

My name's Uri Davillier. I'm a sculptor and a glass artist from the United States. I'm here [Sydney College of the Arts] because my school (The Cleveland Institution of Art) gave me their top travelling scholarship. I chose here because of the density of glass artists and the density of the connections.

About four years ago Lew Jacomb from New Zealand came as a visiting artist to my school. That was the first strong connection. I knew I could see him in New Zealand. The second connection was one of my professors. He had worked with Sergio [Redegalli] at Cydonia Glass. Through those two second-hand connections and heaps of third and fourth generation connections, I realised that if I came through this part of the world, with the limited resources I was given I could still touch a lot of different places. It would be really easy for me to travel Sydney, Canberra, Adelaide and Melbourne because I had a network. Also airfares to Auckland are cheap. Getting around this part of the world was efficient compared to Germany, Prague, Czech Republic because getting around Europe is more expensive.

*'Sculptor/glass artist' – how important are those terms to you?*

Really important, I started off making small glass objects – as an object maker, as a craftsperson. At some point in my career (probably my second year at art school) I realised that the expression of my ideas was much more important than the objects I was making. Sometimes glass was a useful medium and sometimes it was totally inappropriate – like those pieces with the *balloons and the bridge* [balloons released under a bridge to float up and out into the sky] installation work. There was absolutely no glass necessary for that piece. Glass was completely irrelevant to the piece.

As an artist I am going to follow a line of reasoning to come to the final outcome. It was that desire to do installation work that pulled me away from thinking of myself as a glass artist and started me thinking of myself as an artist who uses glass.

*Do colour and light provide a relationship here?*

I guess that does connect back to glass, but it was about the colour of that particular day of the year and about changing people's perception of what is usually drudgery (going to work at rush hour) and turning it into an exceptional moment, taking the normal and making it exceptional. That was really important to me.

*What does glass give you?*

Glass is a 'sexy' material. It is about being able to work with light – the transparency – but also when I am working it, it's that moment when it is molten and it's moveable. You are touching it with your hands and it's thousands of degrees. That shouldn't be possible, but you are doing it and it's changing shape. It is just a love for that material. It's really exciting for me.

Partly it's because of touching it, but I really also enjoy casting and in that case it is about the light transmission – transparency.

*Two things there – touch and sight.*

Yeah. I think it's that I love working with it because I get to touch it. The final product is also relatively interesting, but the process of making is far more exciting to me. Once

it's done you just put that thing up on the shelf, you sell it, whatever. It's the act of doing it again, practicing, honing your skills.

*Hands-on is important for you?*

Yes, absolutely. I don't have any problems with people who work in that fashion [have others fabricate their work for them]. It doesn't make it any less valid than someone else is making the object and is lucky enough to touch the glass while doing it. I think that when I started making the installation work I came across that moment when I realised that, although I think of myself as a craftsman, there are certain things about constructing metal armatures (although I could do it). It would take me five times as long as someone who does it everyday. Why would I waste time doing that? I have gone to the trouble of learning the basics of welding and fabrication, but at some point I am going to trust that to someone who does it as their passion.

I'm able to design something, give that design to someone who will make it and then give it back. My job is to compile that into the final piece. I can live with that.

*Viewing the Australian glass scene from the United States what did you see was happening?*

A lot of my perceptions were based on your use of glass as an architectural material. Sergio was one node away from me and he was using it. Because of the light in this country, you guys seem to value glass as an architectural material far more than we do (at least in the North where I'm from. In Las Vegas and the desert areas of our country people use glass far more for that kind of stuff.)

As my installations and stuff got bigger and bigger I realised that I just didn't have studio space in order to get that done, but there are people out there doing that. This was an opportunity for me to get in on that, to expand the level of my practice with glass. It has nothing to do with the studio glass really.

*How do you read studio glass?*

Maybe because of where I'm from, I picture studio glass as a furnace and a couple of glory holes with a couple of people working in a small hot-shop. All the kilns in the hot-shop can still be used for casting anyway. The flame working I do in my basement – you can do that anywhere, even on a beach. One's domestic, one's more industrial.

With that small studio, I perceive the studio glass movement lending itself to the production of objects (as craft). I think there is still a place for the production of artwork, something that says something, something that expresses an idea beyond that expression of fine craft, but (perhaps this has to do with the economics of the situation), it is so expensive to run a hot-shop it tends to force people to hone in on a particular set of skills and get really good at that when they know they can sell that object.

What I see coming out of the studio movement is fine craft. That space for producing artwork happens in the after hours.

*The 'bread and butter' product is object and the object is fine object – decorative art?*

Generally speaking, I think that is true. I think the makers see themselves as decorative artists. One of the things that really amplifies that is going to see SOFA (Sculptural Objects and Functional Art show) where you realise there is a whole population of people who are completely unabashed fine-crafts people who are just making objects.

*There is no pretence of being 'contemporary artists'?*

Even at that show there is a space for that. There are people producing work that says something more, but the underlining theme is fine craft. There was a piece a couple of years ago that was a huge mosaic of George Bush with Twin Towers and stuff. It was a really moving piece. There are still pieces like that, but the vast majority of stuff is decorative object.

*Decorative rather than functional?*

Generally speaking. Pieces are so nice that you wouldn't want to tarnish it by putting fruit into it.

*Is it all about making a living?*

What else can it be unless you have a trust fund or something? How can you maintain a studio practice for thirty years? There needs to be some way to produce money out of it. There are people like Damien Hirst who are going for millions of dollars every time he sells a piece. There is a space for that in the world, but this is a small upper crust. It isn't there for most of us.

*If you teach or you clean?*

or you work for somebody, but the school is still selling a product. It may seem that there is all the time and resources that you need, but the school still needs to look at the numbers. They will do that and say, "Oh man I don't believe the glass department just blew through ten thousand bucks this month. How many more students do we need? We're going to need three more fund-raises this year to afford the new furnace".

*Everything in the 'real world' is placed in the context of money?*

Yes, a trading of resources of some sort. That's just part of the world that we live in. There is still a place for that time to play, but it seems that that time to play is in the evening. The rest is, "My studio cost two thousand dollars to open today. Did I make two thousands dollars? Ok cool, I made three, that means I have four more hours to play."

*Did Australian glass making have a profile when you looked at it from overseas?*

Yes, you have some really big names and it is actually because people like Maureen [Cahill] go to shows like SOFA. I think even Sabbia galley has a little bit of an influence. Nick Mount and Tom Moore, Richard Whiteley, those peoples' work is known in those circles because you have people like Maureen who bring your artists to the States and get them entered into those high-end craft shows. That's really how it starts.

What is amazing is that when you go into those shows like SOFA and start looking around, you notice 10% of this work is from Australia. In a show that is in America you start to ask. Why are there so many people [in Australia] making glass? Even look at something like the New Glass Review, or Neuglass. You flip through those pages and you realise that the section for Australia is just a few people short of that largest section for the United States. I start flipping through the pictures and the stuff I like is from Australia.

*What attracts you?*

I think it is the newness, the freshness in the way a person is looking at the material and using the material. It's when I see an object that makes me scratch my head and ask how did that happen?

*Virtuosity?*

No, because you look at people who do Venetian glass and that's virtuosity, but people have been doing that for five hundred years. It just means they are good at something that has already been done. I am totally generalising, but still. It doesn't mean that I don't appreciate it, but when I see a piece like Nardesh's cue tips [cotton wool buds] in the New Glass Review, they are just bazaar and beautiful.

*That's the installation artist in you.*

Yeah right, but seeing something I have never seen before. Scale really attracts me. I am excited by things that are big.

*That's a challenge for glass and it's why architectural glass is intriguing.*

Absolutely. Part of the reason I went down this path is because working on the torch everything fits into the palm of your hand for the most part. There are ways to make things larger, but generally everything is tiny and precious. There still is a place for that precious object. I still make stuff that's tiny, small, even undersized goblets with little miniatures. I still like making marbles, but if that is all that you can do, the size limit frustrates you.

*Your preference is for larger?*

But it's definitely not the end all of the situation, it's just frustrating if you can't do it. But now that I can, I like working on the torch again.

*In your brief visit here do you have ideas as to why Australian studio glass has such a high international profile?*

The only thing I can imagine is that materials are relatively cheap over here. Having a place like Gaffer on your doorstep really makes it easy to get the raw materials. I'm really not sure what the answer is. It wasn't happening in the States until four people got together and said we are going to figure out how to do this on a studio scale. They held that event at a university. It's really important to have that little in where you have a workshop that gets fifteen people interested. They go off to become professors at fifteen different schools.

*Evangelists?*

The evangelists, yeah [laughs]. The institutional support seems to be crucial. I don't know how that worked here, but in the States it was absolutely crucial. On top of it having the facility like Corning. Corning was within six hours or so from Toledo, Ohio where all of that started. I'd be interested to know whether a similar thing took place here.

The other really interesting thing that I've noticed here now that I've travelled to a few schools (I had thought this was limited to my school) here it seems as if there is a disproportionate number of women becoming interested in glass. I don't know what that's about, but almost all the students here [SCA] are women and nearly all the new students, except for one guy, at my school the year before I left were females. It is really interesting to see that shift. The same thing at Monash, the same thing at Adelaide, most of the people at the JamFactory are female – blowing and casting.

I don't know what the answer to that is, but it's something interesting that's taking place the more I'm looking around. In the States I'd been around my school for around eight years. In glass you generally think you need a lot of muscle to be able to lift big, heavy stuff to be able to produce work – maybe the nature of the work is changing. Perhaps you should explore that.

*Do you see an issue we should notice, apart from that gender balance?*

I think as I have travelled around, it's the nature of the way glass is taught. Before, I said I moved from thinking as a 'glass artist' to thinking as an 'artist who uses glass' and in that transition I realised there is a lot more materials out there to use. When I started at the school I went to, it was like pulling teeth to get into the sculpture department, or to do some printmaking with my glass, to do cross-disciplinary stuff. By the time I left, they had begun to set up classes that are specifically designed so you have to be involved across disciplines. A drawing class that is a glass class – a drawing on glass class that has two professors teaching a class. It's a little difficult organising it so they are not stepping on each other's toes, but they are working that out. By the time I left (perhaps it was my own motivation) it was not difficult for me to go down to the sculpture department and get the resources I needed at the time, or to go to the printmaking department to get what I needed, or to go to the fibre department and get what I needed there. Then again I wasn't going to take no for an answer. I was just doing it.

What I've noticed as I have travelled around the institutions here is that the glass department is this really insular place. Everybody here makes glass. They make glass objects. They put them up on plinths in glass galleries. They are looking inwards.

*What about people like Tom Moore?*

That's right, exactly, that stuff is really, really exciting for me. What Mark (Elliott) is doing – making videos with glass – that's cool.

*How does studio 'glass' open itself up?*

It starts with the professors. I had a class one semester where the final result could not be put on a plinth, or attached it to a wall. What's the solution? What are you going to

do? Make people think about what they would do if they couldn't stick their work on a pedestal, or make a shelf. Forget any of the normal ways of displaying it – come up with something new.

*Kick the legs from under it and see what gets up?*

That's what art is about, isn't it? That's when object making turns into art making. You come up with solutions, new relationships between objects in space.

*Does that lessen the power of the glass?*

It is just glass. It's a material. I love it, but it is just glass. It doesn't own me. It is something to use. If you want something clear, fragile, beautiful – those qualities – then you use it, but otherwise open up. But then anybody who has used glass realises that they just want to spend the rest of their life playing with glass.

The solution is to think about it differently. Where do you use it? One good example might be when making a casting, how do I use that in my blown work?

*Across technique?*

Right, maybe you don't have to kick all the legs out simultaneously. What I'm interested in now is how to use my lamp work in the hot-shop. People have been doing that for a while, but there have to be other ways.