceramics and glass in parallel. I never really dumped clay, and because I had that parallelism between clay and glass that helped me to break those boundaries. I wasn't only locked into what glass provides.

I well remember a conversation with Alan Peascod, (a very successful ceramicist in his day [taught at Canberra School of Art 1972-1984]) about this new appointment that had been made to the Canberra School of Art. He had misgivings about this German fellow Klaus Moje, because (according to Alan) Klaus was so locked in and so narrow in only thinking about glass and what the glass tradition could provide. He wasn't (as Alan had wanted) a fellow craftsman in ceramics/glass with students mixing within a whole department. There was a German regimentation that Alan mistrusted. You can't deny that Klaus Moje has been extremely successful and that his was the 'right' choice, but the point I am making was that it was self-referential. Klaus was the doyen of that mode. He didn't cross the boundaries and he never has crossed the boundaries.

You were lamenting that you hadn't found a market within general production.

I wasn't sufficiently locked into glass to be used by general glass 'aspire-ees' as the example to follow, whereas there are others who have been the example to follow.

It would be difficult for them to follow such an individual path.

Yes that is probably the case. It wasn't generic enough to allow 'variations' that could be called their own.

As you were returning to Australia as an 'evangelist' for glass, Conceptual Art was emerging. That appears the anthesis of 'object-based' culture.

I had a choice at the time to go into conceptual work, or not. I had a good look when I was in America (1967-70), but I had too much groundwork done in craft to make that transition. Fellow students did make that transition. They had their pedigree in Conceptual Art. It was forty years ago and names don't flow to mind. In the last thirty years I am thinking of Paul Greenaway, who had very successful exhibitions in ceramics (his Scandarooonian Funk, often linked to Bruce Nuske and Mark Thompson). He had exhibitions with Kym Bonython and he has now shifted entirely away from that 'craft ethos' into fine arts contemporary practice. Ten years ago he instigated and is still now president of SALA (South Australian Living Artists Annual Festival). He has an Order of Australia and he has been incredibly successful in promoting Aussie fine art practice overseas and here.

You were doing performance and installation.

That is just my dysfunctional nature. I get sidetracked and delightfully so in my view, but that can invalidate acceptance into any particular art ghetto. They think some of what you do may fit within their main objectives, but why are you doing that other stuff? It is characterised by the phrase 'Jack of all trades, but master of none'.

'Glass culture' had a hard time finding a place for your work?

I suppose there's a bell curve and I'm not in the apex in terms of marketability and acceptance. You look at Chilhuly's main body of work. It is very appealing and it is very accessible. It finds open doors all over the place, but he's not trying to break any cultural boundaries. At one stage back in the eighties I heard his gallery agent was saying that the next best thing was casting and that he should get into casting. Dale hung back and pursued his blowing. It was just as well that he did. He could have been sidetracked into casting and mix-media sculpture. He stayed with 'eye candy' that doesn't challenge you.

My work is a bit darker. I had absorbed the New York art scene. I came back from America with a 'loaded gun' so to speak and I pursued what I wanted to pursue. I wasn't so taken, or drawn to funk art.

Funk and Pop was a 'natural' for glass.

I didn't take that path in the early days. There were some crossovers, but it was my delight in organic mixed media with a narrative content that drove a lot of it, because I have always enjoyed writing. It was a literary interest, rather than going with the *Brillo Boxes* of Walhol.

What made you want to 'get dressed up and stick objects in the ground'?

It may have been two things. One was *Gilbert and George*, which I did see in performance at the New South Wales Art Gallery, but the other goes back further to doing a performance with a group of radical students at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. It was a spoof on *Alice in Wonderland* (The Mad Hatter's Tea arty). We

dressed up to get across a fairly dark point of view at the beginning of '67. That was the start of my involvement with street theatre and performance art. I wasn't in charge of that performance, but with other ones I certainly was.

A lot of the work I have been doing over those decades has been figuratively based. With a figure in clay, or glass you can turn it, but it doesn't move itself. There is no indication of time elapsed. When I internalise what I intended for that sculpture there is an animate object. I can go through a series of scenarios that indicate a progression of thought. That is not possible with a static object.

Although glass with light can be a dynamic event.

That reminds me of a story of Henry Rodin, who showed clients around his studio at night as he held the candle – all the while moving it around his figures to make them 'animated'. There are limits to that.

Performance involved installation?

There certainly was an overlap with that and with the temporary site-specific stuff, which is also installation. Some are only up there for a day. You take a role of photographs and take it down again. A lot of the posters I showed you were of events that were only there until the tide came in, or the sun disappeared, or until I got tired of it and packed up. There is a photo of one on the wall up there from about '83.

That work looks about thirty meters long?

It was as long as I wanted it to be. It mimicked the waves as the water flowed through it. The water and the glass go together in big open spaces. It was getting it out of the conventional setting of the gallery.

But people weren't buying that stuff?

That's right. I was still employed by the University. In that sense I could afford to be 'non-commercial'. It had no 'saleability' at all. I spent a years worth of effort over the decade doing non-saleable work (laughs), because I felt the compulsion to do it. I wasn't chasing the dollar.

There were times when I was concerned with marketing. There were things like this tabletop and architectural stuff, or domestic bowls, which are literally cranked out by the thousands. They were a commercial exercise.

But not contemporary art practice?

Part of that is operating in Australia, where there is a very limited market for sculptures. There is a stronger market for painters who are my equivalent in experience. If they don't sell a painting for three or four thousand dollars they think the show is a failure. I think if I had stayed in America things would have been different, because I was on the ground floor (in the late sixties) in a much larger market. I came back to Australia and I don't regret that.

Where you were somewhat of an evangelist for glass.

I used that 'song and dance' act of blowing primitive glass objects (we're talking about

early seventies) to advantage – just the risk and danger, heat and excitement of glass. Blowing got people's attention, whereas to set up a potter's wheel and throw a pot would have been passé.

At that point the object wasn't important?

When I was on the road (as I was for a number of years before glass blowing became as readily accessible as a visit to the *JamFactory*) I had fairly primitive equipment. There were limitations to what I could do on my own, so I went through basic processes. Sometimes that was with a loud speaker, sometimes just yelling, describing what happened and why. I drew a crowd that way. There were times I was doing that while other glass people were around trestle tables selling their works.

Often it would be just going halfway through making an object and then dumping that and starting something else. I might start with a bubble and blow it up to paper-thin this big [stretches arms out] and then I would touch it straight away. They would realise it had cooled down so rapidly. You could do that because the walls were so thin. That demonstrated some of the properties of glass.

Did that leave you open to criticism over the quality of the objects made?

That may have been discouragement from some who thought I should have been 'all things to all men', but in those early days (as you said) I was using it in an evangelising way. I wanted to teach people. I wanted to introduce them to a new way of looking at glass, rather than as tumbler, or pouring jug. In those early seventies I'm sure 95% of those watching had never seen glass blowing before. Nowadays there would be very few who hadn't seen glass blowing. I was laying groundwork, knowing there would be waves of people who would build on that. I softened up the crowd.

It has always been an uphill battle against the myth and the spin. Those who came later and did a bit of superficial research by talking to one person, but don't talk to as many people as they should. They go away thinking they have the real deal, write something up in a flashy book they have published. Then you are faced with errors. They become the reference for the next book. You can actually see the evolution of an error and trace it back as a genealogy.

What about the chronology of the official courses?

In 1974 Dick Marquis came to Caulfield and did a glass blowing demonstration in the basement of the Caulfield Institute in a casting furnace (I saw the results in the annealing kiln). He also did a demonstration at the State College in Melbourne. In that tour he went to nine venues. I think he started in Perth then went to Melbourne.

Caulfield went quiet for a couple of years until Mike Esson got appointed by the head of ceramics to start up glass blowing. They put him in a room without flues in the middle of the building, so they never actually built a furnace there. Mike Esson left after a while and they appointed a number of people. Then they went up onto the roof and actually got started seriously (Julius Santos was involved in the initial program as well). That was around 1978. There was also Sydney College of the Arts, but it is not fresh in my mind.

The *JamFactory* got started at the beginning of '75. Sam Herman came out Easter of '74 to organise a glass workshop and I was one of his helpers along with Cedar Prest

and a few others. He left, but came back with a full appointment a year later and started [the Jamfactory] early '75 at the back of the Jam Factory at St Peters. It moved into the city about ten years ago.

My involvement with the educational side was that first of all I blew glass. My first teaching of glass was in America, before I graduated from the University of Massachusetts in 1970. I demonstrated glass blowing to the students. I came back via New Zealand, where I gave a slide talk and film night to the Potters in Auckland in August 1970. In Sydney I had intended to set up a glass course. I gave a talk to the Potters Society in late August 1970 at the Cell Block and announced my intentions. I talked with Peter Rushforth [Head of Ceramics E.S.T.C.] about the possibilities of setting up a furnace, as I did with the Head at Randwick Technical College, and the Director of the Woollahra Art Centre (where in 1973 I did blow furnace glass for exhibitions as well as teach pottery classes). The fourth potential venue was the *Tin Sheds* at Sydney University, where I was a ceramics artist -in-residence for six months before my Bonython Gallery exhibition in March 1971. None of those came to fruition. Then I teamed up with the Potters Society, because I got a Craft Board grant to do exactly what I was intending to do and I did that next door to the Potters Society at 97A Bourke Street, Woolloomooloo. (East Sydney Tech., Darlinghurst was nearby.) Famously, the first public demonstration in Australia of the so-called "Hot Glass Studio Movement", (initiated by the American Harvey Littleton in 1962), was staged there in Woolloomooloo by me, aged 24 on Sunday 27th February 1972.

Driven by your enthusiasm?

and by the enthusiasm of various others in the art education scene, but without the commitment of serious space, or monies. It took a while for that to get up and running.

But the courses once up and running would have significant influence?

The attention was grabbed (and rightly so) by Sam Herman, Bill Boysen and Dick Marquis...(as I predicted it would be in the Potters' magazine in Feb. 1974). They had major backing from government sources – the Australia Council and the Crafts Board and the newly-formed JamFactory. They had a higher skill level than I did and so they were able to make inroads and get publicity. Many of the people who saw glass for the first time via them wrongly assumed there had been nothing done in Australia previous to them in art-based furnace glass. That has been a source of irritation to me ever since (and I would think to Peter Minson and Ron Street over in Perth, then there had been Julius Santos... still actively blowing in Newcastle and the two other backyard blowers, also employed by *Lenora Glass* in Newcastle). There were a bunch of six of us who were doing furnace work in the craft/art tradition before the other three turned up from England and USA (not to minimise what they contributed).

There are a number of pillars on which the whole structure of studio glass is built. One certainly was institutional. The gallery scene (which doesn't necessarily flow from institutions) is another. The whole structure doesn't get channelled through institutions. There was private practice and we must recognise stained glass artists who had a longer tradition than the blowers in this country. They were important in showing that glass had aesthetic value (although theirs was mainly ecclesiastical work). They were the established practice.

Although you had the ability to produce 'refined' objects, you went for the 'theatre' of blowing.

For obvious reasons, the best objects were done in the sophistication of my own studio, rather than on the road, but before there could be a reason to have it incorporated into a degree course, there needed to be some fundamental foundations laid. That was to get people aware of the fact that glass could be used in a sculptural way to make individual works. That it did not have to be part of a factory situation. It could be scaled down. That seems so obvious nowadays, but back then in the nineteen seventies, it certainly wasn't obvious. It wasn't obvious to the American public before Harvey Littleton popularised the idea that blowing could be scaled down to something an individual could do in their own studio on a par with ceramists. There had to be a frame shift, a paradigm shift before you could start building something above ground, such as vocational courses.

What about the University of South Australia? It would have been a College of Advanced Education then?

Yes, that was at Stanley Street when I went down there. I left Sydney in 1974 specifically to join up with Sam Herman at the Jamfactory. Later that year I got a job with *Ross Lighting* to set up a furnace and blow glass in Adelaide. I went from there to *Symonds Company* and I did the same sort of thing there. Then I got offered this job at Torrens College of Advanced Education (which eventually morphed into the University of South Australia). I was in charge of the ceramics department there and within weeks I was blowing glass using a portable furnace in the kiln room. That was in 1976.

There was not an accredited glass course at that time anywhere in Australia. We in Adelaide had to wait until the beginning of 1979 for the new Bachelors' Degree in Design (ceramics). That 'ceramics' was bracketed to clay, or glass. In 1979 we started training students and the most outstanding one in the early days was the late Vicky Torr. Also we had a tie up with Gillies Plains TAFE and they had a course training apprentices for the glass industry. They had a lot of cold working and lead lighting there for industry. They weren't training artists as such, but we sent our students out there once a week to work with them.

At WAIT (Western Australia Institute of Technology) Institute there was a course, which got going somewhat later than the others, but it had its precursor in 1974. Some of the people who were later involved in that were around when I gave a demonstration to people in Western Australia – firstly at the Fremantle Art Centre, then at WAIT with Ron Street. I wasn't the first, because Ron Street (an American) in the Perth Institute was blowing glass as an Artist in Residence mid '73 before he disappeared mid 1974.

The flow of glassmakers coming out of these institutions started – as a trickle and then it was a bit of a rush. Glass was for many years under the shadow of the clay workers, but now I think the clay workers are under the shadow of the glass people. At Underdale where I was teaching, I was in charge of the glass, but I wasn't in charge of the overall ceramics department. There was an older man who had priorities, which were not at all sympathetic to glass. Every student had to have a potter's wheel and that gobbled up most of the funds available, so there wasn't much support for developing glass facilities there. Although in retrospect we did a reasonable job, we were not the most outstanding course in Australia in terms of glass. A published summary of Australian glass courses functioning in 1986 showed my Underdale Degree glass course and also concurrently Gerry King's elective glass course at the Magill Adelaide campus. King was the second glass coordinator after me at Underdale.

Canberra came in '83. I met Klaus Moje in Germany in 1981. I was the first Australian that he met involved in glass. He got appointed about a year or so later to come to Canberra. It is not well known that before that there was a furnace that Sam Herman built at Canberra for Alan Peascod's ceramics students (with their help) in (I think) 1977. So about six years before Moje, they had a brick glass furnace. It was only used once as a demonstration thing hoping to kick start glass, but it never got off the ground.

Alan and I go back a fair way. As a 1965 ceramics student he was a year ahead of me at East Sydney Tech. He was liaising between me and the Potter's Society in Bourke Street in 1971-1973 and was very keen on glass, although he never became involved with it.

There was a short-lived facility at Sturt University, Wagga, and in (1979?) via the returned Dick Marquis and Les Blakeborough in Hobart.

Would you do it differently now?

If I had the foresight and the maturity of a sixty-two year old (as I do now), it would be different. I could well have set up a stronger network from 1970 on and sent out newsletters to various glass artists and to heads of colleges, just to get the thing up and running a whole lot sooner. It may have been another name, rather than Ausglass, but it would have been a society of similar minded people that networked far earlier than occurred. I could also have kept up my contacts within America much more.

So creating that culture was very important?

Yes. If I had done that, I would have been able to get grants to get people to come over and start things off much sooner. We essentially just hung around until '78 for the first Ausglass conference, when we could have got to the same point five or six years earlier.

Is there an issue that should be addressed?

For me it's the ratio of cost of freight to the cost of an object in a gallery against the likelihood of you having to accept it back, paying freight both ways, in a depressed selling environment. That has tipped the balance and has made me more isolated than I was in my younger days. I have not been able to deal with that. I have three cartons of glass supposedly ready to be shipped back to me from a Canberra gallery. The cost of shipping that back will outweigh the returns on sales I have made. It doesn't make sense commercially to do that. There is this object [70cm high x 50cm x 50cm] here in this book, titled "The Three Unwise Men", that I sent to New Zealand for a competition. I got it back in a month and the return freight was \$1500. How can you keep that up? It pushes people into doing very small precious objects with a high price on them.