

*At the time of this interview Geoffrey Edwards was Director of the Geelong Gallery*

*Am I right in saying glass is traditionally placed in the field of functional object?*

You are. I suppose it has sat in what museums (until recently, not so much any more) called the 'decorative arts', or 'design' if you are at the Powerhouse or similar. The notion of glass sat in that kind of department until recently. Now with a Janet Laurence, or someone like that, it would be placed in contemporary art. Others would be in sculptural glass.

When I joined the National Gallery of Victoria it had corridors of rooms with curators and assistant curators. Now there is one curator of the whole area and one assistant curator. When I was a child curator many years ago (laughs, I was the most junior of the lot), there was a technical assistant and a junior technical assistant, curators of metalwork, of jewellery, of furniture, of costume – all these specialisations. Glass and ceramics was something that fell to me. Now it is parallel to the new university model of a generalist approach. This has been in the last ten years (or perhaps a little longer than that).

Leave art museums aside and think more of 'general science and natural history' museums. Museum Victoria did away with the notion of a curator of numismatics and a curator of steam locomotives. Now (and for a long time) you have social history, or program leader covering 'technical innovation', or something similar. I don't know the pros and cons of this in that world, but it seems natural in the modernisation of institutions. Possibly now if you asked for an expert on extraordinary coins there wouldn't be one.

*Earlier it would have been possible to be a specialist in glass vessel for example?*

In Europe and America yes, but not necessarily in Australia, because there was a director and then a deputy director then five volunteer people in most institutions.

*What about that period when studio glass was coming over from America?*

I was a bit of a rarity. Nineteenth and twentieth sculpture was my main interest (and my main collection responsibility). That took the main share of the time, but the great glass collection was such that I began to focus on that. There would not have been many curators of glass. Annette Keenan (long gone from museums and into other realms) for many years was the curator of glass at what was then the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

*Being responsible for 'glass' at St Kilda Road would have given you an interesting perspective on the beginning of studio glass in Australia.*

It did. I was still studying and was lucky enough to get an assistant curator role in the decorative arts department. Glass wasn't initially my field, but it was so strong it needed someone to look after it. At that time there was an upsurge in interest in architectural glass. There were probably more people making stained glass, architectural glass and painted glass than object. It was long after Leonard French – that was '68. I came into the gallery in the mid-seventies. The coming of Dick Marquis, Nick Mount and Stephen Skillitzi was underway when I joined the gallery. It is in all the

literature. The American and then the European masters would come out for workshops. This is the mid seventies and more recently.

For a while I advised in North Melbourne Meat Market Craft Centre, which was, for a while, government funded. Quite a lot of objects in wood, jewellery objects, glass and ceramics were collected then. The movement that had the greatest momentum and the greatest publicity at that time was studio ceramics. It was much more prominent. Today (with the greatest respect to all those brilliant practicing ceramicists) it has almost sunk from public view, whilst the glass and metalwork and jewellery have carriage of the greatest profile nationally and internationally.

*There was an early story of you making some comment about glass being a 'dangerous' material?*

Probably that would have had something to do with a response to the work that I still have. You have in your list a question about context. Now much of my role at the National Gallery (and I still have a role with sculpture) was mounting exhibitions. I don't have the time now, but we mounted an exhibition here (Geelong Regional Gallery) a few months ago. Corny or not, we titled it *The Freedom of Angels – Sculpture in a Century of Upheaval*. That is borrowed from one of Michelangelo's recorded remarks. While standing with a client in the great Carrara marble quarries he pointed to a block of marble being cut from the hillside and said, I saw in that block the figure of an angel and I shall carve until I set him free.

Here is the notion of seeing in the material (ready-made, or preconceived, or naturally couched within) the imagery. The point of this exhibition was that artists since (and particularly in the last century – mid 19<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> and beyond) in a century of social and artistic upheaval were seeing in the materials of the modern age (steel, fibre glass) a new kind of image. This is usually abstract, usually big, and they are using those materials to set free (metaphorically speaking) this new range of imagery.

It was from that interest that I looked at artists working in glassmaking to create what was always determined as 'untitled sculptural form'. No names, no pack-drill, but I thought if that that person is making this as sculpture, it was feeble. The fact that it is in glass isn't going to redeem the feebleness of the idea, or the sense of the scale, or the sense of the scope. I often use to think, has the person making that little 'blade-form' in glass and now making such a fuss over it, ever seen Caro or Moore? It was always such a bugbear with me that people didn't look around. The same could be said of people working in ceramics, or sculptors who picked up glass occasionally, but hadn't looked at Tom Patti's glass structures with their intergalactic imagery.

I use to think they had not looked beyond this narrow blinkered 'tradition'. That is probably why I made that comment. They are beguiled by the material.

*They see only with reference to others within a narrow field?*

That is what I am saying. There is some brilliant glass sculpture. For example, Richard Whiteley's structures have integrity as sculptures. I guess that naturally, for a while, it had to do with the advent of equipment for kiln forming and the opportunity to make bigger and more massive structures. This compared to gorgeous lamp worked structures with their sense of pictorial tableau and sculptural interest. I am not suggesting that big is good. It was just that people were excited making a 'sculpture'

that was 'a glass pyramid'. What about Galileo? His glass was probable more beguiling than that.

*A danger within a small community that you get a false impression of the importance of what you are doing.*

In anything. I might be sitting up there writing an article for a history of gardens magazine, but I am very conscious of the fact that I am a dilettante in the area of gardens and I would be cobbling this together thinking there is something really original about it, not having read the great nineteenth century texts, or the contemporary writers. Anyone, in any world, can drop into that pitfall.

You should be aware and know the benchmarks, against your little modest piece.

Another comparison is coming to mind. Those artists who move into the realm of glass installation would need to know the great American Robert Smithson with his *Spiral Jetty* and those wonderful mirrored works. I think I would be pretty wary of going into the mirroring of spaces and crushed glass as small mountains of glittering quasi-diamonds without having looked closely at Smithson and the scale and the extent of his work and how harmoniously that fitted into his whole practice. Yet every now and then I am generously asked to judge (I don't like judging) and there is this piddling little pile of smashed windscreen, or similar on this [indicates small] scale.

I am sounding terribly bitter and cynical. You find wonderful things too. It is just that I think there is not enough awareness of other movements apart from this particular one. Part of this is education and training. No wonder some student graduate shows have this kind of 'frail' work because probable those young artists haven't gone through the mix of 'art histories'. That is a boring term for most young students, but it would give that exposure (without having to be emersed) to the great benchmarks in time. How is a student going to produce something the equivalent of a Robert Smithson work in a post-grad show, but you would still like a sense that they are aware of it's existence.

You might be a diamond stipple engraver (probably not terribly fashionable now), but you shouldn't do that without looking at the great 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch stipplers, then at the Laurence Whistlers of more recent years. You could work in that quite focused acquired taste, subtle, low profile area, but you could do it magnificently. But you would hope people would be aware of the long history that exists.

*Are you implying a lack of perspective in contemporary glass practice?*

Not everywhere. I think the principle courses in each of the states are probably doing extraordinary things, but it still seems so (and here I stress I am not involved as I once was). Even with the last one or two Ausglass conferences I have not been able to attend because there has been so much happening here.

*From a distance do you still see that narrow self-referential perspective?*

I think that remains, and that's the great risk. I am not just pointing the finger at glass. It would be there for jewellery. It would be there for printmaking. The risk is there unless you are aware of that wider scope of achievement and practice. With our current print awards, which is a national prize held every two years, there were seven hundred entries brought down to forty and a number of those artists are best known as

printmakers. There are also those who are best known as a painter or sculptor. It appears to me in that distilled group there is a general awareness of method and bookplate tradition.

*In glass you have a reference to its history.*

Yes, if you are going to make like Nick Mount does, those wonderful curvilinear rhythmic statements you are expertly aware of Venetian tradition.

*In the earlier days did you see people marking our territories identified by techniques and forms?*

I think you see people adopting a stylistic stance hoping they would be Australia's equivalent of Libensky and Brychtova. Now someone like Richard Whiteley arises from looking at those people closely, but has developed entirely his own work. There are other examples. Now you recognise their work without thinking about the older traditions from which they spring.

A Janet Laurence say, who is more in the realm of installation and sculpture using glass and multiple materials, has a form that is very much her personality stamped more upon the process than the medium. With all respect to Marshall McLuhan the medium should not be the entire message. Although there are examples where it is the message and is a consummately good statement.

*There are qualities in the glass that people tend to push, and there are the processes.*

There is the way the medium casts, and I love flame working. There are the 16<sup>th</sup> century French Navarre figurines that are witty and amusing, but there is seriousness and a cultural connectedness to them. The work on the invitation to the Kirra exhibition [*annual flame work event*] looked captivating, although it seemed in the tradition of those figurines. I used to see a bit of Ginny Rufner and I hosted a trip of hers to Melbourne years ago. There was a connection with those older traditions, but the works themselves are entirely of the later 20<sup>th</sup> and now presumably, the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*[Returning to the fixed questions] How do you perceive your role as a curator?*

I don't do much curating now, but the role in the past was really applying a professional knowledge, judgement and imagination (so that's creativity) to the business of elucidating works of art for the widest possible audience. You shouldn't be using the work of art as your own medium in a sense. That can lead to professional self-indulgence. You need to be imaginative in the way those works of art, or that sequence of works of art, or that movement, or that story in art is told in a fresh, a clear and an inspiring way to (as said) the widest possible audience. The curator is at the service of the works of art and the story that they contain, rather than vice versa.

This leads on to contextualising. It is terribly important to conceive a context that is imaginative, that is fresh, that is enticing and that makes the message as clear as it possibly can, but shows the work at its best. That has to do with the light on it and the ambience, which is something to do with the colours and the scale of the room, the circuit that the visitor is taken on and the story the visitor is taken through. Also it is simply a context in what else is around the works. What kind of contrasting, confluent

statements are there, particularly if the exhibition is the work of a lot of different individuals.

*If you were putting on an exhibition of contemporary Australian glass how would you see the context?*

This is a little bit of the way I like to work with displays of paintings and how I would like to work with the glass as well. I would like to perhaps tease out some of the origins of its imagery and how it has arisen in the contemporary realm. This would be done by having somewhere near by (it may be in text panels) something to do with its precedents – either ancient, or recent. If it is a radical new statement then that is hard to do that. You might have references to the basis by which this is now a radically different work. You always need some form of comparison, or context, otherwise a hypo-stylised, or minimalist work won't speak eloquently to a non-specialist audience.

*If you were setting up this glass exhibition what would you be looking for to give an audience this framework?*

I would be looking for issues or directions (there is nothing original in this), or I would be looking for the mavericks. You would be looking at what seems to be leading the way in terms of exploring new ideas, but that can become a self-perpetuating 'newest is best' when newest may not be best. Let us say there was a brilliant diamond stipple engraver working in Bowral, or in the Dandenongs. There may not be a lot of people doing exquisite, creative and masterful diamond stipple engraving. I would like to put that in if it was something special being done at this time in that idiom, even though the next work was a larger kiln formed minimalist sculpture.

*It is interesting that you are talking about processes. Glass identified by process rather than by ideas.*

No. I am thinking about ideas. When I identify a diamond stippler you would want that person to be doing something special. It might be especially good, but it would not be put in because it is diamond stipple. It would have to be something very special happening with that process, as there would have to be something very special being done with a sculptural cast form. You would be looking for those practices now that seem to be the most compelling and captivating and engaging.

Now that comes down in part to professionally formed judgement, but it also comes down to a visceral response. Now you would hope this is not just a whim, but that it is a visceral response arising from years of looking closely, reading and analysing.

*Embodied knowledge.*

Yes. Years ago (in one of the last big sculpture exhibitions that I mounted at the National Gallery of Victoria) I invited Ken Unsworth the Sydney sculptor to create one of his installations (in fact it was one of the earliest of those *Grand Piano* works). It was mesmerizing and I was talking to Ken as we walked around the whole triennial. I asked which works spoke most eloquently and compellingly to him and he said he looked for a work of art (and we all know Ken as a very peaceful, thoughtful, positive person) to come at him like a knife in the dark. You want something with the quality to address you with that immediacy and stop you in your tracks. It is melodramatic, but there has to be that visceral thing – that knife thrust in the dark.

*You can lose that perspective if the culture is self-referential.*

That is infamously in the news lately with dog breeding. Getting so far down the chain that they are breeding these exquisite in appearance, but otherwise crippled creatures, then again there is also something in the breeding of sheep from Spanish stock over time that has led to Australian Merinos. There is something in distilling to within an inch of a thing's capabilities that is exquisite – but it cuts both ways.

You were going to ask me about a favourite work and I was going to refer to the Streeton painting of Venice on the wall out there [Geelong Regional Gallery]. It is just beautiful and it was painted on his honeymoon. It is one of the great Streetons and my response to that is visceral. I suppose my response is informed by knowing it's early in his career, but his use of paint is palpable.

It's almost a palpable atmosphere, more than carefully described buildings. I chose that work partly because that paint and that brushwork become the lapping waters of the Adriatic. It is felt rather than told and that which speaks to you most immediately is the felt or the visceral.