



Dan Clayman
Tinge
2001
kiln cast glass
249 x 56 x 25 cm

You went from lighting as the creation of an event into object making.

That was so long ago, but as I look at it I would say creating an event was almost more important than studying for a young man wanting to be a lighting designer. Being able to put ideas together – learning how to be a benign dictator in a creative event of my choosing.

My move into object making wasn't purposeful. I was twenty-three and on the road all the time. I was halfway through a major theatre tour (working from eight in the morning and finishing at two am). All very disciplined. At the end of '79 or '80, I came back from dinner, sat down and couldn't stand up. In hospital the doctor said I was exhausted and I needed to change something. I do not miss the lifestyle, but to this day I miss the work. The ability to put a big exhibit together relatively calmly and in a very organised fashion harkens back to that young man.

When I visited your exhibition 'The White Show' in Tacoma [2009, Museum of Glass] I felt it was created by someone highly spiritual. It was a very emotive, but a sublimely quiet show.

That is funny because I am so not that way. That work is totally different to where I thought it would end up. I had no idea where this work was going. I believe that the process shouldn't lead the way, but also that the process shouldn't scare you away from anything that you want to do. That's why I have gone on to obtain my level of technical expertise. It's how I think. What you saw is how I think and you're seeing that as I teach [post-conference sculpture workshop, Ausglass 2011]. You are experiencing how I think. That is why I was fascinated by our discussion of the narrative, because as much as this is a technical class, I am trying to teach how to think through a problem. I would say my favourite part of being an artist is thinking a problem through. As an artist I term myself as someone who sets problems out to be solved.

Those problems spin around what – in ‘The White Show’?

Number one *The White Show* was a desire to create a body of work where the aesthetic of colour would be thrown away. I was at a show of mine in Florida and I overheard the following conversation between what could have been two sixty-five year old Jewish ladies – they could have been my grandmothers years ago, (as could only happen in Florida) –

‘Hey, Florence do you like this show?’

‘Oh, I love the new Clayman work. I love the purple. I lu-ve the purple’

‘Oh, what do you think about the blue?’

‘No, I told you I love the purple!’

and that was the extent of the discussion. They weren’t talking to me. I just overheard them and (whatever their names were) I wanted them to get out of my practice.

With my ‘white work’ I wanted to take away the possibility of that conversation.

Number two, there is an artist in Seattle named Pam Gazale who I went to school with at R.I.S.D. She was wonderful, but you hated her because she never started to work until two days before a critique and then she would make the best work of the whole department. Pam lives in Seattle and teaches junior high school art, but she made a body of work on garden implements carved out of salt blocks and they were the most beautiful things I have ever seen in my life. Fifteen-twenty years later and my neighbour in my studio Esther Solondz (a brilliant artist) was making these things out of salt – quite different from Pam’s. So what I was intending to do with *The White Show* (and I think it worked) was that I wanted those objects to come to me (until they are made the objects are in my head visually). It is an impossibility once they emerge in my head to get them to ‘un’emerge until they are made.

These objects ‘pre-conceived’?

Very frequently it is a visual aura. I am not talking spiritually. I have an impression of something. My wife frequently laughs, saying, “You are very busy in there” (my head).

Introspection?

This part of me is integral to my life as an artist. I have seen the same modern psychoanalytical analyst since 1993. I still see him twice a month (with a break for five years in the nineties). I decided I just needed to go back and talk. However you may perceive me, I am very anxious. I worry about my place in the world and how things are going to turn out. It is not like being anxious about getting through this day, it is much more basic – like how is life working out? In this weekly meeting we talk about everything from my relationship with my dealers, to my wife and kids, to I need to go to Australia because I need this break – but how do I deal with the responsibility I feel for my crew? Now after all these years my new theme in analysis is ‘my work’. I have just begun to talk about my work and what it means to me. My constant theme is that you can control the process, but you can’t control the end result. That has been extremely freeing.

So when I set out in 2006 to make *White Light* – that show, I was not at the point I am now. It was my first major museum show and I was so worried about the result during the formulation of the work (at that time we also moved into and outfitted a new studio). I financed the show myself and we borrowed a tremendous amount from the bank (my wife agreed to this). That work became so important to me as it was formulated and as

I saw it coming to fruition. I think the word 'joyous' is appropriate. I wanted to make these large scale pieces that absolutely changed the perception people had of my work. I wanted to throw everything on its ass and move forward, but I also wanted to make these objects that brought you to see not only the objects themselves, but also how they worked together in dividing the space up. As artists we know 'negative space'. With the circular objects especially, but even that long suspended channel and that piece *Leaning Plane* (that long piece made of one hundred and thirty rectangles) - it was all about tension. You have this material hanging in space, but it was also about this negative space. You had this scoop and channel – I was much more interested in having you seeing the space flowing through the objects. That is not to discount that I wanted these objects to be so fucking 'beautiful'.

I didn't enter that show with preconceptions and I wasn't thinking about skill.

I didn't want you to be thinking about skill when you were looking at the work. If you look at the work it is not tightly done. Every joint is weird.

I saw 'sacred spaces'. Was that my own projection?

'Sacred space' is the last thing in a million years I would think about, but people kept saying it.

The room had a church-like quality.

I kept hearing that and it cracked me up.

You are very grounded in process and technique. You can reach into all that embodied experience and pull out something that had a profound effect on me. Even though it had nothing to do with what you wanted to do, I was reading something deeper because it left that space for me.

Which as an artist is a great result for the work. You can't ask for anything more than that. I'm thinking one thing and you are thinking something completely out there.

Even if I completely misread, you told something of yourself in that work.

Absolutely. I am thinking about the pieces and with all those joints we had to glue up – every joint was a neurotic worry. The building of the work was a neurotic, but joyful worry. I sometimes think that unless I am worrying I don't think I am alive. Unless I am under 'stress' is what my wife says to me.

Where was the stress in making that work?

The curator engaged me, we were running way behind and I hadn't finalised theorising the show. They kept waiting – they would call asking for drawings. I would say it was happening. Most of the work was formulated using polystyrene cups. We bought the new studio in 2006 and then we renovated. That was a stressful two-year project that I enjoyed to the hilt. On January 1st, 2007 we took the last piece out of the building we had been evicted from. On April 1st, 2007 I told the crew that whatever renovation work they were doing had to conclude today, because eight months from then my show would open in Charlotte, North Carolina. All that was built of the show was one piece – that had been what the curator saw when I proposed what I wanted to do. We had

poly-Styrofoam cups cut apart that I was reassembling while thinking about light transmission, glowing.

I could have got all the white glass in that show from the same batch, from the same manufacturer. I chose not to because I liken myself to a marble-carver harvesting hunks of marble from a quarry. I wanted there to be that modulated white look – some very white, some pinkish white and some with a greenish hue, but with very slight variations. It was important that this didn't become a 'spit-polish' group of work. I wanted it to be about the structure, about how it made you feel tense. That piece *Aperture* – (the big wide arc) scared the living shit out of me the night we hung it in the studio for the first time and left it. I went home not knowing that it would still be up in the morning (although we had done destruction tests on all the parts).

You create these tensions.

Absolutely. Constantine Brancusi was incredibly facile with all the materials he worked with, but just for instance lets say we would not consider him a marble artist. But he became so facile with whatever he did; he was the sculptor of the ages. When he first showed those 'baby heads' they would not have been accepted as baby heads. Those 'birds' were not birds. We are use to birds looking like birds. He had to fight against the tide. So my whole thing about the technical aspect of what I do is that I look at my mastery of a medium to be freeing, not constraining. That has been very important to me as a maker, as a doer. I'm not encouraging you to feel that Dan Clayman knows the best way to do it. Dan Clayman has developed some ways that work very well for him. I was overjoyed today the see a new technique in a process that I have been doing for twenty years. That releases me.

You have been quoted as saying glass in tertiary education should be under sculpture departments.

I think so. The Rhode Island School of Design sculpture department right now is the anthesis of that. As an undergrad in sculpture you can get through that course and not take a mould-making class. I don't think that is a good model. But I think the model that accepts glass as just another sculptural material is. What is still missing in a lot of American universities Glass programs (RISD as a highly theoretical department is not guilty of this) is a theoretical approach to sculpture. It is fascinating to me that we are fifty years into the modern 'glass movement' – when was the modern 'bronze movement', when was the modern 'plastics movement'? Why is glass not seen as just another material (as is becoming the case more and more) has always puzzled me. I think there should be a glass division, so I'm not saying there should not be the possibilities of that material. By the same token I would love to see ceramics under the sculpture department. That is the European tradition of craft training (without this burden of 'what is it?')

That is the ability to develop a three-dimensional language whether object, installation or whatever.

I think so. As Juli Cho Bailer said on the second day (Ausglass Peripheral Vision Conference), we are just artists. The craft/art debate has been alive forever and in some ways it continues to be a silly debate, but I come from the standpoint that I went to a number of colleges (I didn't get my Bachelors degree until thirty). I taught at the Rhode Island school on a part time basis for nine years until I chose not to do that because I wanted to be in my studio. I'm talking from the basis of someone who gets

up every morning and goes to my studio, but as I look at academics (each year I do at least two visiting artist critiques at different universities) and still in some art schools I see in their program someone who just wants to learn how to blow a Venetian goblet. I love all these Venetian goblets – they are amazing things, but I don't think they necessarily belong in this context.

The Penland School of Crafts in Penland North Carolina speaks specifically from a craft background. It says in the catalogue all abilities are welcome. When I wanted to have an advanced class there over the summer there was some discussion over it, but I decided to withdraw the request. So now it asks for a general knowledge of materials. I practice craft at its highest level and I love it. I love the act of making. My anxiety always comes from the act of thinking. What is this/what does it mean to me/is this good/who says so? These questions are endless.

A lot of the power in the glass movement came from having an identity as a faculty in the tertiary institutions.

It did rest on that and if I may extend this – in America the glass collecting movement happened. I am a lucky, happy result of it. Also this idea of a glass gallery evolved and while I have enjoyed the fruits of it, I am not sure that from an artistic standpoint it has been the best thing for progressing the quality of the work.

Does the 'collecting' movement 'freeze' makers into ways of making?

It is the hardest thing. Certainly, if I had stayed with certain bodies of work that were selling very well, I would be a wealthier guy. One thing is the financial struggle. While my reputation in the glass world has built, I'm still borrowing money from the bank all the time. It's a cycle. When money comes in you spend it on new work and at the end of each cycle you hope you can put a little away.

The most exciting day for me in making a work is when it comes into my head. Then the day we start it, and the first time I see the work again after a break. I crate the work up and after two weeks I see it again to set the show up. I am no longer exhausted and I go, "did I really make that – that's not half bad".

The self-critical thing is alive and well in my busy little brain – as it should be with any artist. Otherwise you're complacent.

From your 'distant' perspective, what is your reading of Australian glass?

I'm uncomfortable commenting on this, but I see both good and bad. In the catalogue for the Ausglass Conference someone giving a talk said in their 'blurb' how self-referential Australian glass had become. We need to be aware of that. I think there is some really bang-up work going on here – really nice work. I also think there is a lot of stuff that is very self-referential within Australia as there is in any medium in any smaller community. In some ways Australia is a village. Just as an example, if you go to a glass art conference in the States, a small conference is sixteen hundred people and some of the conferences have been as large as three thousand people. (The head of GAS said he would like to contract that a little because the big conferences were a little too unwieldy.) Here they said one hundred and eighty was an incredibly good attendance. I thought this conference was really incredible. I think with the Australian work Richard Whiteley is really on to some things with some new work he is making that have these vaginal folds in them.

You are aware of Australian glass?

Oh, I have been aware of the Australian glass movement since I was in college. I had to give a little talk at Sabbia Gallery the other night and what I said was that when I was in art school (even in the early eighties) the Aussies were coming. It was “what are these Aussies doing?” We saw it in the publications and I think it is pretty incredible what has evolved here.

You know Jess Loughlin’s work? She’s a wonderful person and her work is pretty amazing, however there is the ‘Jess Look’ that can be seen with many of the Australians. I think it’s because Bullseye Glass has become such a strong presence here. I’m not saying that is good, or bad – it just is. I think that is a pretty interesting issue. The evolution of Klaus Moje coming here having already worked with Bullseye Glass and introducing it into this country has been really something, but it confuses me that Klaus doesn’t just paint.

You work in glass – why?

The objects I make – I just don’t think they would be as interesting. I think of one of my big circles cast in bronze and it bores me, but maybe it would be absolutely beautiful. It would have surface.

There is a ‘resistance’ in this material.

If somebody, or something is not pushing against me ... My wife and I have a wonderful marriage, but we push. It is very contentious. I need that resistance.

You also push against ideas.

It is a point that my marriage has gotten stronger as I have matured and now I push more in the studio. Certainly in the last year of my life I have worked more to push not only in the studio, but me in the world – and not so much at home. I am pushing against my banker (laughs).

I was walking down George Street, Sydney and at one point in the day I caught myself asking – ‘is this how I should be spending my day?’ There was a question. I think this theme of resistance is interesting. As I go through this psychoanalysis (it is not traditional Freudian analysis) there is someone who helps me wrestle through relationships to the world. That helps me to stop me pushing in the places where that is not going to be productive.

There is this thought of wrestling the light out of the air and into a tangible object. I’ve said that over and over. It is this idea that I’m making this object that has a quiet presence. That occupies this space, but I don’t know anymore. Is it really all that much, or am I just ... I just love to get up and go to the studio and work and make something happen. Hopefully I’m going to live until I’m eighty-five and when I’m eighty no matter what the doctor says I’m going to eat ice crème every day while I continue to work.

In those ensuing years I hope I feel good about my work. More than anything else (I will get myself into hot water here) I love being in the studio late at night and I’m blessed with a wife who has tolerated that. When I built this new studio I put florescent

lights in, but I also put in theatre lights. When I go in at night I turn one light on. I walk in and it's a dark cavern with a piece sitting in a pool of light – that's all I can tell you.

An emotive relationship to your work?

Absolutely. I have been working on this piece called *Slotted Volume* for a year. There have been some problems just in the making. So it is sitting there, half built – first it was sitting there, eighth built, then quarter built. It is slowly emerging and I've had visitors to the studio a year later ask "you haven't finished that yet?" Part of me is too scattered to work on it, but there is another part of me that doesn't want to finish it. It is almost like a good book. The work is an event. It's all an event. It's the process don't you think?

And when I'm working on a piece I don't know where the show is going to end.

That's what I'm talking about – paying attention to the process, but you can't predict the outcome. I can't predict how it's all going to work out. I had to come to Australia ready to deliver lectures and engage with people, but I didn't know what was going to happen.

We project into the glass because of its qualities – ambiguity, paradox and the shifting light and those projections reveal something of us.

So without me being willing to acknowledge it, that really means those qualities and issues like 'transcendence' have to be on the table.

The object expands out to become an event that engages.

But object makers are a dying breed. You go to the highest level of commercial art – the big art fair circuit (I just went to Art Basel in Florida). There is some object making, but basically what's there is someone with a digital camera whose taking cool pictures, blowing them up to six-feet tall and they get laminated to aluminium, and the video.

I feel we are almost burdened by the history of our material. However, someone said that glass is always the material of the future. It continues to be the material of the future.

I'm certainly wrestling with what I'm making currently – like what is this and why. That's healthy, but the act of turning off the studio while I'm in Australia has been beyond freeing. I haven't done that in a decade. While the studio turns over I am not worrying, but I did have to be engaged.

Comments by Daniel Clayman noted during Ausglass 2011 Peripheral Vision Conference and associated workshops:

- Light doesn't show itself until it hits something. I was fascinated by light penetrating through knotholes and being revealed through dust in the air. This makes light-beams solid. I wanted those light-beams stolen from the air.
- My practice is basically an object making where process is as important as the object itself.
- Process has beauty.

- At the end I want everything to look considered.
- The main focus of my object making is casting – using techniques from the old world to the most modern.
- I am defining space with relation to object.
- Using modules there is no limit in scale.
- I would like to find a new New York gallery for my work. Glass is so insular in its aesthetic base, its critical base and its collector base. By broadening the audience perhaps the studio would generate enough income to permit making only ten pieces a year and still pay decent wages to my workers. It would mean a saner existence.
- Words he used when reacting to his work: incredible, phenomenal, ecstatic and excited.