



Deb Cocks
Grace's Ark
 1996
 slumped and enamelled glass
 diam. 32 cm

I have images of your work going back to those early works in Wagga Regional Gallery that echoed David Reekie's work (made before you knew he existed).

In a funny way I still feel that like that, even though I know they're different. I wasn't aware of his work, but when I had done the *Blaxland Show*, that is when I became aware of him. I thought that's it – it is too similar.

A potter may not mind producing work that looks similar to other potter's work.

No, that is in a tradition. It might be trying to get a similar glaze – a craft tradition where you are able to slice through the form and see you have the perfect line. It is a pity Andrew [Stewart] [spouse] is not here, because he's a potter.

We attempt to create work that is identifiably ours.

That happens across all mediums. I started doing my bowls as my production line, but every one was different. I notice one of your questions was whether you take advantage of whatever mistakes might happen. The big bowls started because at Tempe Tip I happened to buy a lot of big discs for twenty-cents each and that was how I started to make those. I had the glass for two or three years and then I met Andrew. He was a potter and he made me big rings – so therefore big bowls. It happened that I couldn't pass up these enormous discs. I guess I wanted to make big bowls, but I had to wait two or three years before I could actually do it.

The other thing is that they are very hard to clean with the technique I use, so that is how I started engraving. That became integral to my technique as well. That is how I work. I love chance. I love mistakes. I love things going wrong. I saw you looking at all those little pieces in the cupboard. They are my bowls broken up, fired and stacked up. That is what is happening to my bowls now. I have only done one show in a long time and that was last year. It was five women and it was called *Heated Words*. We each chose a book. I chose Haruki Murakami, a Japanese author who has got the most vividly wonderful descriptive passages. Instead of doing one book, I combined all sorts

of passages. One thing he talks about are the *tells of my past*. These works are the *tells* of my past. In another story there were the thirty-six steps to something, so I have thirty-six *tells* of my past here.

This is work tied to your life.

Totally. That is why I had so much trouble all the way through – I have all these pushes and pulls and she (daughter Grace) has been the most important thing for a long time now. The other thing is that I look at the history of glass and I look at the things people have done over time that are absolutely time-less. That is what I always wanted to achieve. My original thing was that I wanted to blow glass and paint on it. It would be all my own, and in a way it would be time-less. There you would see things that would be beautifully crafted, well designed and that would hold over time. You look at Gallé pieces and a lot of them are just beautiful, and they will always be beautiful. That does not mean that they have to be Minimalist. It can cross across all styles, but there are certain things that you look at and know they will always be good. It can still be tied into its time, but it has to have those elements that enable it to survive. That sets a high bar and you become very hard on yourself.

Are you talking about form?

No. I am talking about the whole thing, the integrated thing. The reason I am telling you about this is because I look at a lot of my work and think it is a load of crap. I began to work with Jonathon Westacott in Queensland and he started blowing forms for me. The reason was that the big bowls were my one-off production line and I churned them out. Some I look back at and think they were all right and others I think “Oh God, how embarrassing”. They stopped selling. When you live off something and they stop selling that is a problem. That happened just before we renovated. I went to Japan and worked as an artist-in-residence for ten days (I took Grace and it was wonderful). I worked on some forms there. The idea was to try and work smaller on beautiful blown forms, get more in the kiln to become more economical so we could live off what I was doing. They didn’t sell either.

Initially I was lucky in that I sold what I was making, but when that stops you start to look at things differently. You try to do things to sell. The trouble was that I think what I was producing then was a lot of my best work and I have still got it here. It is more timeless. (Brings out work) I like this bowl. It is my Brays Creek [where Cocks now lives] bowl, but I get the response that “it is not like me – it is not quirky”. So I did some quirky things and they didn’t sell either. (Points to bowl and figure fishing) This is now my signature man. He has become my little fisherman – my philosopher. I have a RedBubble site and I have been designing fabric and material from my bowls and using my images to do other things.

I am trying to do different things now. I don’t ever stop doing. I just have to work out why I am doing them and where they are going to get me. Trying those things is a whole other world and it is so competitive too. I am in two minds here. I work at the Tweed Gallery and every five weeks we do a change over. I can’t really get a job because of responsibilities with aging parents, but I have all these skills – how do I use them? I am not good at marketing my own things. There is so much good stuff out there.

Yet you are still driven to do work?

Oh yes. I am getting into textiles, although my main thought at the moment is to use up all the crap we have stored (laughs). For the show that I did I brought some new glue because my locktite was twenty-years old, but apart from that I was not going to buy anything.

The reason I do my work is because I wanted to do it. It wasn't because I was earning money (although my bowls were the production line). The 'Dave Reekie work' ended that sculptural work.

But you backed off as soon as you saw similarity.

Yes. I thought people would think I was copying. Does that happen in other areas? There is the Japanese tradition of the unknown potter. Andrew was a production potter and then the GST came in and his market bottomed out. Then there is all the Chinese imports. He stopped earning quite a while ago.

Now there is imported Chinese blown glass kitsch.

And the annealing is terrible (laughs). When I was teaching we got a whole lot of glass and just checked to look at the annealing and it was stressed right out. My other background is in antiques and art history. My first degree was in art history in Canberra. My parents collected antiques and that is how I am earning money now. I am selling all the stuff I have collected. I have handled a lot of good stuff in my life, so I do have a notion of what is timeless.

From this distance do you have a perspective on studio glass?

No, I've dropped right out of it. You have to work hard at being in touch with people. You need to be gregarious and I'm not a gregarious person. Some people are happy to go to every Ausglass meeting and they will keep in touch with people, but I don't. I'm Grace's mum. I've always thought I'd keep my passion for glass warm until Grace finished school. I thought High School would be easier, but it hasn't turned out to be so. It is pretty idyllic here with our workshops down the back. We would pack up Grace and we would all go down the back to the workshop and while she was young it was wonderful. She played down there and we worked.

And she appeared on the glass.

Yes. There were the pegs and everything – that just happened. It was a natural progression. You think things are going to change and be easier, but life just keeps throwing things up.

Are these images 'incidental'?

They are, but they are also very consciously put together. You are talking about people reading my work. Of course I put together things that are read how I want to read them, but I also leave them open to be read. We have talked before about what other people thought. They would think I was weird. They would tell me so and I would say no, you're weird, not me (laughs). I read the work differently.

Our trick is to create a thing that takes on a life of its own.

Yes. This little fellow (the fisherman), I drew him sitting at the airport (having been to a Melbourne opening). Because I was doing this work for Melbourne I thought it was time for him to go home, so I put him on that bowl, but he is back here now – he is well travelled. He is my Fisherman – the fisher of life. But others can make whatever they want out of it. In the end it is just juxtaposing images, images layer upon layer. Then I put them in Photoshop and do things with them. This is a whole raft of techniques, but I just love juxtaposing images, because they can mean so many different things to so many different people.

You talked of ‘timelessness’, was that to do with form?

Yes, but I also wanted to do things I could not do on my flatter bowls. I didn't want a rim. I like the shadows, so when you actually put that work on a plinth and the sun goes through it, there are absolutely magic shadows. It changes as you look at it. That is nice and I like using all that stuff. All that seems a long time ago, but I did that piece in 2008. Not that long ago, but to be honest it feels like another life.

These more intimate pieces (small pieces stacked, glued and wrapped)?

There were thirty-six of them, and then there were two 'walls' as well. They are down the back in a box. I am keeping those and I am keeping them because it is here and I am never doing another one. Normally there is none of my work around. Of a series of bowls there is a big piece I did of Grace when she was younger that is here somewhere.

These things hold memories?

I guess so. With those pieces you probably need the whole thirty-six. They were set up on a glass shelf. You would just walk along them and there were little bibs and bobs. There was this sandpit and that thing was found there. We have been here eighteen years and the woman before us had four kids playing in that sandpit. Each morning I would go out and there would be another thing, possibly an animal without legs – a little horse or cow and it has slept in the sandpit until the rain washed it out. It is a constant dig and it is wonderful. They are the 'tells' of my past. That was such a perfect title for this. The title is important because put together they are a history.

That title also directs the viewer.

Yes. You may have to ask what a 'tell' is, but a tell to me is a midden heap. It was a Japanese author so that name was a translation, but it had such beautiful resonance.

In gambling a 'tell' is a gesture that reveals something about yourself to those watching.

They are just such good words. Then there are the enamels – when you look through them they are all different. And it was so satisfying cutting up all those bowls. You would score them and then you would get a hammer, cover them and go wack. All the stuff you don't know what to do with. I don't want to sell it because it is not good enough, so to smash it is absolutely brilliant. These were all 10mm bowls. Then I would put them in the kiln as little shards and heat them up. I have these pictures of them sitting in the kiln that I have made into a fabric design, because they just look so beautiful in the kiln. They gloss over and all these beautiful things occur that are

absolutely fantastic. I have all these other ones that I can't stack that I think are so beautiful on their own.

They are fun and they were really good to do. I was glad I had a reason to break-up these works and do things – there is that element of chance. Putting together all these bits that you had smashed up. So I built these walls that had an old car at the top. Then I had Pyrex tube that I engraved with fish. The story was about this guy driving to the end of the pier, but Haruki's story had real twists and turns. I imagined the water coming out of these Pyrex tubes with the fish in them. They were a lot of fun.

A 'collaboration' with an author?

Yes, but not being a literal translation. I wasn't trying to illustrate his story. Here is another one – *The Elephant Vanishes*. I printed up material and stuff. It was another absolutely beautiful story. Inside (this bell jar) you can let the elephant down as when the elephant vanishes out of this cage at the end of the story. Again the little elephant came out of the sandpit.

These are mixed media constructions. You are not a 'glass purist'.

No. I love mixed media. A lot of the first things I did were old rusty things with glass in them.

Why glass?

I guess I fell in love with glass somewhere along the line. I may have started with stained glass, but illuminated manuscripts were my first love. They have that richness of colour. I love the writing, the gilding, the everyday scenes – that comes from my art history.

You created a style with your painting that was very identifiably your own, but that became a trap for you.

Yes and when I started to create this new work people asked where the big bowls were. They wanted the bowls, but I had passed that. I would have had to order more glass and had more stands made. If I had done that it wasn't going to work. They were not going to like them. I didn't want to fall into that trap because I had moved on. I stopped doing that because I knew that what I would do wasn't necessarily going to sell. I'd be doing it for the wrong reason and that doesn't work.

I only had two galleries by then and they were Maureen (Glass Artists) and Kirra. Suzanne (Kirra) is wonderful. Kirra was very supportive, but in the end I said I couldn't do it. If nothing is selling you should just sent it all back and I will take a break. At this stage (until Grace finishes her HSC at the end of next year) I am calling it my sabbatical.

You may be building a whole new body of work?

Sure, I agree. I am doing Photoshop. In that I'm playing around and doing a whole lot of layering of images. In that layering I'm still doing the glass and I know it's building to somewhere because I know that process. I am doing my 'India Flint' (textile artist) and she does a lot of rusty iron and wraps things up in that. I am doing that sort of thing. Seth Apter put a whole lot of bundles out to weather and then he uses the weathered

thing. I looked at his work it and it was the David Reekie thing all over again, but worse.

Doing very similar work while not knowing that other work exists?

It has to happen. We can't all be unique and with the Internet there is so much you can get onto. The downside is that you realise there are so many people out there who are trying to 'be'.

Glass had a very good run.

Yes and at good prices too. I few years ago Maureen said ceramics was more popular because it was cheaper. Glass was getting enormous prices - \$11,000, \$12,000. It is a real dilemma.

When you look at the technique when I started 25/30 years ago and what they do now straight out of college, it is amazing.

We choose to work with glass because of what it offers us.

I love being able to see through it, but now I see through Photoshop layers and it doesn't cost anything (laughs). You can play to your heart's content and be creative, but that does look like Photoshop. I know it is not the same as glass.

When you worked, was it common to mark your work against other glass artists, like you marked you work against David Reekie?

Had I known about Seth Apter (who doesn't work in glass) I would have marked it against him too. There have been so many people who do what I consider 'David Reekie stuff' in ceramics as well, but I guess we were only just dealing with glass.

It was a community.

It was a lovely community as well. It is a great community. It is finding a way to do it your way. I still feel I have to be my own person. Maybe it is because I feel vulnerable, but people can be so nasty and dismissive. Painting has often been dismissed as a second rate glass thing within glass. When you don't reach what you want to do yourself, you are going to take on board what other people say about your work.

Because I'm doing this textiles thing I remember Jan Irvine (I was in her workshop) stitched this way, so I stitched that way. I really like the way Alabama Chanin works with recycled materials, so I am saying I am doing India Flint, Alabama Chanin and Jan Irvin and then I am making it mine. I am trying to see where you can take bibs and bobs from people and put them together to make something else.

Is it possible to be anything else but yourself?

Definitely yes, I think you can take in too much and not see it. I look at my work very critically and that stays with me for a long time. This is particularly with my work in the V&A. That piece I never would have sent if I had something else to go. I look at that and think of all the pieces they could have had. I sent it to a show because it was all I had at the time and then the V&A bought it. Now all I can do is look at it and say, but... (Laughs).

It is hard to measure yourself in creative areas.

But you can measure yourself against the perception of things. It is interesting working in the gallery where they have exhibitions. There are those people they sit and talk about it, and they mention all the names 'of the moment'. Then they have to pick exhibitions to go together and I feel they are choosing 'of the moment'. They are working within the timeframe of what is seen as acceptable – or 'in'. Across the board there is the technically beautiful. That cuts across everything – whether it is little sculptures, or anything else – it is technically beautiful.

Yet, something I am involved with again this year is a children's art show with about twenty schools from across this district. You have whole classrooms of kids doing the same thing and so you might get batches of portraits. I have run it for about eight or nine years. For a few years I got into judging it and I had to tell the other judges that they had to trust their intuition. There would be thirty things that were the same and there would be one that stood out. There are a thousand portraits and in age they run 5 to 7, 8 to 10, and 11 to 13. Then there is a disabilities group. We sit three judges at a table and they each have ten stickers and you have to place your ten stickers on works selected from the three hundred in front of you. You would be amazed how many times three stickers are placed on the one work. There is some sort of aesthetic coming out right from an early age. Many times it is kids who have other learning difficulties.

What comes through?

I am looking at what sells and what does not sell with my work now and it is trends – something I do not have control over. It is fickle. Around ten years ago, when the Crafts Council of NSW became Object, they threw out the word craft completely and what is happening now is that we have knitting in Object. They threw the word 'craft' out saying the word was bad. They were panning a word, but in doing that they also undermined so many people's identity and activity. They picked up the trendy artists and they dropped of those they didn't want. It was sad.

Interview continues 21/09/10

I see glass as a multi-meaning thing. That's how it is for me. Often how glass is seen isn't how I see it. I see it as a means to say what I want I want to say. It was fascinating when I realised I didn't belong with decorative glass. It is fascinating when you realise you see things differently to the group. I find it is interesting when I upload work (onto the RedBubble site) and see it with other's work. That really puts it into perspective for me. You find like-minded people. Although it has been a feature of the glass community that right from the start they have been nice.

The environment you live in is rich in images and story.

It feels like that. I work with glass so I see things and their reflections as something not just to take a picture of. I see them and work with them. I use the qualities of glass. I like being able to work over it. I like covering it with engravings, but possibly a lot of people don't read this as reflections and shadows. I think the reflections that are created (particularly in these bowls through the engraving and particularly through the enamel) are sometimes so beautiful. Those shadows can be sometimes better than the work.

A lot of people will look at glass on a superficial level (and that is not wrong), but I am trying to differentiate. Obviously when you work in a material you get a deeper understanding of it and I am saying that as being the opposite of superficial. When you work with glass you have your painting and you have your cast pieces. You see so much in a cast piece. You analyse how it goes in. You know its reaction to heat. You start to see how the glass flows into the mould and what happens then. Because you work with it and understand the fluidity of it, you have a different way of looking at it. It is your language. I always go back to the fact that you can't do something unless you know the language and you can't use the language until you get the technique to a certain level. You get to a level in your glassmaking where you start to see everything within a frame, but you know there are all these fragments that make the whole. You have this base of deeper understanding that enables the work to flow.

I am in this sabbatical where I am trying to reinvent things. I am in isolation in one way, but I am in contact with all these little groups that you can come and go from and that makes you look at things in a wider context.

You are making objects that have a rich layering of meanings.

It takes a long time to get to that stage. In the workshop you'll see stuff everywhere. When I was working on that show I had ten pieces set up trying to put something together. It was getting all those layers together that worked.

Multiple mediums are not an issue.

I have never had any problem with that. Right from the start I used cottons. Wagga may not have them out, but there are slumped things that are actually strung with cottons. Wagga has those from many years ago and they are very thin (so thin they could flake off). I would drill holes, string cotton and suspend a painted image. There were cottons and beads and it was painted. Then I went heavy – 6mm to 10mm. Now I am back to fragility and reverting to the little drawings suspended with materials I have done. You re-look at your past ideas and go off at other tangents. With the many qualities of glass you have so much to work with. I realised I had a whole raft of things that I saw in glass that others don't see as 'glasslike'. It has been very interesting looking at that and finding that you understand things in a different way, because you work with it and its your language.

Then why did you paint your cast glass figure?

It was an act of irreverence (laughs). There are other things I used to do – like my three professors sitting in old metal things (I did for Blaxland in '92). That was the only exhibition I did that involved this stuff and that had three big professors' heads. The glass was contaminated so it had blackened, so I took that further and all of them then had oil paint on them, but the glass still came through. They had old glass slides on their heads that looked like mortarboards. I have actually put oil paint on lots of stuff, instead of enamelling it. There is this lovely dead flat quality of oil paint on the mass of cast crystal. That is a great combination (laughs).

That could have been lead.

No, it had to be glass, because you can still see through them. There is a lot of luminosity, but on that one it was fully covered. That was a wonderful thing to do because to cover it completely is so against what people do. For me that was lovely because it totally denied the fact that it was glass. There it was just a heavy material.

Richard Whiteley was saying that some of his students were making glass objects where appearance denied the glass.

Ceramicists are making mugs that look like polystyrene cups.

It is intriguing that you have gone off working on your own, but you are doing what in effect some contemporary glass practitioners are doing.

It is a struggle finding the technique that I'm happy with to make this work. That is, to put it all together. There are only five pieces, but I have a long way to go to put it all together. That is also tempered by the fact that I don't want to buy anything, so I'm setting myself a boundary. That makes you think laterally and it pushes it for me. I'm back to the point where I don't care if it doesn't sell. I have had to restructure my thinking to say I'm doing it. I don't have to sell to make the next work (which is what used to happen with the bowls). I don't even have to have somewhere to exhibit anymore and it doesn't matter.

You can be making really interesting work that people do not see.

That is not the point. I've had to restructure my whole way of looking at things to enable me to do it again. I do not want a stash of stuff. I can break work apart and remake it. A photograph can be the end of it. It doesn't matter. I can put it together and pull it apart again.

But a curator like Megan doesn't see your work and it doesn't get into that exhibition.

That is because I don't go to Ausglass, or keep in touch. That's me. I'm not in anything. You have to really work at staying in and being part of a community. I need to say, "Hello, I'm still here and I'm still teaching", but I get to the point where I think that is fine. I went to England with Maureen [Cahill] and it was wonderful and I went to Japan and took Grace.

The contrast between the English and American interpretations of your work was interestingly so differently.

You can take it either way, which is what I like to do.

But you put triggers in your work.

I put in lots of triggers, and they are very conscious. I will sit there and say I will put that in and I can see how it can be read in different ways. I like that. I think that is the fun bit. That's tapping into the rich medieval tradition of glass painting. It was wonderful going to the V&A and through those galleries of glass painting and the little ivory sculptures. The V&A was magical.

I have quite a few cupboards of stuff packed away that I have not put out yet and I am desperate to get that stuff out.

Object is another link for glassmakers. It is object in combination with the conceptual carrying capacity of glass.

That is what a lot of people don't see – the other layers of the glass. Then, as the owner of a glass piece, you have custody and the possibility to put it in a variety of places that make it change even further because it is glass, whereas other things wouldn't have that potential.

Andy Plummer had a cast piece on the windowsill in the room where I was doing my stained glass commission. It was his favourite piece then and it was amazing. You would just glimpse it out of the corner of your eye and go "Oh!" because of the different light.

We are hard-wired to be attracted by light and by change.

And we are, you would see it out of the corner of your eye and go "Whoa!, it changed again". As a 'piece' I thought it was pretty natty. I don't want to own it, but it did change all the time.

Objects intrigue you?

I pick up things all the time. I have boxes of dead insects. Everything is just wonderful.

What about needing validation for your work?

It is easy to be sucked into that. That is why I am still on RedBubble. I need someone to say that's nice (laughs). Andrew is never one to say much and after he would photograph a piece he might say that wasn't bad, but that was it – high praise (laughs). I would send work off and I very rarely go to openings. Living up here I'm Grace's mum. I'm not a glass person, but I like the fact that I do not have to live up to anybody's expectation. They have a really big bowl of mine in the gallery here and it is lovely having that. I don't mind being associated with that bowl. I am represented by something I like. That is just the level I like. I do not want to have to live up to the expectation of 'artist'. I've never called myself an artist. I don't call myself anything. When I get really good I'll tell you then (laughs). I feel you have to earn that. It's not pretension. It is the notion of what an artist actually is. For me that is somebody who lives their life knowing where they're at and is able to produce really good work in their own language. I guess that's what I aspire to, but I don't think I am there yet, particularly because I am so fragmented. Now my art journey is back where it was twenty-five years ago (and that's lovely). It is gathering and not producing. I love gathering.

This room is that multi-layered gathering – a rich fabric.

That is why I got so upset when the word 'craft' was put down, because it wasn't fair on the word. It is a rich and beautiful word and they were panning it and making it into something that was not what it was. It can be any object imbued with the maker. A simple bowl can have so much in it.

When you spoke of a thing that was 'timeless' I understood that as elements of form.

It's not actually just a formal thing. It will be of its time, but carry that through into other ages. You can read it as being 19th century, or 18th century, but it will still work and be valued for the same qualities – whether they be formal qualities, or the idea/concept. That will be seen in any century as something that still works and it can be understood and appreciated. You can look at old English porcelain that is hand painted and you

know it was made three hundred years ago, but it still has something that defines it. It is an object that you can look at and see that still carries all that with it.

Object as a container of memory.

And you can still use it and add to it. An object can have two hundred years of history and I am still holding it and using it every morning. I find that amazing. What I aspire to is to have my objects having that and trading on eBay to see how it they are recognised. Things may be worth nothing because of trends, but people may recognise qualities and build up their own collection of things that, in another hundred years or so, people look at and go, "Wow!"

You are not going to accept the price of something as its worth.

No, because I know that is fictitious. I find it interesting because you look at a lot of people's work and you hope it doesn't get chucked out and lost with the bathwater because it is not trendy at that time. You are relying on people who buy work now when otherwise it may not survive.

I find it an interesting concept that you are reliant on that. I have been lucky up to now in that I have sold work and have been able to do what I wanted to do. Then that was taken away. You realise how much you are dependant on the will of the market, even though you think you are working independently. This is particularly so with people in glass who depend on sales to do their next bit of work. You cannot help but to be influenced by someone who buys a piece of work and says it is wonderful. It is hard to maintain a balance between what you want to do and what you are pulled towards because it sells, when selling makes your other life sustainable. You can never work totally independently if you are trying to maintain an arts practice with its equipment and things like that and you have a gallery exposure.

If you want to continue to produce glass pieces and teach you need to be lucky. I think I have been very lucky to have sold those bowls with pegs and nappies and Maureen [Cahill] has worked very hard at that. It is also good to have had that stop, and to go back to thinking about what I am doing. In my mind my work was always a production line. Those works then became a diary of my life. I have only got photos of Grace's first words on plates. Why did I sell her first words (laughs)?

People are interested in other people.

Then they would meet me and go, "Oh!". They created a fantasy that I was big, because I made big bowls. I remember standing at one opening night talking to a really big woman. Someone had obviously said that was Deb over there and the person came up and started talking to the woman beside me (laughs). The woman I had been talking to said, "That's Deb" and the response was, "Oh, I thought you would be big".