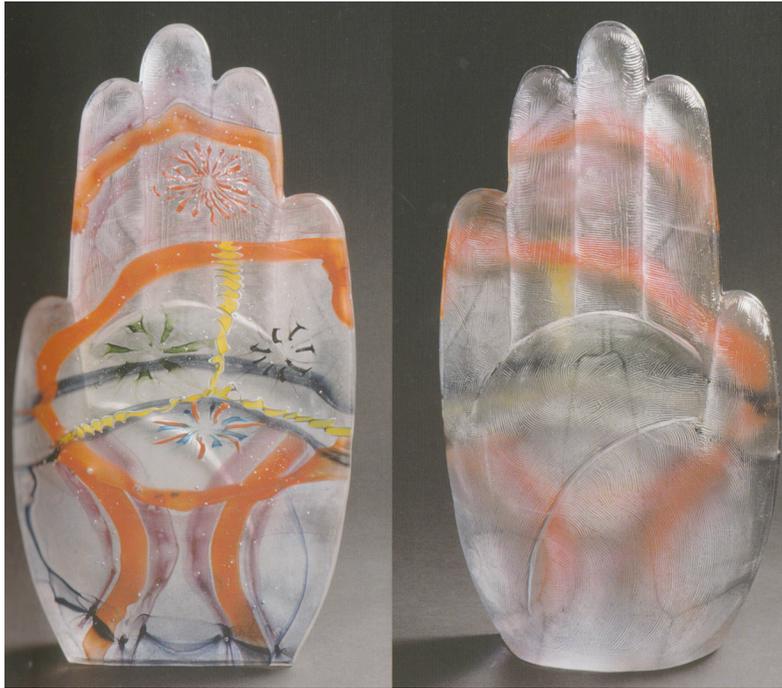


At the time of this interview George Aslanis was Lecturer and Coordinator of the Glass and Ceramics studio at Monash University



George Aslanis
Mano Poderosa
 2003
 Kiln cast furnace glass
 63 x 33 x 10 cm

How do you describe your practice?

My practice is object-based. I don't work with installation at all, or any of that sort of media. I'm working with the object itself. I explore various themes, concepts, or ideas within the work - either as a series of related objects, or as individual objects on their own.

I'm a sculptor of sorts. The term is changing. Sculpture implies a whole lot of other practice. I would say mine's object-based sculpture.

Is that classification important to you?

No (laughs), in a word, it isn't.

What's your training?

I work in glass now. I worked exclusively with ceramics and the vessel from the age of eight to age thirty-five.

With my Masters Degree I was researching translucency in ceramics. That's when I started to investigate the notion of light and light transmission and also a lot of exotic metals that were used to colour glass, but in a glaze situation. Part of my research paper was also developing a translucent ceramic body that was not porcelaineous. So

it was another type of ceramic that was translucent. That led me into science and research with the CSRIO.

I think with process-based media the science is important – to understand processes, materials and how they act in different situations. I don't believe there should be any divide between art and science, or craft and science, or any other process-based media and science.

That opened up a world of thinking for me. I thought before I got too old I would like to train and go back for what, at that stage, was my third degree. I went back and did an undergrad degree, because being involved in education I wanted to learn a ground-level approach to my processes and media that allowed me to explore the nature of glass. (I came back to study in an undergrad degree in glass in 1995.)

A philosophy based in understanding a material?

Absolutely, but it is always in service of your idea, or your concept. To be articulate in process assists you in being articulate in expressing the idea. You often see good ideas poorly expressed via a medium (or a process) that hasn't been explored, or developed, or researched enough. Conversely too, you see a lot of work that is all process and not much of an idea. In glass you see a lot of examples of hyper-craftsmanship (and there is nothing wrong with that, but) I start to worry when other definitions get put upon them. They say it's 'art' when it falls fairly into highly sophisticated craft, or design.

I don't believe in the 'hierarchy'. I believe in differences. I don't believe in high art/low art. I believe in being clear, with the appropriate definition and distinction made between areas. Of course there are hybrid areas where things crossover and that can get tricky if you are process, or medium specific, because if you are media specific you are linked into its long history (which is mostly craft and design) and it becomes a strange, grey area that people have to be very careful with.

To recap, you were in pursuance of an idea in a particular material?

Yes – for its qualities.

That material gave you qualities that enabled you to work with the idea?

It gives me the ability to work in a different way too. In glass I have never worked with the vessel. For me that whole exploration of an interior space defined by an exterior form. I'd personally come to the end of that research by the early nineties.

This was coupled with other things. I had started collecting glass from the eighties, because the qualities of glass fascinated me. I was exploring it. With that early research having to do with translucency and ceramic bodies and such. (I'm a collector of a great many things as well.) I thought I would just like to explore it, to see what would come.

I work with the open-mould process, so in a sense I have a window into an open space. That's what engages me about glass personally – the notion of an interior space and all the other implications of it describing light. Light itself is made of matter,

but we don't experience its material nature. We don't feel photons hitting us, but glass is an interesting way of describing light. It's also the metaphorical qualities too.

The concept of the container and the content?

When you look at other media too, there are the Italians with really sophisticated work in acrylics and Perspex. They actually capture similar qualities. What's different is its physicality. When you handle it. Touch, (especially when you are in process-based media) is all-important. That you are physically engaged with it, in the making – the process is physical.

You are gesturing a lot with your hands as you are saying this.

Well of course, it is all about the notion of it being a physical experience as well and the way glass feels – that's often what is unique about it. Its density, its weight, its mass coupled with its brittleness, or in certain circumstances its fragility – if it is fine enough. (I work quite massively.)

Also I have to mention what engages me about the process. Ceramics and glass I don't see as separate. They are actually (at a chemical level) the same stuff, because a glaze is a glass. If you are a ceramicist you can modify a clay body to become a glaze. You can modify a glaze to become a glass. It is the same group of minerals, in different relative proportions.

I was researching a lot of glazes, so I was researching glass in a sense. People see a distinction between them. I see them as really closely related, especially with translucent porcelains, or translucent bodies. It's the whole transformative nature of high temperatures upon these minerals to create a vitrified (because ceramics is vitrified – a word for glass) body. In fact, stonewares and porcelains ring because they have glassy structures in them. It's the transformative nature of high temperature upon these minerals (because that's what we are working with – the earth) to make them a permanent material. Prior to its vitrification you can slice ceramic down and make clay again. Glass before it melts is a collection of minerals. They can be broken, but then they are shards. They can't be returned to their original form, that's an interesting aspect of these materials as well.

And you combine that solidity with the ideas you started with – the translucency and the light.

That's a nice paradox. Glass describes light, yet it is dense and heavy and solid. It is the antithesis of light, yet it describes light in so many ways and its form has an interior volume that's tangible and readable. That's one of the unique properties of glass that I like to explore. The interior dimension has a physical, viewable presence.

Does the 'accident' play a role in your work?

Again that's something I explored in my ceramics days, because I worked with high temperature glazes that were very sensitive to atmospheres. Within a kiln that has a reduction atmosphere, a certain glaze creates a traditional copper red. How the oxidising/reduction currents move around a kiln can give you the happy accident in terms of one side of a vessel may be blood red, the other side a cool white because

the front of the vessel was reduced, the back of the vessel was oxidised. That was an aspect of my work I explored.

Similarly when I worked with glass part of my PhD research, I was using furnace glass to cast with, but not by ladling from a furnace. I actually create billets of glass with colours that react in a certain way as those colours form in the billet. I lay these into my mould, then I cast. They behave in a particular way, but also a random way. They move following the form of the mould and sometimes that is successful and other times not so. In that sense I like the notion of (to a certain amount) the physics of it taking charge. I don't control it completely. I enjoy the spontaneous acts of physics. How the glass flows, or how a colour might intersect with another colour to create something else (laughs).

You are not seeing a finished result from the beginning?

In form I do, but in that interior space, not at all.

Which, in a way, means you are opening your work to forces and through that to chance? The 'making' is critical.

Yes, it is about that. Interestingly enough, all my sculpture is originally carved in clay. So I still work with clay, but now I use it to define a volume. I don't fire the clay and make it permanent. It's a medium I have an affinity with. Because I have spent most of my life working with clay, it is second nature to me as a material to form with.

With those forces, in terms of the physical world, there is the parallel and the metaphor of those forces. It is loaded with narrative. I did a whole series based on the hand. I still work with hands sometimes. It is hand to eye, not just the eye we see with, but the 'I' of identity, the 'I am'. There are themes like that in my work, but also culturally too. In Byzantine art the gesture of the hand is symbolically all-important. The hand is what we enact our will with. I think that's really important. Whether you write, or whether you make, the hand is what we create with, what we destroy with. Even intellectually to express these ideas, to record them we write (laughs). We mark something.

It's about marking in a sense too. Making is a form of marking. We mark a point in time. Whether a creative, a philosophic, a theoretical point in time, or a combination of – it's about marking things. Then, it's transient too (laughs).

It wouldn't be natural to get someone else to make your work?

No. Of course that's acceptable in contemporary practice and there is lots of virtue in that, but for me that would be designing in a sense and I'm not a designer. I don't instruct others to form and construct my ideas.

But with that too there is the acceptance that when you make things, one of the great joys is knowing you can make that work again. That's why I have never been precious about what I've made. For me, the final step in the process is that it resides away from me. I don't live with my own work. For me personally, all of the steps are really important from beginning right to the end. Then it goes out into the world (laughs). Some makers are precious about what they make. It is like they have given birth to a twenty-kilo diamond.

Do other people read your work differently than you?

That will always occur. I try to give people an appropriate lead with a statement or a title, but often it can be quite surprising the way what you make can be perceived by some people and what attracts them. It's often really interesting. Some people respond to colour in volumes and other people read it in totality.

Even with your icons the work is still open to different readings?

Well, you can't help that (laughs), although I'm not loose about it. I don't believe in 'read it as you will', because then in my mind why bother externalising the internal if there isn't consideration, or concern, or belief there. If anything goes, then why bother? So it's about directing someone to a glimpse of an aspect of you. I think an artwork is the peak of an iceberg. Humans are much more than we externalise. It's not your total experience, but it is like a peak. What's beneath the water is a whole lot of thoughts and experiences.

Are there situations where you get similar experiences to those you get working with glass?

When I was a young man (and it's still with me) I was very keen on working with gold and silver in metalwork. That was something I had a brief sojourn into when I was young and mucking about with a lot of things. But the work I would make using that media would be again different. With metals I think it would be a whole different way of working for me.

What importance do you place on naming a piece?

It is important to name a piece as a way for the viewer to engage. It's directing the viewer to engage in the area I would like it to be read in. It's difficult naming something because words are something else. It's another craft altogether (laughs). You have to be cautious about the titles.

Do you find yourself responding differently when you come across your work again?

I do, especially if it is old work. If it is more than a few years old, I am my first and worst critic on one level. I analyse the piece and tend to read faults. Then I consider how I would visit that idea now.

I'm actually in that process now. I did a series called 'Degrees of Clarity' where there are anthropomorphic, zoomorphic forms holding optical lenses that I found (I use the occasional found object - lenses in particular). I worked with this about ten years ago, but those days I worked with lead crystal. My knowledge wasn't as developed in understanding processes as it is now. So I'm revisiting that idea now because over the years I've found some wonderful lenses (old optical devices) and with those I am putting together a body of work revisiting that notion. The work is different, but the idea is the same. It's about perception and how we perceive.

Your skills are better and you can express it better?

Yes. That's the wonderful thing about journals. I look at journals that are ten or twenty years old and there are ideas that I had no way of expressing, because I didn't have the skills to express those ideas. Now I do.

I was just looking at a journal that was fifteen years old and I saw some ideas and I thought yeah! At that time I had no notion of fabrication, or how I would approach working with glass to create that idea, but now I do. Ideas don't need to be always new. If it is a well-expressed idea, the individual makes it new.

As you experience everything more – as you read more, as you teach more, as you learn more – the onion gets more layers. I really enjoy that.

Talk about the 'perceived' history' of glass in Australia.

It was directed via American studio glass and what is perceived is not a different history. It's one aspect. It is understood as really linear in the glass world, like this then this and this, when it's actually a delta. There were many people working in many ways at the same time. In the history in terms of the 'Australian glass movement' (whatever that is, because I'm still unsure) there were a lot of intersections. It was a delta of people working in many places, but history is an artefact and a construct in many ways. So (laughs)

When you delve into it – for such a small country and for such a new media – there were an lot of people working with it. It's noteworthy because of the different ways of thinking of working with the material. It was experimented with. It would be more of a complete history to include its diversity. It may not have ended up making great art, or even high craft, but the point I'm making is that these individuals were still exploring this material in its infancy, as a new departure for the craft arena in Australia at the time.

That implies a divergence.

Absolutely! It was actually very interesting. Part of Maureen Cahill's collection from the early days is fascinating and it's not the whole story. There are really interesting works there and when you actually place them in the time-line you see there were lots of different things happening. Even her work in Australia was great work at that time.

Books are written for various reasons (laughs).

What's been lost if you work towards a linear history?

All the subtleties, all the variations and those expressions, which one way or another are linked, are part of it. It is like having a complete picture and then cutting out a section and saying that is the picture, but all its background is gone. To remove that denies the complete environment, the space that was actually being explored. It implies that only a few people or institutions were critical for studio glass to happen when there were lots of people working within it. It can create a 'style'.

I don't think that glass as a media in Australia has been worked with long enough to say there is 'Australian glass' when its origins are so distinct on one level and it's linked itself to the American studio glass movement. I find it laughable - the whole thing about Chilhuly going to Venini in Murano to bring back Italianate techniques for

everyone to applaud as the qualities of Italianate technique. Italianate technique had been there a thousand years. It's astonishing that people are so fascinated. This isn't new (laughs).

That's one of the downsides of the glass arena where it is process first. People/objects/whatever get examined through process first. The technical process is always secondary to the maker's intent, whether it's craft, or whether it's design, or whether it's art. In craft, the process and the intent are fairly well balanced – there's still function in craft.

It's legitimate that 'process' be the intent.

Exactly and function is another layer. To me it's humorous when someone calls a bowl 'artwork'. Well! It's a bowl and why aren't you discussing the vessel aesthetic? There is great writing on the history of the vessel, the vessel aesthetic – symbolic, metaphoric, allegorical nature of the vessel across all cultures, across eons of history – it's not discussed in that context.

Possibilities expand?

Exactly. I don't understand the shame a lot of makers have in extending upon a tradition that exists. This whole thing about it being 'new', and this bowl is not a bowl anymore. It's 'art'. I find that has to do with 'highbrow'/'lowbrow' and escaping what is perceived as a lower form of working.

Talk around the 'contentious' issue of Australian style.

Look at the 'accepted' history and the leaders of our style. There is Klaus Moje who is German. You can say he is Australian as much as you want, but actually he came here as a mature individual with an identity that was developed. He was not a child. So we have there a German European and then there was Stephen Proctor, an English European. That's emblematic of Australia - when someone comes here they're ours.

You imply Klaus Moje is Australian style?

Well in Australia do we accept the whole notion of multi-culturalism. If we go way back we certainly aren't the indigenous population are we? It's a relatively new culture. Sylva Ptrova, one of the senior academics at the Sunderland glass studio in England is a Czech theorist/historian. When she viewed my work the first thing she asked was: How many years had I been in Australia? To her eye my work was European and not Australian. I identify as an Australian. I was born here. It's an interesting thing.

By implication she read an Australian style. Which was...?

I'm not sure (laughs).

This is that history again - that one narrative.

Yes, but I think it is symptomatic in the glass arena too. In the nineties there was a major exhibition in America. It was titled *Clearly Inspired* and it talked about contemporary practitioners, but linking them back to earlier practitioners and traditions. I thought that was interesting for America to begin that. I believe there is another

recent publication where lots of contemporary glass artists, including Australian ones are there, and it is referencing earlier work.

I think that's appropriate and it's due. I don't think that anyone can say they work in a bubble or a vacuum and create this and nothing like this has been created before. When you examine the history and complexity of glass across two thousand years, an awful lot of process has been explored - an aesthetic has been explored. To say something is completely new, if you are working in traditional ways (I'm not talking about an artist like Roslyn Piggott, or contemporary artists where glass is sometimes part of their practice. I'm talking about the glass-exclusive practitioners. I don't think you can deny the past. You may want to reinvent the wheel by saying look at this amazingly intricate Italianate vessel, but it is part of a long narrative and you may not necessarily be contributing to it.

I have noticed a tendency for makers to try to establish a style, to make a thing that is recognisably theirs.

And then make it forever (laughs). That's the 'collector trap' though and the maker's trap, where they think "I have had success with this I better not diverge or digress from this because then my collectors might drop off, my galleries might drop off". It's an interesting thing, but I think that when you work with something you should have more integrity and courage than that and surely you must have more than one idea.

I will probably edit this later but my goodness, some of these glass 'artists' have got what, one idea and they work with it for ten years, twenty years? With one idea you can, but the one expression of that idea for that long is (laughs) irritating.

Are we talking 'market'?

We are, but glass is, to a great degree, market driven. The main galleries in Australia are commercial galleries. Glass hasn't got the recognition, or respect as a media on its own. But that's it. In contemporary practice the single media has gone. It won't be called contemporary practice if you work with one media, that's it. You just can't.

With contemporary practice in art, (you are talking the top of the pyramid) by virtue of using one media – well you are excluded from that arena because it is not considered contemporary practice. Whatever drives it – the academe, the way theory has been explored – that's just how it is.

It makes it difficult for those working in one media to create work that has got many virtues. Then on the other hand there are many working in process-based media that are too quick to call it art without critique or dialogue - that's what happens, everything gets called art. You have to be careful that you don't call everything art.

Like entering beautiful cat in dog shows?

Yes, there's a difference. The exclusivity is interesting. It's a very western way of thinking – this is correct and this is not. Mind you, it is all swings and roundabouts - it will all change again. I'm old enough to remember when art was driven by Marxist theory, well where's that now? (laughs) And who cares? It's prone to fashion. Theory is an industry too - to publish is the aim. The product is writing and it has to be 'new' writing. It will change.