

Abridged interview with Wayne Pearson: 15/04/06
Subject: Australian kiln glass with specific reference to 'style' and glass artists Deb Cocks, Warren Langley, Jessica Loughlin and Richard Whiteley

Why did you start working with glass?

When I was in Canberra at university I went to a stained-glass course with a friend who wanted to make a front door panel – that's how I got into it. Then the people she was doing it with wanted some designs done and I started doing designs for them (none of which were made in the end).

That sort of got me into glass (copper foiling and all that), but it is that colour and the light and the immediate reaction to picking up pieces of glass and then physically being able to cut them and do things (I am a very 'hands-on' sort of person). To be able to manipulate it that way was great.

You interact with the material?

Yes. There is something about it. You can break it and it is that brittleness that started me – that interest in the technique.

It is being able to pick it up and hold it up to the light, do things with it and put the colours together. In the end, I disliked stained-glass windows because of the thick heavy lines. I went towards copper foiling and the ability to be able to paint. I think I am a frustrated painter.

What did you come up with when people asked you to design?

They were long, key-like windows and they were actually quite painterly. None of them were ever made. Some were abstract landscapes with gums etc., but they were more traditional in early 80s – whatever was in vogue at the time.

A painterly quality?

At that stage I was not painting. The painting came later. I did copper foiling and worked with the glass, then went back to Sydney. I needed to do something, so I applied for Sydney College of the Arts Graduate Diploma, because I could not go back and do a full-time undergraduate course (I needed to work).

Then I walked in and saw Maureen. Back before the 'Bear Pits' in Balmain, they were in another studio. That was such an eye-opener. I didn't know that glass existed in any way like that. So the stained glass went out the door entirely. Suddenly there was clear glass and what you could do with that, inclusions, casting – all sorts of things.

Implying flexibility?

Yes, and then I fell in love with blowing. I just was not very good at it, but that 'brittleness' became something very fluid that you could draw and pull and make something with (again the technique). I used to love the heat and physicality of doing something with glass.

I still like that, the lifting, the actual physicality of it all, standing at the belt just grinding away.

'Body' involvement?

Yes, the technique. We get carried away with technique, don't we? It's how to use the technique for the other things.

There is another issue with painting – that is storytelling.

At the Canberra School of Art I used to do printmaking at night. The things I did there were very much stories – puppets and things like that. I wanted to tell stories.

I think having a child brought that out in me. I was suddenly able to tell a story. So when I talk about the glass, it is not my career as such, it is part and parcel of my life. For some people it is very much a career. It becomes a combined thing. I am actually a mother first, not a glass person. Everything else is a combination of things. It is never just what I do.

Money comes in to it as well. Because my bowls sold I stopped doing a lot of the other stuff. There was not time (or energy), and yet everything feeds into that narrative and the story telling. Because having a child makes me see things in a different way (and our grand-children – all that)

I am not the career artist in some ways, but we have earned money from it. I find there are these other elements making it hard to define where I sit as an artist. I do what I can when I can and within whatever time constraints there are. This leads to much lateral thinking – trying to squeeze everything in. That's very creative and inspiring.

That makes it a bit different from other people who can focus fully on what they do and make decisions for the good of their glassmaking. Strings and tangles often tie images together on my bowls – fishing line with hooks ready to catch the next thought as it floats by and before I forget it.

The sources are many and varied and they filter through. I was doing an artist's statement the other day about how stories filter through ... from people, objects and stories/news from the radio. What I find interesting is the juxtaposition of living in a beautiful area (so remote with what goes on in 'the real world' in many ways) and the horrible stories on the radio. The juxtaposition of my life with what is the reality for other's lives. I find it really interesting.

A personal response?

But that personal response is always with a notion of what and how other people can read it on my bowl. So it is a conscious, (laughs) semi-conscious choosing of images. Implying a social awareness and almost guilt that I have such a wonderful existence.

All these are completely open – no, not completely open – I have my interpretation, but I always like to think there can be a completely different one, because I find it really interesting to see how people can read my works. They read something else into it, yes.

People could say why bother to work on glass and all I can say is that it is what I am comfortable doing. I love printmaking, but I didn't pursue it. I love drawing, but I can't quite get to that same technical stage that I have with glass.

Fluidity?

Yes, it suits my way of working with paint. (Working with light – removing the paint to make tonal variations and then adding colour)

Reverse-painted glass seems to intensify colour.

Yes, if you keep building up until you get the colour you want.

This is the purpose in working on glass rather than canvas for instance?

I would like to think so. I like 10 mm. I like 20 mm. I like the way the people think it [the image] is caught in between and they're peering underneath ("How would it have been done?"), when it's such a simple process.

You are looking through something. You know you are looking through into a depth – a depth of glass. The surface isn't with you. You are looking through this shiny surface to this other stuff underneath.

When people look at your work in a gallery are you aware that they might think of you as being someone totally different to who you really are?

Oh yes, completely. I love it. I think it is fascinating. People look at you and say, "I thought you were going to be big and wear vibrant, brightly coloured clothes and be really extrovert", and here I am five foot nothing and really quite shy. I much prefer looking fairly mundane.

We read so much into people through their work. It can be so often misleading. There is still a lot of me in there. When I teach, it comes out. I become a bit more speedy and zappy... and mad, in a way, which is probably more like my work.

The stories are not superficial?

No, the stories are very important. I often think I would like to be able to write and put down all those little things that happen in reality. Yes, the stories are what life is about – all these nice people and stories and animals. It all sounds so 'twee' though.

I can't be pigeonholed, that's what people tell me. I could not be put in with anyone else.

A very personal response.

But not necessarily one that needs to be read by anyone else in that way, because sometimes it is just a mundane sort of thing. Yes, they are often quite mundane, but I can see them and do them. I know they can be interpreted in lots of ways and that does not surprise me. I enjoy what people do with my works. I think that it is really nice that you can have all these things happening and that they have a life of their own. They have their own story.

Robert Bell looked at that one called *Header* and talked about rabbits and hares taking over Australia. That is something that I did not intend in the beginning. It opens out like that. But the piece is very much about balance and the precariousness of life in general. All those pieces have been done in the last few years. It's what I feel through having a child in the world, and bringing them into this precarious position. Often you do not know what is going to happen. You can send them off on an aeroplane and they may

never come back. You know all that precariousness of life – the warming of the earth and other environmental issues.

Big issues.

They're all in the work. So it is really interesting to listen to the Robert Bell pick-up on one – his way of interpreting it. All those issues are there because it is so precarious. Sometimes I feel I have let it overwhelm me completely, but I live in this absolutely beautiful part of the world. I'm very lucky with friends and family and all that, and yet the world is so precarious.

Sometimes I feel we are hidden away. Then I feel I can't get too maudlin. So I have to put humour into it, because humour is how we survive.

Is there something that marks glass as being of a particular country?

There is definitely the Czechoslovakian thing with Brychtova and Libensky, but an Australian thing? I can't see it. It's very American, because a lot of us trained there, but then America drew in people from all over the world.

To me it's more the person. There is the web site, 'American Alliance for Contemporary Glass'. They go into private collections in houses. These collectors have been collecting for years. A centrepiece will always be the Libensky and Brychtova in the lounge room window. Then photos take you all around the house. You see all these glass works in 'living situations'. They are in the bathroom. They are in the bedroom. They are in the kitchen. They are everywhere. I looked and saw a Brian Hirst there.

You'd pick them individually, but not from what country they came from. You know them by names, but not by country. You'd probably say with a lot of the Czechoslovakian stuff (particularly their big castings) that they've come from a country where they've been able to do them under Government auspice.

Apart from that, I find it very hard to articulate it into country. I don't know whether the others find that. If you go into a house and say there's a Warren Langley. There's a Toots Zynsky. There's a Joel Philip Myer. There's a David Reekie. You wander through the house and pick the people rather than the country.

When I was in Adelaide I walked around the conference student exhibitions and I still don't think you could pick them by country unless perhaps you went into the techniques, maybe (but only by technique).

I would say yes to something like signature style rather than a country's style.

Are there disadvantages with signature style?

Yes, there are. I'm now known just for the bowls. I gave up casting when I saw David Reekie's work. When I saw his work I thought everyone will think my work is just a take-off of his (which it wasn't). I didn't want to be seen to be 'copying'. When I look back, they are actually not alike. I used found objects and they were quite different.

Bowls were something I could do quite easily. They were selling. I still see them as a production line in one way. It's just that I've lost interest. (I have had a couple of months off now, so the interest is back! Fickle aren't I?)

It's important that people recognise your work?

It's important to have my own style. Also it's important that if people see a drawing (or something else of mine) that they recognised it as my work because it means that it's mine. It has a bit of me in it. That's what makes your work different. I have never queried why. I suppose I was led to believe it was important that something was mine and was recognised as mine.

A desire to be recognised?

The recognition happened, but for me to feel I was achieving something then it had to be specifically mine and that nobody else could do it in that way because it's all connected with me. I didn't want to be seen to be doing anybody else's stuff.

It has to be a bit quirky and even though I'd like it to be deep and meaningful I can't quite...

And when your work is recognised as a Deb Cocks?

That is just how it should be. I have an art history background. I have a love of medieval manuscripts by monks. A lot of the time there is no known 'doer', but you can always pick out the style of the person who did it. To me that is what an artist did. They had their own recognisable style. All through history that is part of what we do. (So it doesn't have to be Deb Cocks as such – it could be that hermit on the hill who works in glass)

As part of the role of artist?

Yes. That's what you do. You go through a book and you know the artist and you know their style – whatever medium they choose to work in.

If people saw your work they would recognise the style even if they misinterpreted the story.

There are not a lot of glass painters around, so that's a definite plus. I've taught so many people and there are still hardly any around. I would love there to be lots of glass painters. I'm not turf conscious

Talk about the negatives with signature style.

The negative is that if you change it, people say they don't like it. That's the commercial side of it. I did a whole lot of different stuff and sent it to America. It wasn't very different. It was still painted bowls. I would do the black and I would scratch it all back and add more paint to it (which I find really satisfying). I really enjoy doing it. And I haven't tested it a lot, I must admit. But it wasn't quite as quirky. Over the years you do a load of work and you think it suits the gallery and you discuss it with them and they say, "Yes, what's selling at the moment is dah, de dah, de dah... flowers, wings and insects and things". So you do a lot of that and it doesn't sell. So they say, "Maybe we have to have quirky". So you do quirky and that doesn't sell either and you are back to square one.

Sometimes commercial imperatives are misleading?

Yes, but also they have to be there. These were always my production lines. When I do quirky in one way it sells. One thing I have noticed is that the 'better' I become in drawing, or painting, or doing something on glass, the more people don't seem to like it.

They want 'edginess'?

Maybe the naivety of what I was doing. I look back at that work and think it is bloody awful. I think I am getting better, but it doesn't seem to have that reaction in the market place. Maureen's now going to Taipei so we sent off photos of various bowls and they chose. I did a whole body of work around a certain bowl, which has gone back to a certain style that didn't sell particularly well. We will see what happens.

What of s pontaneousness?

Yes. I just work straight on the glass. If it happens, I love doing that. You do part of it, you stop, you scratch and you leave the rest black. You work in the bowl more and you see the edginess.

There'll usually be a starting point.

Like the start of a slope?

Yes and you just see where it takes you. I love doing that, but it's also nice to do just straight stuff and enjoy that. This is where (for me) it becomes fairly complicated. When the quirky side is working well, then I'm really happy, but then I like the periods when I walk down the hill, pick up a leaf and draw that.

I used to draw a lot before Grace (daughter) got older. It just all happened in my head in bed at night and I'd get up the next day and do it. Now I sit in front of it and start. When I do draw the drawings are very loose. They are just an idea. But often the outcome is still jaded. If you work to a formula, you start to feel you are being very formulaic and they will still look the same in the end

If it's too easy, there's no struggle?

No, struggle has never been one of my things. When I say that, I mean I tend to just do and then look at it and think it's a heap of shit. The 'struggle' is always that one of these days I'll be happy with something. And every now and then I'll look at something and say that really worked well, or with a series it looks pretty proficient.

I guess at the moment I'm at a point where I would like to be doing something different and signature style binds me to what I'm known for.

I love to do a bit of casting (which I will do). I look around my workshop and I'd like to paint my old bits of metal with oil paint and do things on those as little paintings.

Move away from glass?

Yes and I've got that much on the computer with digital images of the bowls and close-ups that I love. I love these little close ups of the thick paint, the back of them, where the paint has built up. I get on the computer and manipulate those. I'd love to see some of those.

You like 'fiddling' with material?

Yes, and the computers are just as good. If you've only got ten minutes, it's great. You can flick up an image and you can do all these things to it. I love playing. Because I haven't drawn much, I collage. I cut things out and I've got pages of juxtaposed images all together. I'll paint over the top of them because I can do it quickly. I need to do something. There is all this stuff and I don't know where it is going.

As Grace has now hit high school my life gets divided up differently yet again. There are all new issues to deal with. Yes, so here I am, we're in high school now. I'm doing a lot of that computer stuff. We're into the homework side of it

This is life.

Yes, exactly.

The high school series is coming out when?

I don't know about that, but in another six years it will be a new stage again. I think if I can just keep everything going then maybe when that happens I can move on and try to get it all together again. But it's another six years, you can do all this stuff concurrently and hope that later it will hang together in some way.

I would like to be able to do it so you don't have to worry. You've got to sell too. I don't have room for all the stuff. I can't keep giving it away. I've got to earn money to make it

You need an independent income.

Yes and we don't have that, so at this stage everything's stopped selling, so it becomes very difficult.

and glass is a big commitment.

Yes, so where do you go in that time? I don't have a teaching job anymore.

But 'things' continue to 'happen' in your head?

All the time, but whatever I do might not be good enough. So you've got to be able to do it for long enough. You've got to have the conviction to put out something that you are not known for, with a conviction that you're happy with it. That it is very much my work and it is up to a certain standard.

It's not so much the high standard, but I've handled a lot of really good antique glass and ceramic – studying paintings, etc, and it is good. My work's not to that standard yet. It's getting there hopefully. I feel happier putting it out, but in that sense, are you just accepting anything? It comes back to a standard, a quality I have to sustain myself. It has to be acceptable to me.

What do you read in Warren's work?

It's too hard for me to separate the person from the work? I don't know whether I read it in the work, or I read it in Warren (therefore it is now in the work).

Warren learnt how to manipulate the flat glass really well in his kiln using the sand casting style. There are all these other things here. I was at college with Sergio and all that sort of stuff. (The time of people setting up businesses and sand casting) Warren and his brother set up 'Ozone', which is great. I admire Warren a lot. He's done his own thing, but he's set up his business. He's made an excellent contribution to everything and now, with these 'light sculptures', he's doing fantastic things. I haven't spoken to him for years, but looking at him now I think he's actually more himself. He was the first wave.

I think he loves the texture, playing around with it. He does a lot working out how to do things within his own parameters – what he was willing to do. His sculptures are very flat, but he worked out a way of doing them without having to cast them in the round. In a way I use to look at him and think why doesn't he just do them in the round.

I always saw him as being very commercial, even before he set up the business. I don't know whether that's the correct reading for what Warren did or not, but he always had a commercial basis.

Warren is very much concerned with setting parameters and then making his glass within those parameters. He claims it.

With Richard it's a classical approach to the glass.

It's very Czechoslovakian.

You are right. I see Warren would be working near the kiln with a whole lot of bits of glass and fiddling with them until they were right, where as Richard would design first.

Jessica would plan too.

Jessica comes from a different place to Richard.

That's his whole life too. When he was at Sydney College... I tend to go into lots of exhibitions, take the opportunity to exhibit. I didn't judge who was exhibiting or who was the gallery. I just enjoyed it all. Richard could say he had ten exhibitions, but they were all in the best galleries.

That's very much Richard. When Richard was at Pilchuck, he had just left Canberra. He was the 'Mel Gibson' and everybody fell in love with him. They all thought he was gorgeous. Then he went to Albert University and he came back very rigid. He changed in that period and became very conscious and aware. Very controlling of what he did. His work is very controlled.

A negative?

No, no you can see that in his work, very controlled, the whole thing. – that is his signature style. Maybe controlled isn't the right word, nor is planned. Maybe he is able to orchestrate because there is such an inter-dependence of technique and concept and physical performance to polish. Yes, I wish I had that ability to orchestrate to perfection!

Jessica's work?

Was it Jessica's work in Adelaide, a block with a very muted cream? It has to be again for technical purposes. I find her work very planned and very rigid, like Richard's. But she obviously puts a lot of thought into the design of the piece. Yes, they are very beautiful pieces and they are technically beautiful too. They just seem magic to look at.

The other thing, with works like that is, and with a lot of glass, and probably with Richard's too, when you've got it in a window, or in light sources, there's change. It always changes. That's one of the magic qualities of glass, that it never stays the same. In the cast pieces, at every time of the day it'll be slightly different.

I have trouble with Richard's a lot of the time because they are too Czechoslovakian and I feel they are not Richard, but then I saw this Pilchuck thing and I saw all this other

work in there. There is obviously this whole range of other work from Richard that I don't know about. It looked amazing. I thought maybe that's more Richard coming out. He seemed to be caught up in the American ways, now he's back in Australia he will be more Richard again.

He is an amazing practitioner.

You're dealing with a totally different approach.

But then people say why bother doing it on glass? That's what I keep coming back to sometimes. Why go through all this...but it does look different.

Your work reflects an intimate landscape.

Yes, I know, the physical landscape (yes and one in my head). I went down the road this morning and I drove back. There were grass bales and things. It's been very misty and I came around the corner and the mist had cleared on this hill. There were the most amazing colours. I'm constantly amazed by what goes on around me. That must come into the work in some way.

Jessica's, I look at hers and I like that horizon very much... when you travel you see that horizon line, but there is no horizon line here. We're mountainous. We've got the Caldera crater around us. The Caldera crater ring always surrounds you. We are always within this rim. Yet one day we were out at the bus stop, which is just outside the house. There was just mist. You could look at it and imagine there was no rim there and you could see forever. That made it so different.

That's what Jessica's got in her work – 'forever'.

Yes, it's the 'forever'. That's what you get when you go to the beach. You can just look at horizon, whereas here we're very enclosed, and cluttered, and busy.

That would be a description of your work?

It is. The bowls enclose it, which is like being in the crater really.

That might just be fortuitous, but...

It sounded good, didn't it?

Someone mentioned your bowl as being a very utilitarian object, which reflects a concern with the domestic landscape.

Yes, which it is. Andrew is still a potter, although he hasn't pottered for a number of years, but yes, we are surrounded by utilitarian things.

It is almost as if Richard's landscape is in the formal elements of the glass?

Yes. I think that is a good way of reading it.

Warren has narratives he runs through his work.

Yes. I must see more of his bigger work, because I've only see a couple of images of them. I've been very interested in them. It is lovely what he has branched into.

The flexible lighting?

And from that also comes the photographs and what he can do with that.

You've talked about what you want from work in progress, and it seems it reflects your concerns at the time, and that it is unpredictable.

Yes, but it is still a conscious decision. I still control it to a large extent. I sit there making decisions. It's not completely 'Dada'.