



Richard Clements
Mystery of Life
 1996
 lamp worked glass
 18 x 10 cm

How would you categorise your practice?

I'd never introduce myself as being an artist. I wouldn't say, "I'm a glass artist". I see myself a more of a sophisticated production worker. Ever since I started *Argyle Glass* back in 1972 down in the Rocks [Sydney] we just developed all these lines. It was very much an industry just for making a living. It wasn't 'art'. It is loving the work, the process – developing as you go on, but basically it was making product that sold.

Sometimes you can get into 'art' in inverted commas, like young people who go to art school and they come out and they can't sell anything. They make some lovely stuff, but they are really struggling to establish themselves in the system where you need to make a regular quid.

I started with an apprenticeship when I was sixteen. It ended when I smashed myself up on a motorcycle and was out for a year. Then I came to Australia when I was twenty. I finished early. It wasn't a full apprenticeship as such. I didn't really like it when I started. I did it because it was a job. Then I started *Argyle*, and I still love the process.

Glass is as big as your imagination, but it's instant. Half the thing with it is knowing when to stop. Whereas other things like woodwork, or metalwork, they're thought out meticulously. It's designed – then you make it. With glass you're designing and making at the same time.

That's a dynamic process.

It really is. Even though I haven't made one-of stuff for five or six months, what I'm most interested in at the moment are the heads I've been making. When I start I really don't know what they are going to look like. I have no preconceived idea except that it is going to be a mask. Obviously it is not going to turn into a teapot.

Where is that coming from?

I think it's the same thing as a painter, when they have a whole pallet of paints and an empty canvas and go from there – it's exactly the same.

I still love the process of working with glass. It's a lovely material to work with.

What elements?

It keeps changing. For many years I mainly made perfume bottles. I started them in 1975. When we had *Argyle Glass* we created a whole range of different things. We use to make a lot of animals, candle sticks – all ornamental glass. I started making them [perfume bottles] in '75 and there was such a huge demand for them that, bit by bit, I just stopped making the other things. My income today is still mainly from perfume bottles.

I always said I'd always keep making them as:

- A) as long as they still can evolve and I enjoy them
- and
- B) they sell.

So far I still enjoy their evolution. I still try to make everyone of them different and they kept on selling. Consequently I keep on making them.

And they keep changing.

Yeah. That sort of thing really goes to the heart of it. Because I like it so much, I really haven't gone down that road of one-of stuff. Even though everything I've ever put out was very popular in exhibitions I used to do (I don't do them now). Nothing ever came back.

An interesting shift from your training in scientific glass blowing.

You learn to handle tube and you learn to blow bubbles. You learn to join your rods. You learn all your basic lampworking – flame-working skills.

I used to work for Peter Minson in Sydney. John Shinman, Phil Broadbelt and myself got together and we had this business manager Alex who was one of the best things, and one of the worst things, that ever happened to us. We had this idea of doing creative glass in front of the public. No one had ever done it in Australia before. We sat down and we set it all up then we looked at each other and we didn't know what we were going to make. Alex got the position in the Rocks and he pushed us down there.

Because it was the first in Australia it was incredibly popular. We worked literally seven days a week, nine hours on the bench for six months without a break. It was just chaos. It was such a learning thing. We weren't very good, but nobody had any glass to judge it by, so nobody knew that. The only other glass was Orrefors, or those established lines.

A lot of it evolves from a conscious decision when I left Argyle. I was only there from '72 to the end of '74, basically for three years. It just got too much. Alex wanted to turn this into an empire. We had a shop in Double Bay. We had a shop in the Rocks. We had a shop in Bondi Junction. We had a factory near the city. We had all these things. It was just crazy. I used to run the Bondi shop, but we just couldn't keep up with it.

It was a really conscious thing at the time to use a lot of colour and to make things very heavy. That was because lamp-workers have always, until now, been considered second cousins, or as Shane [Ferro] described it, the second cousin with red hair. Lamp-work was always considered a bit of a joke compared to furnace-work. That was more serious because they work the furnace while flame-work was considered 'carnival'. You didn't take lamp-workers seriously.

The 'heaviness' of the glass was trying to make it look substantial?

It was to confuse someone who had just bought it. They wouldn't know if it was lamp-work, or furnace-work. A lot of these pieces here [Richard's gallery in Franklin, Tasmania] you see are really, really heavy. So people think it's made in a furnace. They think, God here's a really good furnace-worker – it's better than those others. I'm always fascinated with what other people like. I just find it crazy. Work I really like often isn't the popular thing at the time. In two or three years they seem to catch up.

Do they have ownership of what you do?

Yes, if you change, if you go off on a tangent. (It doesn't only happen to me, but it happens to loads of people.) If you really change your style, rather than just gradually evolving, people can't handle it. They find it confronting. They just don't like it. They don't like change.

When they look at your work are people reading things into it?

I don't know. Just the other day there were two long time collectors. They bought stuff going back to '79. I had two bits up there [a private section of his gallery] that were not for sale, but they really liked them. He's got a *Jim's Mowing* franchise. I love the thing where you sell stuff to people who aren't rich. Where people love it, but they've really got to save up to buy it – they really, really want it. I find much more enjoyment in selling to this guy – his wife's a teacher.

They love it as a precious thing.

Oh yeah. There's a piece there I wanted to keep myself, but they really wanted to buy it, so I let them have it and I let them have it at a really good price, because they have supported me so I don't have to go to work.

You don't have to go to work?

No, no, I just sit home and play. You don't work here.

Your relationship to your work is play?

If I start to consider it being work, I stop. I find if I am not enjoying it, I just don't do it. That happens very rarely at the end of the day you are a bit tired – we're not machines. 99.9% of the time I still get up and come to work at five-thirty in the morning and work to half four. I do have an hour and a half, two hours off at mid-day. Sometimes if I can't sleep I will get up at four o'clock. I will work through to twelve thirty without a break. Even with coffee I don't stop. On Sundays I'm still working cleaning up, but that's six days a week overall.

After forty years there is still that joy?

I find it really hard to stop. I think I've got an addictive sort of personality.

What keeps it exciting?

Once more it just comes back to the process. Also it really nice when you've got lots of orders on, which is puffs me up because people like my stuff. I'm always flattered when I get emails from people saying they really like my stuff. That's very flattering. It's lovely, so you keep on doing it.

You said it changes. What changes?

You've got to make it evolve. That comes from the most obscure places. It's like anyone involved in the creative process. You yourself, you just see something – oh, that's interesting. Also I like (if I get a run on – which I haven't done for ages) quirky things, really like stupid things, things that are just so silly. It's just so funny.

As when you made your 'cigarette fish'?

Oh yes. I spend half the time having lots of fun just thinking of the title. Those were *Smoked Cod* – literally a play on words. You think of smoked cod and you think, oh yeah. It doesn't have to look like a cod. That's irrelevant.

The title becomes a trigger for the creativity?

Yeah. Then there was *Cod Almighty* – I had a halo on it. Just stupid. It makes me laugh when you think about making it.

The other day you had that lovely block of glass you had taken from the kiln. How important is the accident in your work?

Oh with that it was a true one-of, but accidents happen all the time. Something goes wrong and you try to cover it up by doing something with it. You've always got to be prepared to change. You never ever have that fixed idea. It changes in the making. You make decisions as you're going along.

I was asking if the accident plays a role in the direction your work takes.

Not so much now days. It is harder the older you get because the older you get the further you are down your own path. When you are young you are bouncing off things. It's the pyramid. Down here you are bouncing around. Being older your poor old brain doesn't seem to do that. You get into a style and it's very hard to bounce off things.

With your training in scientific instrument making you'd think it would be very easy to be locked in from the very beginning.

The trick is not to do it for too long. That's why in Australia (along with America) some really fantastic work is made – not just in flame work. I mainly know about flame working in America with people like Shane [Ferro] – there's a whole range of makers. They really try to cross ideas. Some of the stuff that is coming out of there is

phenomenal. Unfortunately it is much more advanced there than it is in Australia because there is still not that many doing it here, everyone is so far away and people (but not necessarily) keep to themselves. In America there is this tradition of teaching and sharing information.

An openness?

They're a very open society when it comes to information. They don't mind showing anything where we Anglo-Saxon types tend to keep our trade secrets.

What keeps you ahead of the poachers?

You get to the stage of being recognised. People like your stuff. There comes a time when, if you have done the right thing through your working career you almost have a 'trade name'. You find your position in the market that you're comfortable with. I've never been comfortable 'up-market'.

'Funky' work?

Yeah, well I don't say a work is \$3,500 while looking somebody in the eye then take \$3,500 off them when it's only taken me an hour and a half to make. I wouldn't feel comfortable doing that whereas a lot of people do. You see their works in a gallery at \$10,000 and I know it hasn't taken them long to make.

Do you find yourself looking at work you made twenty years ago and seeing it differently?

I tend to revisit things. I never really finish any thing – where you stop and don't make any more like that. Most of the stuff is still vessel shaped. I do make things like that hanging jellyfish there. There was a sculpture of thirty-six – all hanging like jellyfish. I made hanging thumbs as well.

Work is a research for more work.

I look at it as I walk past. I still make bottles three days a week in the normal course of events. When I walk past them I think, oh I haven't made a shape like that for some time. I'll use that shape (or something similar) and I have a newish pattern. I get bored. I couldn't do that thing where you have ten designs – A,B,C,D,F and every year just pump them out. If I really like a design or pattern I will make a few – as long as I really like it.

At different times you use different techniques. Look around here at the different things I have run with. I made a whole lot of these blue ones, then I was into some that are over there with almost a reptile skin – they're the latest ones I do.

After all when you come down to it, there are only so many techniques. You can only subtly change them.

Technique plays a great part in what you achieve?

Oh yeah. Technique's important. There are things that I liked that were not immediately successful and my masks are a good example. You have to be a certain

type of person to shell out money to buy those. A lot of people don't feel comfortable with them on their walls because I'm trying to make them really scary, really creepy. They're sinister. I'm really trying to get that feeling and a lot of people just don't like that on their walls.

Where's that coming from?

Oh I don't know. I think with these it's definitely coming from all this stuff going on with berkas and things. These people with their heads all wrapped up. These are similar to patients. Some look like desert people, but some I make look like patients from a car accident all bandaged up. I must admit some of these I am trying to get as 'dark' as possible. This is different because I have always been the other way. I have been known for my whimsical stuff and now it's the complete opposite. Disney goes to the dark side, yes.

What is it about the colour?

When we started off in the seventies there was no colour available – certainly no commercial colours. If you wanted colour you had to make it yourself. Glass (before any studio glass came out in Australia) was all like Swedish glass, which was very, very popular, (Orrefors – all clear glass). I thought that if all the popular glass is clear why not try and make mine different by using a lot of colour. If there was no colour that meant you had to learn to make colour yourself and so I learnt basic formulas.

In that period from the seventies what happened? You said it was open...

The Americans were, yes. We tend to be far more closed. If you've got a secret you don't tell anybody, because of poachers, unless you're not going to be affected by poaching. I know of some woodworkers doing some fantastic stuff and backyarders blatantly copied their work. They weren't really serious, but they undercut them. Even though they weren't doing as good a job, a lot of people just can't tell. It depends how sophisticated the public is. If it is something new they are just not that sophisticated.

Also a lot comes down to price. With my perfume bottles your name becomes a bit of a trademark. When Tony Trivit copies one of my works and my work retails in a shop for \$130 while he's done a pretty good damn copy and his sells for \$90, a lot of people buying a present are going to buy his.

Australia has internationally recognised artists?

When I was in Paddington at Pete's place [Minson Scientific Glass] in '70, there was only Stephen Skilitzi mucking around with his furnace down the road. I think the first Ausglass was '79. There was nothing. Dick Marquis came over. My distinct impression was it started then. I know Dick Marquis came down to Les Blakebrough [Hobart], but that was in the late 70's, '80's. That was ten years after we started doing our flame-working thing.

Vary seldom is there talk of the lamp-working. I don't know of any Australian lamp workers who are particularly known overseas.

The Americans kicked started Australian studio glass?

Not with flame-working, because flame workers were the ones who took techniques out of traditional factories. Getting back to what I said about not doing the apprenticeship too long. I think that's the trouble with Italian glass, Murrano and all these people who go to work in countries that have a huge glass tradition. They just can't see outside the square. When they are taught, they are taught by people who have been in the system for a long time. We see a lot of this stuff. The designs – I mean Italian glass is just so Italian.

Implying Australian glass might be more interesting?

But then again it is settling down. You see a lot of people in America still doing a lot of glass by copying the Italian thing, but they do it for what they want to get out of it.

It's a dilemma. You need technique, but if you are not careful you get bound to it.

You just can't get out of that. Shaun Donahue shows that sort of thing. He's a great glass blower. He was taught at Waterford. He's a machine. He does perfume bottles and they're beautiful. They're lovely and they are really well priced, but if you watch him work he is just a machine. There's one, then there's another one and there're almost exactly the same. They are within two ml. of each other as though they are locked into this production line.

Technique can be a constriction?

Nick [Mount] will tell you if you ask. We found it when we were up at the art school up there [Hobart] when Dick Marquis came over. Les set it up with Dick. We'd just go along and blow glass up there. There was no teacher. We just went there to this facility. No one knew how to do it. We just had great fun. Les didn't know how to do it and I had just done six weeks furnace blowing back in England in Newcastle on Tyne. We just started. We use to make these beer mugs. They were all wonky. Nick use to make his glasses. They were a little bit off, but it was the thing to try to get them better. But the paradox was the better you got the less the demand. The public wanted this weird stuff where you as a craftsperson wanted to make it really good. I think you need to be able to make it really, really good and then you can make it floppy and wonky. If all you can make is wonky work then to me it hasn't got credibility. The thing is, the better we got, the less people wanted the work because they became too perfect.

What are they looking for?

I think they just want the look of something that is handmade, which is crazy because it should be the other way around. Something that is handmade is far inferior in quality to something that is made on a machine. I think it is just because it is handmade, the rejection of things that are made by a machine.

It must be that the art/craft industry has been so incredibly successful in Australia. It has supported quite a few people. I've had a great existence on it. I've never been wealthy, but I've always got enough money in my pocket for a meal, or whatever.

Getting back to that thing with the wine glasses, some of those wine glasses that are machine made are actually works of art. I defy anybody to make anything as good as those mass produced goblets.

Do you think high technique is an art form?

I really respect it. I might not like it, but I really respect technique. Just the brains and the skills of the machine makers, the engineers, that collective mind that has built this machine as big as this building with each intricate part – that's pretty clever stuff.

And then along comes the customer and wants the wobbly one.

Yes, it's just so bizarre. Human beings are a pretty weird lot.

Post interview I mentioned that some of Richard's pieces were jewel-like and he responded by saying:

"Interesting that you should say that because people say that to me about my work all the time".