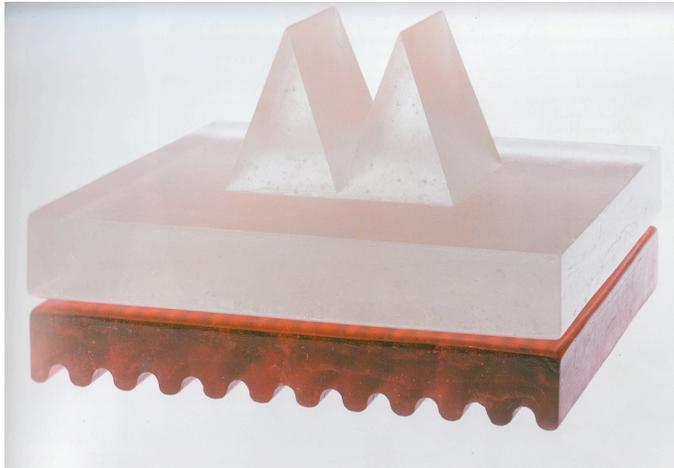


*At the time of this interview Helen Aitken-Kuhnen was the Director of Workshop Bilk.*



Helen Aitken-Kuhnen  
*A Journey 2*  
2004  
kiln cast glass  
22 x 25 x 25 cm

*You've been working in this field for a long time?*

I have - it must be twenty years now in glass, and thirty-five years including jewellery, but it seems like a very short time.

*How would you describe your practice?*

I always say I'm an artist. I work with metal and glass – I trained as a jeweller. I do enamelling, I do glass, I run a gallery and I teach.

*Why glass and metal?*

I originally trained as a jeweller and I went to Europe to study enamelling. I wanted to put colour into my work and enamelling being glass on metal. When we moved to Canberra some twenty years ago, Klaus Moje was in the workshop and I knew his work from Europe (I had lived in Germany). I decided I wanted to study glass as well, because I wanted to use more solid blocks of transparent colour. Ever since I have combined both mediums. I use glass where it is appropriate, enamelling where it is appropriate and metal where I find it appropriate.

There have been times where I have struggled because I have tried to bring it all together. The glass is always colour and light - mostly blocks of colour, although a little less like blocks now.

There is a layering of colour in glass. Even when it is opaque it has a different effect to anything else. It has a way of holding light. That is what I have always loved about enamelling - even though it is only .4 of a millimetre thick, you can get so much colour going through and coming out as it reflects off the metal. Those blocks of glass have so much light and colour. It's got an inner glow. Glass has a life in it.

*An inanimate object having life?*

But it does! For me it does. A painting on a wall, or an object in your house does have a life. It affects you in your surroundings.

*That's not a rational response.*

I'm not rational (laughs), but science has an emotional side and an intuitive side too. You walk into a room and that room presents itself in its dimensions and colour, and where objects are placed – that has an immediate affect on you.

*A felt response?*

Yes, it can have a physical affect on you. If a room is windowless, it is unlikely I would stay in there for more than half a second. If you stayed in a room like that long term you would be physically sick, because your body reacts to your emotions.

*Contemporary jewellery appears to be expanding into contemporary art practice.*

Some jewellers might be doing that, but if you wear something you wear it for an effect, or a response, or as a statement – be it fashion, or jewellery. Then if you put something in your room you also do that for a response. I don't see a difference.

It is interesting isn't it? When I went to Germany and studied, the first thing that hit me with the German jewellers' work was that it looked as beautiful off the body as on the body. I particularly find that with my husband's work (because he is German and works like that). The piece is as beautiful on the table as it is on my arm. For me the borders between jewellers and glass artists, between metal and glass (or whatever) are very much blurred and that becomes more so the older I become, although I might still work in a narrow field.

*The object can be an aesthetically pleasing, but contained thing. Can it be more?*

Yes, it can be all things. It could be shocking. It could be confronting, but jewellery can also be shocking, confronting, or ugly, depending on the intention.

*Then it isn't just glass artists who are having this debate?*

I was sitting there (an Ausglass *Peripheral Vision Conference* debate) thinking this is not just in glass.

*Do you see Australian glass artists as an insular group?*

No. I find the glass movement very welcoming. I always did. I find it very easy to move in it.

*I'm talking about our perspective. Do we tend to assess our achievements within the field of glass?*

I think every medium does that. I think every medium has people with tunnel vision focussed on their medium. I know metal artists like that. I am also know that from state to state there are people unaware of what is happening in other states. I think that is in the nature of us as a beast, but I also think that to be very, very good at something, sometimes you have to narrow down and concentrate. Both of us spent days and

nights working, and if we had not spent that time we would not have made the work we did make.

*You work across fields?*

Yes, and sometimes I jump backwards and forwards. Sometimes I feel I concentrate too much on jewellery, then I go back to doing bigger glass pieces, and then I start enamelling. It is a nice journey though. It is nice play. I have never had the problem of knowing my practice. I have always been aware (whether that is arrogance, or stupidity). I have always known what I wanted to do. The focus at the very start was that I wanted to be a jeweller. I did everything I could to get as far as I could in that field. In the same way, when I was in Europe and I discovered glass was happening there. I looked at it in exhibitions and saw there were effects I was not getting in metal, but I was struggling to get my enamelling working then, and that was a technical field too. If people did not like my work, that was all right. It was not my problem because I was not making any money out of it, and I may as well make what I wanted to make. When something sold, or went into a collection I said 'how lucky am I', because it wasn't the major reason for working.

*You moved into glass?*

Originally it was to make larger blocks of work that transmitted light through them, but I also used colour. That started at the art school when I was studying. Klaus was always saying to me, "Helen, you must do glass jewellery". I was saying, "yes Klaus", but I did some of the biggest castings in the workshop at that time.

I desperately wanted to control the material, but it moved. Very much at the start I wanted something that would transmit light and would change as it did that. I would change angles to do that. I wanted it to be 'hard-edge', but friendly. I am very aware that with some of the early designs I did didn't work like that.

*'Friendly'?*

Yes – just a little bit soft. Hard-edge can sometimes be harsh, or horrible.

*A visual seductiveness?*

Yes, but I ended up giving myself too many technical constraints. I had the lighting, then I had the metal and then I had the glass as well. Over the years there have been pieces I have been very happy with, then others I haven't been so happy with – slowly bringing colour into them, playing with them, changing them (this is with the lights). This was a really nice process, playing with them, moving them while using the same elements, using my metal work as well, transferring them into container shapes, into the bowl shapes.

*Technical and design problems?*

I found it really difficult at the start. I had no technical problems in metal (and I still basically don't – I have a grip on that). I didn't have that with glass at the beginning. I really could not cope with that, and poor Klaus would say I would question a hole in his stomach (a German saying) because I was asking Klaus this, and asking Klaus that. I only had two years because I did the diploma. I was very hungry for information, and I think as an older student, you are very aware of what a gift it is to have that time again.

I guess now it is not so much technical problems, and although I am starting to move into a shift again, I think I know what I am doing. About five years ago I reached an age where I felt more liberated in my work. I don't know if that is an age thing, or a period where you are in your life. I am just really enjoying what I am doing and freeing up a lot more.

*Putting it simply - there was a period concerned with overcoming process problems?*

It was probably more that I was trying to free my mind from forcing the material too much. I think within the next few years I will be able to bring the three mediums together without forcing it. I'm feeling so comfortable with the three of them (glass, metal and enamelling). There was a time when I was trying to make glass jewellery with metal in it, and trying to add enamel too. I made a few pieces, and apart from the fact that it was far too much work, I don't think it worked. I could see it was forced.

There was also a period earlier on (this was a marketing thing) when I did what I thought was my best glass jewellery, and it didn't sell. Galleries (National Galleries) stopped buying because 'Helen wasn't enamelling anymore and she had done such beautiful enamelling'. I said no, this is what I am doing.

*There was an expectation around what you did?*

Yes. It was really interesting. Financially it was amazing. Nothing sold in Australia, and I had three exhibitions in Germany where the Germans were just fine with me changing. They didn't worry at all, and I sold.

I wondered what would happen if I put metal with it and I put silver with it, and it sold. Because I run a gallery now I think that if people can't see a material value (as in silver) in it, they will not buy it. For an experiment, I put gold in one and I got so much more for it. That's OK. That is the general public. The people in the galleries who were buying didn't understand it. They hadn't seen it before. I had spent a period developing it, and they hadn't been sitting next to me while I was doing that, and they did not understand why. They can't be expected to. They have a life too. I have come to understand that three, or four years later work will begin to sell.

*What was interesting you within your new work?*

In jewellery, I wanted to do something that I could not possibly do in stone, or metal - some thing that could not be recognised as anything other than glass. It had to be a shape, an object, or a method of working that could only be applied to the material I was using, and I was very, very happy with that, because there was no possibility it could be done any other way.

*Were you looking for qualities in the glass?*

No, I was looking for my language in my work to be made in glass that was wearable, that had a colour quality that only I use, and a light property I use. That had to all be in the one piece that couldn't be made any other way. That was my brief to myself.

*You wanted something that was uniquely your work?*

Yes, for me that is really important.

*How is that evidenced in the work?*

That is something I have always found really hard to answer. I did a series of bracelets in enamelling that are in collections all over the world. They would take me a month to make, enamelling and engraving. They had a sort of profile to them in the colours (I used about thirty different colours - all graduated together to make different colours within the bracelets). That was the time when I began to make the cast glass jewellery. I had an exhibition in Dunedin (N.Z.) with a Swiss jeweller who was a very astute man. Someone asked me where I was getting my shapes from for the glass. I did not have the faintest idea. He just looked at me and said, Helen you have just turned your shapes on the side and made them three-dimensional, and I realised that I had. It is very interesting, because I knew that I should use the same shapes, the same language and not go somewhere else, yet I was unaware that I was doing it.

There are different parallels. There is a parallel where I will do my more sculptural, more three-dimensional shapes and there is a parallel that is very narrative with me – whatever has happened in my life follows through within this work as well. It jumps to it; so moving to Australia I do beach scenes. In the mountains I did a little bit of mountain scenes. It goes on – I have a cockatoo series, because I love birds. I wanted to make Australia that was saleable, and I never repeat things.

When my mother died I did a series of stuff. Nobody sees that as figurative. I did a series of *Bismarck* broaches (I had a giant Schnauzer that was run over and killed. He was my best dog), but they don't look like a dog. They are just colours and lines. Very few people see what is going on. One will start off that looks a little like something, and then they will very quickly move beyond that (laughs).

*Not blatantly figurative?*

Never. I used to be scared that people would read something into what I had done, and I didn't want people to read about me, but very few people realised, and those that did were the sort of people I was comfortable with.

*You started by learning means, and then used those means to express a deeply felt response?*

At the start, when I was talking about those means, I was talking about when I first studied glass, and now I am talking about me and how I work twenty years later.

*And having that behind you, you don't have to think about it.*

Yes.

*Would I be going too far in calling you a romantic?*

I don't know. I am very disciplined in how I work, and I am very exacting in what I expect from myself, but I am not looking to change the world, because I don't know that I can. Years ago someone asked me why I was doing this, and what work did I want to do (I think my answer would still be the same). I don't want something that is going to shock anybody. I just want something that is going to make life a little bit easier, a bit nicer. That time when you see something, and you are drawn into it and you find something in there. Maybe that is romantic.

*It is about turning the object around to become an emotive extension of your self.*

That happens, yes.

I am very optimistic and my daughter says I am incurably so. I guess if you are doing something like this you need to be an optimist to keep going. A lot of people see I am not making a lot of money out of this and ask why do I keep going. I never think of it like that. I always think of it as fun. I have never done this for financial gain. It is a nice way to be. I really enjoy the process of having the idea, or the inspiration, or whatever you want to call it, then working through it, having this picture in my head coming out as an actual piece. I just love the journey. Then building on that piece to the next piece – the opening out of it. I enjoy the discourse with various other craftspeople. I love working for an exhibition.

*You mentioned a picture in your head. How much does that change in its realisation as object?*

Once I have drawn it – I draw a lot, whenever we go away, after a few days I start drawing – it is exactly what I have drawn. This is how I work – I do the creative, then I make. It doesn't matter how chaotic my life is, when I am doing that creative planning I am really vulnerable, and I have to be in a place where I am safe. Nobody can yell at me, and the phone cannot ring with some awful problem. I need to be protected and alone, but once that is over I have it here and I can come back into the real world, and work like an idiot and be hassled – it doesn't matter because I have it all planned. I have all the drawings and all the ideas.

*Is it correct to say that you have embodied the material processes so that when you draw/play/plan the material processes are part of that?*

Yes, but I try not to do that sometimes. I usually end up in a corner 'trouble-wise' then, but I try to do it as an exercise. I did a series of very big neckpieces at Sabbia Gallery two years ago – lots of movement in them. That was really difficult at the start trying to get the movement right, so they hung properly – so they balanced. There was my idea at the start, and then I kept going back and re-drawing and re-planning until I understood the technical constraints more. It was a different way of working, because I had never tried to make something as big and as moveable.

*You worked hard at learning how to manipulate glass?*

Because I was so at home with metal, to go from one material that I was so familiar with, to go to a material I could do nothing with was a real culture shock (laughs). I do push a lot, but I do that in my drawing.

*And you push with knowledge of the materials.*

And sometimes I say, well maybe I can't do that, or I will talk to Johannes [Kuhnen] (because he is a great sounding board. I will say I am going to do this, how the hell am I going to put a join there?)

*How important are words to you?*

Only when I am teaching, or if I am talking to people close to me. I sometimes name works – like the *Bismarck* broaches. The work from Sabbia had names for everything – partly because the gallery wanted it and I thought that would be easy. It made me work out more where the work was coming from.

*So naming was a way of self-examination?*

For me it was, but for Anna [Grigson] it was a way of selling. It helped people to connect. I can understand that too, because you can't expect people to understand straight away.

*The words are a way in?*

Yes, but it frustrates me to have to read pages to understand a work.

*A simple key is nice.*

Yes and then interpret how you want to interpret, as long as it works for you.