



Mark Elliott
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 flame worked glass
 33 x 33 x 33 cm

I look at myself as someone drawn into a particular material, a particular craft, without expecting it. At one point early in my life I thought I might be an architect. I dabbled with various materials, but I have been drawn almost unexpectedly into the vortex of this material.

On one level I'm a myopic craftsman obsessed with this material, like a gemstone collector, or those fanatical people who go out cracking open thunder eggs looking for crystals. As a teenager I collected old bottles and I got mesmerised by hand blown glass. I was really seduced by the material, as many of us have been. I was enchanted for reasons, which I couldn't articulate (probably still can't fully articulate).

But on another level I see myself as an omnivorous, eclectic member of a very eclectic society where I could dabble in any material and make a go of it. It seems like a contradiction to focus on one medium, because I have so many influences. We have grown up in this absolute cornucopia of possibilities and potentials in media and ideas.

I'm one of those people who listen to a variety of different music, is interested in various philosophies and is not attached to one particular philosophic direction and it seems a contradiction to be obsessed with one material. I think part of the reason I'm obsessed with glass in particular is because in a sense it grounds me. It's like anchoring myself to something, otherwise I would just be in free flight and dissipate all my energies in dabbling in this and that and the other. So in a way it's to cage myself within one material – to have something to fight against and stretch against.

Flame work is like that for me. In general glass is a difficult medium for expressing ideas. Many of us have probably chosen this material in part because of its difficulties and because of the sense of struggle involved in using it to express ideas that might be quite easy to put down on paper, but when translated into glass often become an enormous ordeal. I think in some ways that has a grounding effect in that it helps you to focus and gives you something to wrestle with, to engage with. On some level I quite enjoy that engagement – that wrestling – although it's sometimes very frustrating.

Having said that, sometimes the best work happens when you are having respite from that struggle. When you somehow transcend it. So sometimes the most successful works I have done have been the ones on the side while I have been struggling with a more 'important work'.

I don't want that sense of struggle to be embodied in the work. I want to transcend that. But it does help me to focus and it's fun to try to stretch a material and a medium beyond its usual expectations. For example trying to make something ridiculously large in flame work is a fun challenge.

Flame worked glass is also a material that I've attached to unwittingly, because on the surface it's a material that lends itself to what I would regard as trivial work. It lends itself to kitsch. There is a history of flame work that is very much involved in kitsch and I'm always wrestling with that notion, because some of the work that I do is dangerously close to, and probably sometimes falls over into, kitsch, particularly commercial work that I'm asked to do. I find that difficult.

I also find it fun, trying to stretch a medium that is used for scientific apparatus (very rigid specification with no aesthetic engagement), or to the other extreme, this novelty work which is all about craft and the novelty of the medium – little knickknacks that are attractive to people. You can't avoid dealing with those issues when you work with flame worked glass.

There is a narrative with flame work even before you work with it?

Yes, that's right and I enjoy trying to work with that narrative, trying to extend and push beyond the boundaries of that narrative.

I hear two things. The resistance of the glass enforces a discipline on your personality, which by nature leans toward too much diversification. There is also an implication that glass is intrinsically attractive.

Undoubtedly, unquestionably, I am definitely seduced by the material to some degree. It's like glass is a liquid jewel. It's very easy for us to see glass as a cheap industrial material, a vernacular material. It is just a slight shift of emphasis from seeing it as the material of windowpanes and wine bottles and so on, to seeing it as this gorgeous, rare, special, valuable substance which in many ways is like diamond and gemstone. I find it interesting that it is on the border and can fall either way so easily.

In a thousand years time somebody who digs up a coke bottle will be entranced by its shape and texture and form and the history embedded in its surface. They will read the mould lines, study them and try to reconstruct the way that vessel emerged as well as the culture it represented, whereas to us the coke bottle is a throw away disposable item. Glass has that incredible durability, as well as incredible fragility and the sense of being disposable and cheap. It has all of those things and you can trip over the border into any of those areas so easily. A piece of scrap cullet from the furnace can look like a piece of scrap cullet that you only consider as whether it is good enough to throw back into the furnace, or ditch it because it has a bit of metal on it. On the other hand you can look at it as a unique object – in my teenage years when I was smoking a lot of marijuana, if I picked up a piece of glass cullet I'd be mesmerised by the way it took the light.

My early drug experiences probably helped me to those perceptions. That is, a slight shift of perception that lets you see the extraordinary in the mundane. There have been other such lessons in my life. There was an Australian actor (Robbie Steel) I once had a chat with in a pub when I was a teenager trying to be a good Aussie, beer-drinking bloke. (I'd be glass blowing at Minson Scientific during the day and indulging in idle conversation at this Paddington pub after work). I bumped into Robbie because he was a friend of my father's (also an actor). I began to engage him in rather banal conversation while I was rolling a cigarette, and he responded by challenging me with great intensity, saying, "Stop for a moment! Do you realise how extraordinary these ordinary, everyday things are that you are dealing with are? Yet you take them for granted. Look at anything! take this packet of tobacco for example. Let's open this plastic bag and tease out this strange substance. Look how wondrous it is, look at the threads, the extraordinary texture. That's how the world is – nothing is certain, nothing is ordinary!"

I don't think Rob was having a drug experience. He was pointing out to me the extraordinary in the ordinary and what a fantastic world we are in and how easy it is to become smug and complacent. Perhaps he saw me as this ignorant teenager (with little life experience) espousing opinions on all manner of things I knew little about. I was losing my sense of childhood wonder and setting my perspectives in concrete and he wanted to give me a bit of a kick – to remind me that the world can't be reduced to the banality of arbitrary opinions and binary opposites. Everything is not divided into good and bad, cheap and expensive, beautiful and ugly. The world is far more extraordinary – in more ways (both exquisite and tragic) than we can possibly imagine, and there is always more to reality than our intellects can begin to fathom. It is to our loss if we grow up forgetting the sense of awe and wonderment at life; having the arrogance to assume we fully comprehend it. It was a valuable lesson I took from Robbie and one I often need reminding of. Life is too short to waste on tedium.

There's a trick of perception in glass, because of the way it takes the light. It morphs and reflects depending on the light of day. A piece of ordinary glass hit by sunlight can suddenly become gorgeous. That's something that fascinates me about glass, but also the fact that it is as hard as diamond one minute and then suddenly it is molten and dripping like honey. That's a marvellous paradox.

I imagine I'm chewing it. I think that is because I have worked with it for a fairly long time. I'm not thinking of the intermediate equipment between the glass and me and the fact that it is too hot to touch. In my mind I am actually chewing as if it were toffee and holding it and crafting it as if it were clay in my hands. To me it is this fantastic material to chew. There is no other material that has this elasticity, yet substance and weight.

How I think about the glass depends on what I'm making. When I'm making figurative pieces, or pieces where I'm working to a specification, then I guess I'm drawing more on my little bit of scientific glass training and it's fairly crucial when you are doing that sort of work (and the more technically challenging, the more crucial it becomes) that you do apply some sort of formula. Some of this I was taught and some of it I learnt through experience.

On a mundane level, say I'm making a glass wombat, it's important for me to know at the outset which end I'm starting with. Am I starting from the body, the tail or the head? Then, what process will I need to use to elongate that body from a spherical blob to an oval shape? Although I might change my mind, I usually have a plan. However I'm

actually working more from a sense of the shape. It's a feeling. It's like massage in a way – whether physically or mentally. I'm using my hands to trace the shape and form. It's a combination of visual memory, planning and a feeling for the shape, which seems to be in the hands. I feel the shape of a wombat. I'm not so sure that's located in the mind specifically. It seems to be located in the hands and that's close to massage. I do a little bit of massage on my wife and friends and I receive a little bit of massage and osteopathic treatments and you articulate, almost as a sculptor, the form of the person's body. You trace, you feel the shape of the back. You're encountering the texture of the body as well as its substance and its surface. So in my mind, when I'm thinking of a figurative form – whether it's a person or a wombat, I'm feeling the shape of its body, the shape of its head, the shape of its legs.

Looking at you now, you are actually tracing shapes in the air with your hands.

Yeah, I'm feeling the substance and the surface and the weight and the texture all at once. That may include other sensual memory – for example the smell of animal hair. There are various senses involved in perception and for me they are not always separate, but I also generally need to draw on a formula – whether learnt from another glassblower, or worked out by trial and error, because glass is such a tricky material to use. From memory I know I'll start from the body. I know I'll next do the left leg, so I can look from the back and get the right leg to match it. I'll attempt to fuse the glass fully so that it becomes one piece rather than an assembly of blobs stuck onto a body.

This is proscribed technically?

Yes, to a degree the smoothing out of joins is proscribed, but so is the technique of assembly and I'm in part trying to work against that because I don't like to see a piece of glass where I see the formula that has been used – one blob with another blob and another blob. In the same way that I've never liked method drawings of the human figure that are taken from those models where you have one shape for the chest and another for the pelvis, discreet shapes for the thigh, calf and foot etc so that it is assembled like components in a mechanism. I am not fond of assembled figurative work, because I don't conceive of a figure as separate elements assembled together. A figure to me is one form.

Interesting considering your background in scientific glass.

I think that is because my experience in scientific glass was very short. It was enough to give me a superficial knowledge of the material and ways of working with it, but not enough to have fully embodied the techniques. So really I am drawing as much on earlier experiences of working with clay and plasticine, of doing drawings as a child. Scientific glass blowing hasn't left a very heavy trace on my ways of working.

I never liked the mechanistic look of scientific glass, just like I don't like the mechanistic approach to constructing figures. I am always tending to iron out the joins. This is partly because it is technically more effective – producing fewer weaknesses. If you fuse the glass fully you don't leave groves that are likely to turn into cracks. So it's a technical consideration, but mostly I am trying to produce one form. I am trying to take glass back to its primeval form in a way – away from 'tube and rod construction'.

There is part of me that has never liked getting the material in a visually sterile, transparent, mass-produced form – made to identical specifications. I guess that part

of me always wants to work it back to a more organic form. I draw on plans and I see their importance, yet I tend to want to throw away the paper, or leave it aside when it comes to actually making the work, in part because I am not very good at working with plans, but mostly because I want a clear mind to focus on the process of creation. In the same way, I find sheet music useful, but it often inhibits my creative flow and ability to have all my wits about me in the present. As soon as I have a sheet of music in front of me I lose some of the sense of being in the moment – the spontaneity and confidence to just allow form to flow out. If it's in front of me on a music stand, I find I need to refer to the recipe all the time. That's not the same for all people. Some people are much better at balancing these two areas of the brain. Others are comfortable in one and cannot use the other at all, for example classical musicians who (believe they) cannot improvise, or folk musicians who cannot (refuse to) learn to read music. This has been often characterised as a left/ right brain divide which is probably true, but an over simplification.

I don't have a massive repertoire of theoretical knowledge in music, or in glass, and I find it very hard to get excited about that aspect. Just as I'm not fascinated with the chemical formulas of different glasses, I'm usually not fascinated with techniques for notating music, or the technical information and list of names on famous recording sessions. A lot of my memories of music are not connected to specific names, or events, or times. They are just feelings, shapes and colours. Music to me is quite sculptural, in that I often see it. I get synaesthetic perceptions of music, often in visual form so that I see songs as coloured, textured, sculptural forms and I often see improvisations as shapes in the air.

When you say it looks as if I am drawing things out of myself, in one sense that's true, but I am also seeing myself surrounded by shapes and forms. I don't necessarily feel they are all within me and that I am bringing them out. They are everywhere. I am in an environment of shapes and sounds and forms. It's as much a matter of reaching over and connecting with the shape as it is bringing it out of myself.

I feel I am in a landscape, or garden of forms and shapes, which are multidimensional. They have sound dimensions and visual dimensions, so the shape of a pear has a sound, and words, letters and numbers all have colours and colour combinations influenced by a variety of things. A lot of the colours don't make any logical sense, but others do. Some, like the word 'orange' are inescapably linked to their literal meanings. So sounds have form and forms have sounds.

Not that I am always seeing things that way. Often it's a dimension I'm only vaguely conscious of. Some music just looks like mud anyway.

When viewing a work is it an intellectual or emotional process?

I actually don't find it very easy to break these things down, to separate them. I think I am in the realm of ideas a lot of the time. I really enjoy engaging with people on the level of ideas.

You would favour emotional engagement with material over the rational control of scientific glass making.

I would, but I am in awe of scientific glass blowing technique and skill. I think it is fantastic, but I haven't got the patience to be obsessed with whether something holds

200 ml or 202 ml. I am more interested in the form of the vessel than its exact specifications.

What does that skill give you?

It gives me a purchase on the material and some awareness of the planning that has to go into producing works. You have to use some strategy. That's important. One set of skills would be to produce an exact construction according to a plan. Another set of skills (which are very closely related I guess) is to be a bushwalker who is in a forest that they have never been in before. They are exploring the forest. (This is an analogy that works very well for me.) They have a lot of survival skills. They know how to find water. They know how to work out where the sun is going to set. They know how to find trees with fruit they can eat. They've got good survival skills. They are in a new forest and they don't know exactly where they are, but they are exploring and it's fun. That's the way I like to approach things.

I like to have the skills (and I wish I had more skills – you can never have enough skills or knowledge). I would like to have enough technique to avoid all the cracking that goes on as I'm working. I am always trying to salvage things from the brink of disaster, which I partly enjoy. I think skills are marvellous, but I want them as survival skills on an adventure, not as a strategy for reconstructing predetermined complex structures.

What roll does accident play?

Oh it's huge. In a way related to the fear of 'wrong notes' in classical music, in scientific glass you can say that an accident is always a problem, it is always a mistake, it is always wrong. It is always something to be eliminated and rectified, which is perhaps why scientific glass blowers often find it difficult to do non-symmetrical work, because non-symmetry is deeply associated with mistake.

Implying that technique becomes a cage?

Yes, and that one of my great constant endeavours is to eliminate accident and that can become so imbedded in one's practice that you see mistakes only as a problem. You see them as a risk and something to be avoided at all costs, and constant training will enable you to transcend accident. Whereas, for me, accident is part of that discovery in the forest.

It is tricky when I am doing commercial work, because then I have to set that aside and I have to eliminate accident otherwise it becomes non-profitable. Also in a lot of situations I'm producing a product (as much as I hate that word) in a context where bubbles and striations don't belong. Obviously then I am using what knowledge I have to avoid, or to erase those phenomenological traces of the piece's making. But I think I would be miserable if I was doing that all the time. That is why I couldn't be a scientific glass blower, because I want to explore accidents – the same way that a confident jazz musician will play with an accident if it comes along. They will go off on a journey and it will take them somewhere else. So accident is crucial in process. It is crucial to creativity. It is crucial to exploration.

When possible, I like to leave traces of the accident (such as an irregularity in an otherwise uniform coloured pattern) in the work. I like to leave evidence of the accident, because that's what drew me to glass in the first place – finding antique

bottles that were a bit wonky and didn't stand up quite straight. I could see the tool marks in the glass. I could see the evidence of the experience of making the piece – perhaps a punty mark or bubbles, striations, variations in thickness and tool marks where the lip had been applied. I could sense where the hands had been, and the slight deviations from the plan. What went on, I want to be able to see that in a work. Not usually in the foreground to the point where it distracts from the design aspects of the work or the main narrative, but in the background as an alternate narrative. I like to travel with the piece and see the experiences that have gone on with it. So if there is an air bubble in my work, I tend to leave it, unless it really is a problem. If there is a crack, I will tend to leave the sliver of air trapped in the glass where the crack was, as a reminder of that cracking event.

It is not that I want to emphasise it or make a big thing out of it. No, I don't want to produce a childlike drawing in my work and pretend to be a primitive. I'm not really interested in that rather precious approach to accident. I don't want to highlight it, but I want to leave the memory in a piece, and glass has an extraordinary memory. So, on a subtle level I will leave that background in the work.

It is as though you are looking at a person. You may be looking at their character, what they are saying, but you are also aware of the freckles on their arm. They are all there, warts and all. I tend to like that. I am not really interested in 'immaculate conception' in the sense of works having their memory erased and the stories of birth and life tidied away in order to achieve an end result that perfectly matches the crystalline concept. The aim of this kind of work is a perfect rendition of the original concept. The artist is in control with no messy story of process. All the trials and maquettes are thrown away. I want to see the lot. No, I'll contradict myself. I don't always want to see all the broken bits that led up to making a beautiful vase. That might well detract from the simplicity of the piece. But I like at least a hint of the history. Every person has a navel. So do artworks, even if they're fully clothed.

Is there a difference between the way you and others are looking at your work?

Oh yes, let's talk about this particular 'Dreamscape' here for example: a large piece with woven glass tendrils that are interconnected forming a loose asymmetric basket shape. Each tendril is a journey in a sense and there are figurative elements that materialise within that as characters in an improvised narrative. These are stopping off points in a way, like architecture in the street, or trees in the forest.

I often find the first thing people see is complexity and mess and fragility in a negative sense. People often come to those pieces saying, "How do you dust it? How do you keep it clean?" "Oh God! You'll never be able to sell that." "You'll never be able to transport it." That is often their first reaction. They might even find the basket form confining, which I don't intend it to be. I'm not trying to produce a cage. Others find the tendrils 'spidery', which I don't see at all.

I'm conveniently skipping all those issues and seeing the work as a kind of mindscape, the externalisation of an internal world. (The words external/internal I find not terribly meaningful. What's inside the brain and what's outside – I don't have a clear separation between those things.)

I enjoy suspending things in the air. The way they tend to be suspended in the mind. That is what I have always liked about the work of Chagall. That is dreamlike mental

imagery being suspended in space in the work in a way that is not logical, but is intuitively very real.

For example when I travel to Melbourne, from visiting there since childhood I've got this emotional kind of dreamscape of Melbourne. My mental image of Melbourne is not like a street directory, so when I go there I get lost. I have a map of Melbourne, but it involves clocks and birds in the sky and buildings suspended in the air with flavours and colours and feelings and moods and smells: feelings in the chest, in the stomach, and that's very much like a Chagall painting. My internal map of Melbourne is very much like a Chagall painting. That is what I want to produce in three dimensions with my work. Obviously my imagery is different because I didn't grow up in a nineteenth century Jewish 'stetle' in Russia. As a child I looked at his imagery a lot and added it to my own story. When someone says *Fiddler on the Roof*, for me it does not mean the musical, it means this purple sort of uncle person dancing on a rooftop in the moonlight, playing a fiddle with shapes of goats, roosters, floating wooden cottages and flying people in the background.

That storytelling imagery from Chagall is one of the childhood sources for me.

Is spontaneity difficult when you are publicly flame working in your integrated performances?

I don't usually find that difficult at all. I try not to be too serious about it when its accompanying music. I'm not trying to make a very literal translation of what I see in the music – that's fiendishly difficult to do. It is more like a parallel journey with the music where I'm allowing the two to influence each other by osmosis. Ideally the music is being influenced by what I am doing and what I'm doing is being influenced by the music. I'm not trying too hard. I don't want too much effort to come through in the work. Rather than get knotted up about trying to express the music, it is more about allowing the music to interact as another sculptural form. It is though the sound of the music is interlaced with the glass and they are weaving together like two neighbouring plants. I just follow my nose and take the glass in one hand and the burner in the other and just go on a journey with the glass.

In that case I am using very little planning, very little technical construction. I enjoy that freedom.

You use the word 'improvisation'?

I use the word improvisation all the time. Improvisation is a combination of many things. It's partly about being in the moment – like a meditation. It is also collaboration. You're collaborating with other people, or with materials. You are negotiating with the material in the world. That involves technical issues and ideas and someone else's aesthetic. I enjoy that. It can be problematic, especially when you are working with people that have a very different aesthetic.

I couldn't improvise to all music, but I do enjoy that process of collaboration and negotiation. I think improvisation always involves collaboration in some sense.

For improvisation to really occur it has to be embodied in the same way that talking is embodied – that helps to demystify it. Improvisation is a very commonplace thing. We are improvising now as we are talking. If I had to stop and read a chart, if I had to look

at your questions and say 'do you find a work changes as it is created', if I had to work through each letter of each word, I could never get the whole story happening. It would be like learning to walk all over again and thinking where your next step is going to go. You would be so caught up in the process that you would probably fall over. And improvisation is like that when you are in a psychologically dangerous environment where people are being highly critical. It is very hard to improvise in that kind of situation where you are being self-conscious, you are being analysed or you are analysing as you go. A cat could never jump onto the windowsill if it stopped to think through all the considerations of distance and what might happen if there were to be an accident. The cat takes one measuring look, embodies the process and jumps.

That is the way of improvisation. It is why we can have a conversation. It is because the intellectual process is happening confluent with the physical expression of the voice. It is way too fast for calculation. It's an embodiment that I don't quite understand.

We often put improvisation up on a pedestal as though it were some high and mighty act of inspiration in that you have to be extremely skilled or have a direct conduit to God. While there is truth in some of that – listen to the music of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan for example. He was an extraordinary musical improviser from the Sufi tradition. He went on great flights of improvisation with extraordinary passion and vocal dexterity. He was definitely in the realm of the sublime. His music is very expansive. It is as though he is singing for the world, beyond the borders of religion and culture. People like that it is very easy to place on a pedestal, the way you could place Bach or John Coltrane on a pedestal because they are transcendent and have virtuosity and command on so many levels. From that you could deduce that improvisation is a rarefied stroke of genius, that it is miraculous. I don't think so. It is also commonplace. It needs to be reclaimed as our common birthright, and yet there is always an aspect of the miraculous.

I'm reading a book on improvisation at the moment, a technical manual written by David Erkhart Jones. In that he says he wants to demystify improvisation. There is a sense in the way he writes, that he wants to break it down into nuts and bolts (I may be misconstruing it as I haven't read the book fully). For the purposes of this teaching manual, he is saying that there is nothing magic about improvisation. It is just learning a grab bag of tricks.

I too, use a grab bag of tricks – I have bits and pieces from scales in my music. Bits and pieces I have heard from other musicians. In my glasswork it's the same. I've got pre-made objects that I can sometimes weave into my improvisations and I have things that I have used before that I know will work – little techniques, rifts and patterns that I bring in as they occur to me, but fundamentally that is not what improvisation is. It is not a mechanistic thing. You can't break it down into its components. It is a case of the gestalt notion of the whole being greater than the sum of parts. There is magic. There is always an unknowable, unquantifiable sense of magic.

Things you don't expect?

Yes. I can't say I'm going to create a jazz solo and it's going to have this sort of beginning and that kind of end. Improvisation is a story that is alive and spontaneous. It doesn't happen in a vacuum, but it does have to happen miraculously. Like a leaf bursting out of a seed, it just comes and it may grow, whether you are cultivating it or not. Yet there are all these tools and equipment that are sometimes useful and

necessary, as well as those rifts and patterns. Making do with what you have is that other aspect of improvisation.

The same way that language enables you to talk.

Yes, that's right, exactly.

Do you name your works?

That's a very important question, because also it has to do with structure. It has to do with presentation. It has to do with finishing, with completion. This is an area that is very much 'a work in progress' for me. I can go on journeys, but I find it very difficult to contain, or find an end point – to find a title. To contextualise, to finish, to complete and to know when to stop, here I'm very much a novice. A lot of my works never seem to want to end. They keep changing their names, which is very difficult because we are also in an industry. The industry wants things fully resolved and presented and titled. They don't want things to change titles from one exhibition to the next.

I think I've come up with a perfect name and then a few weeks later I realise it's not and I want to change it, either because the work has changed or my perceptions have changed and I'm reading the piece differently. I think reading the work is always a process of negotiation for me. Whether it's one's own work, or someone else's, you read it differently at different times, and the meaning can change because after all it's just a chunk of glass. We decide to read it as 'art' in the first place; we're the ones determining whether or not this chunk of glass is a work of art.

I as the artist and everybody that views it are all part of that discourse. That discourse is sort of an improvisational thing. It changes, it ebbs and flows and there are many examples of that. The one that I tend to draw on a lot is Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka – Bohemian born scientific glass blowers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Their works were intended as scientific specimens, because it was the best way available of accurately reproducing and botanical and biological specimens. Now we tend to read them as works of art, but at the time they were apparently nothing of the sort.

All art will evolve in our perception, and people's perceptions are the only thing that actually determines the existence of a work of art. There is no objective definition of a work of art that I can think of. No matter how extraordinary the piece – some great work by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel – it is still a human perception that makes the piece of marble, or the layering of paint on a surface constitute a work of art. It is a cultural agreement and it is an individual decision.

And it's temporal?

Yes, what is seen as a cliché at one time is not at another and what is seen as deep and meaningful at one point is superficial at another. With the benefit of hindsight you could mistake an original work as a cliché because you have seen hundreds like it, or you could recognize it as the original one and designate all the others as clichéd copies. Where then is the work of original genius?

This is leading onto another tangent – that of 'originality' which is a fascinating area. I think we are in a culture that is obsessed with the original. That, I guess, is a modernist

obsession in a way – the cult of the individual creative genius. It didn't begin with modernism, but it is regarded as a western obsession. That's why we tend to see the thousands of similar stone Buddas created over millennia in Asia as lacking in creative originality and therefore of lesser consequence artistically than a 'one- of' work by Picasso. I think in Asian cultures, the terms of reference are often very different. As in the tradition of Japanese calligraphy where the process of copying great works is a venerated creative practice emphasising the subtleties of interpretation, The stone Buddas would not be seen as derivative work lacking in artistic merit. In my own perception I tend to oscillate between these perspectives, depending on the circumstance.