



Judi Elliott  
*Across the Wall 1 and 2*  
 2005  
 kiln formed glass  
 76 x 66 x 36 cm

*Start with general conversation leading into a link between ceramics and glass [Peter Travis had mentioned very early in her career Judi had worked in clay and that she made beautiful forms]*

It is easy to step over from ceramics to glass and probably from glass to ceramics. Glass is silica and the glaze on a pot is silica. With ceramics you start with a soft material and make it hard. With glass you start with a hard material and make it soft (you melt it) and then it comes back to hard again. It's all kilns, fire and heat. They are related.

I didn't choose to change over to glass. Everyone's destiny is formed in a way and I have been pushed into things most of my life. I was a ceramics artist and I would have stayed with ceramics because I loved it, but destiny intervened. I gained my post-graduate Diploma at Alexander Mackie [now COFA] on Austudy. Austudy overpaid me and at the end of the course they asked for the overpaid amount back. I did not have it so I had to go back to art school to work it off. I had no option but to go back as a student. I had just come to Canberra so went into the art school and enrolled. Klaus Moje had just launched the Canberra glass program. I walked into glass and it was the sort of moment that hits you between the eyes and I thought, 'I'm doing glass'. That was the overriding reason I studied glass, although I had long loved glass. I had seen Bill Boysen (from USA) blowing glass as he travelled around Australia with a truck fully equipped with glass blowing equipment. I was fascinated then, but I couldn't study glass because there were no glass programs in Australia. Well before this experience I enrolled in a course with Harry Hollander who was an acrylics man who had come from America to the Wagga CAE on a teaching program. He was a sculptor pouring acrylics. Transparency and colour – it was all leading up to glass.

I took an interest in glass after Bill Boysen came out. That was just magic. It was also a new technique with the excitement of the glass and the excitement of the heat. It was almost like raku – taking work out of the kiln and putting it back into the kiln. That captured my imagination. I developed my love of it then, but I didn't think I would ever study glass. When I enrolled (ANU) Klaus Moje had only just arrived here in Canberra [1983]. He would only take people who had a background in art. It was a very small class, so I was very lucky to get in. He took in about six people. I had come to Canberra and it was like destiny. Everything leads up to something else. I could have done sculpture. I could have done painting (I always said I wanted to be a painter), but it was the glass that excited me.

I went over to England and Ireland several years ago. In Ireland I went to the Dublin Art School and I met a girl there, Rochelle de Boutlier who was one of the teachers in the glass department. The English translation of her name was Rose Butler and that was my grandmother's name. She said all the Butlers were related and their origin was French. The butlers went to Ireland around 1066. She asked if I knew what Butler meant and she told me it was 'bottler'. They used to make glass. That was the origin of the name, so it is all linked.

*Giving your practice a name, what would that be?*

'Artist'. I think you are born an artist. People are born whatever they become – scientists are born scientists, artists are born artists – I just know that. I believe you are born with a destiny. Unconsciously you seek out areas where you can learn something about it. I always lived in the country. There were no art schools, but I wanted to be a painter because that was what I thought artists did. The first thing that became available to me was ceramics, so I did ceramics. I plunged into it 120% thinking I would never have the opportunity to paint. You are an artist and you choose whatever destiny sends your way. It was not like now days living in the city where you have art schools and you select from a menu. When I was a child living in the bush there was nothing, but I knew I was going to be an artist because I was drawing all the time and loving art.

*Innate?*

Yes absolutely and you are led to it. Led in directions where you will learn something. I was never able to go away to art school (protective parents would never allow that). We got together a group and encouraged artists to come up and do workshops. We had all these top guys (Peter Travis, Peter Rushforth, Bernie Sahm) coming up and doing three-day workshops, staying with us in our homes. That was absolutely wonderful.

*In '83 how was glass perceived?*

This was the first time glass teaching came to Canberra. Klaus came to the art

school and opened the glass department. It was my second introduction to glass and it was just as magical as the first time. There is something in that material that draws me, that makes me feel it is part of me. That doesn't happen with timber (I don't like, or dislike wood) and I would never buy a woodcarving. A table is all right, but as an art object, it does not appeal to me. Ceramics fascinate me, as does drawing, painting and glass. There is the excitement of creativity.

I have had people come to this house and yet they do not see a piece of glass. I have work in galleries, you watch and people walk past. I wonder how can they walk past? It is that they don't see it, but other people do. It appeals to them. To me it is like food – you have to have it in your life.

I did a big commission in Sydney once and I put ten three foot by three-foot tablets in this foyer. The morning after we had installed it, I went in to sit quietly in the foyer and just watch people fall about at my glass (laughs), but so many people did not even look up. I found that staggering. It was a white marble foyer and there had been absolutely nothing there before. On the Monday morning after the installation it was a blaze of colour. There were ten of these enormous glass panels surrounded by stainless steel frames, but nobody looked up.

To some people it is part of their lives, but others don't even see it. It is the material and the creativity that drives you on.

I exhibit in Sydney, Melbourne and the U.S.A

At ANU Klaus was teaching kiln formed glass. That was his expertise. There was no blowing, because it was a new department and we didn't have that equipment. There was no casting. There was one technique and that was kiln formed glass. Eventually they got the equipment and they introduced blowing and casting. I find now that everyone's casting. There has been a tremendous shift. Richard [Whiteley] started with kiln formed glass because he was studying with Klaus.

When blowing first started in the art school everyone went mad with it. It started as I left. I studied with Kirstie [Rea] we were at art school together. We tried to get blowing off the ground, but it was the cost of the equipment so the art school naturally had to work up to that, because it was only a new department. We did have a week in Wagga with a blower there called Denis O'Connor. We stayed in his house, slept on the lounge room floor and used his workshop. We could not continue with blowing after that, not without equipment. While I was studying glass I still had my ceramic workshop. I was still making ceramics and I was teaching ceramics at the art school. Nobody had glass studios, or workshops at home. We did all our work at the art school.

I don't think I could have been a blower because it is a team thing. You need a team to blow and what I was doing satisfied me tremendously.

*What were the relationships like with those working around you?*

We had very close relationships in the class that I was in. We would party together and work together. Klaus was a great party giver. The teaching staff consisted of Klaus and occasionally another teacher would come in. Peter Minson came in and taught lamp work. It was a very close little group. Klaus would organise exhibitions and he had us exhibiting in New York and all over the country. Those exhibitions were stunning. He was amazing. His students were so good, because we were artists anyway (Kirstie was working in stained glass). The students took to glass like fish to water. Klaus trained us in presenting our work, in exhibiting and dealing with galleries. We had to work very hard. It was demanding, but that was good. I like working hard (everyone did). We were disciplined. All of us were already established as artists. We were on our pathway. This was what was special with that first group that went through with Klaus. They were already well-developed people who knew where they were going and what they were doing and they were doing it well. It was very clever of him because everyone graduated very well. They did wonderful things. We were exhibiting through *Heller Gallery* [New York] for Gods sake! [Judi finds a later catalogue from her files – an international exhibition of formed glass with a Klaus Moje on the front and a forward by Keith Cummings].

*Impressively international.*

Yes Klaus established that [the international linkages] for his students in exhibiting with the right people. This is another one [catalogue]. It is *World Glass Now* 1993. This one in 1994 also included Stanislav Libinsky and Daniel Clayman).

*The international glass community was close knit?*

Yes. I'm still exhibiting overseas. I think Klaus established this. He was arranging exhibitions and our names became known.

*The glass group was small enough and the linkages strong enough to gain almost immediate entry into the international arena?*

Absolutely. There weren't many of us at all. It was just a small group of people (and I don't know how many were working in Sydney at the time). In Australia there was a small group of people working in glass and we had brilliant teachers, which meant we did well. It was an amazing time. We were very lucky. If we had only had an Australian teacher who had trained in Australia, there would not have been the prestige that Klaus brought (coming from Germany having been a good artist there). He brought credibility with him and shared it with us and then shared us with the world.

Klaus used to say (and I used to get cross because I didn't agree, but you don't say anything to contradict your teachers) – he was repeating Harvey Littleton – he use to say technique is cheap. I don't agree with that at all. Art isn't about

technique, but unless you have technique you can't do those things.

Even though Klaus was saying technique was cheap, he had bought the technique over and was teaching us technique. Unless he had taught us that we couldn't have done glass and I said him once that if he hadn't come we would not be making glass. If he hadn't come I would not be making glass because he brought us those technical skills, which you have to have with glass. Unless you get the firing schedules, annealing and compatibility right it will not work. If we had just decided to get together and make glass we would have been doing dreadful things. You have to have talent. You have to have a drive and a love of things, you need the soul of an artist, but you have got to have technique. Then you rise above the technique.

*Do you work in a 'language'?*

In every medium (and every aspect of life) there is a jargon. At one stage in art schools (in the very early seventies) they would say just go and paint. You don't need any teaching, just go and do it (not!). You have to have the technique to be able to release your own creativity. You have to know how to do it.

We probably all have our own sense of form. I've got a very strong sense of design and form. I don't know whether that is an inherent thing. I have been working for a long time (and working with clay), but I do not know whether you are born with that sense of form, or you learn it. You can change your forms, but I was always impressed with architecture and all my forms were architectural, even the ceramic ones (like the window and the house). I followed the forms of architecture, which meant a lot to me. If I do work with a form that makes me feel very uncomfortable (which I have) and wrong until I find I can't work with it any more. I have to relate to a form before I can use it and work with it. Colour is the same.

As I said, I always wanted to be a painter, but I never had the opportunity. (People say that my surfaces are painterly.) It is a discipline. Have been always been interested in design and I notice good and bad design all the time. I have had some training in design. The work that I am doing now (those tall triangular and angular pieces) is all based on the Golden Mean, so there is a sort of formula there.

*You benefit from resistance and challenge?*

Without that I wouldn't have had the same journey. That journey has been very rewarding and I have learnt a lot. I have learnt a lot that I would not have learnt if I had just leapt in from beginning through to that technology. The leaning process is invaluable because you become embedded with form, colour and design – all those things you are learning on that journey. It is like artists now who are creating paintings and work on a computer for God's sake! I can't comprehend that. Without material how do you go about that? I have always wanted to paint, but when people say just do it, where do you start? You have

to have knowledge to be able to put knowledge into practice. Only then can you put your own self into it. You have to have that technique, that beginning. Tell me – how do you go about doing a painting?

*What about the material?*

Well it's a direction in a way. It is a structure and a direction, otherwise you are out there and where do you go? You have to have a starting point, a point of departure, something to push against.

You have to choose your pallet of colours. I have a very slim pallet of colours. Bullseye have this enormous selection of glass. I went to Perth in September 2009 to teach a weekend workshop in Marc Leibs studio (Marc is the agent for Bullseye Glass in Perth). I was amazed at the enormous range of Bullseye glass that Marc carries. It was wonderful. It was like a candy store.

I have the Bullseye catalogue and I chose the colours I have a feeling for, an empathy with. I reject the ones where I don't. I just use that pallet because that pallet works and I relate to it. I've discovered over the years what I can do with certain colours and can't do with others.

*In '83 there were limitations?*

That's right. Bullseye have done a wonderful job in the world of glass. When we were doing ceramics we had to dig our clay and process it. Then we had to test it. If it wasn't plastic enough we had to add ingredients and if it were too plastic add grog, then we had to wedge it up by hand. You can't do that with glass, but you have to be able to choose the right colours and the right glass with the right compatibility.

Having people like Bullseye was very important. Bullseye have done a tremendous amount. They have now set up a gallery and they show work from all around the world. They have people going there working, testing and demonstrating.

*There was this parallel development of a pallet.*

And the development of the technical aspects of glass. Before you can make an eighteen-foot panel you have to have that technology off pat. I put that under the category of technique (which is not cheap). We are back to that saying again [Harvey Littleton] and I took it as meaning 'who needs technique'.

*What of people using others to make 'their' work?*

I had to struggle with that (and this is going back years) – when people used to get other people to do their work for them and then claim it as their work. I remember having a long discussion with someone who is now in England. She was a very clever person who used to do work other than blowing, so if she

wanted any blowing done she would get a blower to do it. She would then claim it as her work. I remember her sitting with Brian Hirst in my house when I was a student and we were discussing that same problem. I don't think Brian could come to terms with it either, but she was saying that it was her idea and her creativity, all she does is get someone else to use the technique, but she was the force behind it, therefore she justified doing it.

I think I can understand it now, but then I was really intensely involved and I didn't think it was right (laughs).

*A question would be – what is she missing out on?*

Of course, then it is all getting faster and faster and you can't learn every technique. But you are absolutely right. Even when you are firing you can make a discovery. My God, you think, fancy that. If other people were doing your firing you would never experience that. You have to have the journey, don't you?

There are so many techniques in glass. I have a friend who is a printmaker. I go to her studio sometimes and we just play around with printmaking. I have started 'etch on' and 'print off' glass plates. I think the technique I am talking about has been done in America. That's absolutely exciting.

*In your work you don't tend to use the light through the glass. I am interested in the way you use the surface.*

That's interesting. I see glass as another material used to make art. I love the colour. The light doesn't influence me that much. I have had people say that and I have had galleries say, 'No, if it transmitted light we would be interested', but I just use it as a material. I like to use the opaque. I don't want to use the transparency. I don't want to see through it. Windows you see through and glasses and bowls and things, but I want to use the rich colour. I don't think in terms of the light, otherwise I would be working differently. I wouldn't be using all that opaque glass, I would be using transparent.

I'm working like a painter and a sculptor, rather than as a glass person because I don't think the important aspect is the light coming through. I am actually layering. I'm layering one colour underneath another. Most people when they make kiln formed glass they have a sheet of clear glass then they have a pattern on top of that. I don't do that. I have layers of coloured glass underneath my top pattern and I don't use clear very much. It has to have colour because I want that colour, not light, to show through.

I felt an affinity with Sean Scully, the Irish painter who bought out an exhibition to the *National Gallery*. There was a little video of him painting. He has big canvases on the floor. He paints in blocks and he will put in blocks of colour (it doesn't run, because it is not standing up). He immediately goes over it with another series of colours. There might be a black block and he will cover it with

white – and there is a gradual merging of those paints. He has about five different coats of colour as he builds up and builds up one on top of the other. They are all wet so they are all pushing into each other. The edges are important as they blur and reveal coloured lines.

I am doing edges (and I was before) where those edges are different colours as you see the other colours peeping through. That was another moment of rapture when I went into his exhibition, because it was synchronicity – two people doing the same thing without knowing each other (he living in America and me living here). That is going on all the time in the creative world. I think it is something in the air. Jung calls it 'synchronicity'. That is how I like to use glass. I like to build up colour. I get striking colour and texture without even thinking about light.

I sandblast my finished work to take the shine off. I have seen that other technique where you can sand blast through to another colour and that is fascinating too, but for me that is too technical. My colour mixes reveal themselves in the firing. What is happening in the firing is exciting.

I get a physical response to beautiful things. I remember being fascinated by the *Impressionists* when I was young and I used to collect art books. I have seen art collections overseas since of course, but at the National Gallery at the moment is a collection of the *Post-Impressionists* and that is a physical thing for me. I look at them and feel a deep response. There is no need to view work with a guide to tell me what it is all about.

*Does your reaction to pieces you have made change over time?*

Sometimes it's very nice to see old pieces and that does happen. Sometimes you will see them in people's homes and think, "That was a good piece". Sometimes your reaction is less positive. Not very often (laughs), but you can see that you have moved on. You have learnt a bit more. Mostly I see them and I am pleased with them. It is like meeting an old friend, because you had forgotten that particular composition and that colour arrangement. It's nice. It springs up and greets you. It brings back a time. I know the smell sensation when you smell a perfume and it immediately takes you back to another period of time. I think meeting an old piece of work does that too. You remember all the things that were happening – some good, some not. They are little records, records of my time.

The catalogue that I was looking for, with the blue cover, was from a show in New York and Chicago (Richard Whiteley is in it – he had only just joined the group). Immediately I see that catalogue and see Richard's work it takes me back to that time when he joined the art school and what a lovely young guy he was. His work is totally different now. You can see that he has had one hell of a journey and learnt a lot.

*Do you name your works?*

I do. I don't name them when I finish. I don't look at them and wonder what I will call them. I know what it is before I start because I will start on a series of architectural buildings. They are all specific buildings. I know what they are before I finish them. Like the *Fortress* series for a start, they are all fortresses. They are all one fortress that is changing all the time in the landscape. I name my things before hand. I know what they are – no that's wrong, I don't name them, because I don't know how many I am going to end up with and what they are going to look like, but they all are the one theme, the one concept.

*With 'Fortress', what would be driving that theme?*

It is architectural! In 2005 I produced a whole architectural series for an exhibition at the *Drill Hall Gallery A.C.T.* The pieces were all walls and according to some of my critics, in the end they presented like pieces of body armour. Walls are protective and they had become smaller and more personal and they are presented as body protection. Working with architecture and 'protection' as my theme, the fortress evolved.

Protecting myself is probably my attitude to life in general and my life in particular. That has taken a lot of thinking out. That's there in the psyche and you don't think about it until somebody discusses it with you and points it out. I started to think about it. I work with architectural forms, but there is something that goes deeper than that and that's how the *Fortress* came about. It is how I always know what I am going to name them – because they are all to do with my life, architecture and protection.

*Relating to the human body?*

Yes (points to work in catalogue) that work is about two feet [60cm] high. I have a quotation from Luis Barragan, who is an architect from Mexico –

*'Walls are welcoming, containing, inviting. They protect and provide calm and safety against the unknown. The importance of walls lies in the fact that they form a barrier to the outside, to the street. The street is aggressive and hostile. The walls create silence and harmony.'*

I have related to that with my walls. Here we are delving deep into the psyche.

*Talking of the importance of forceful personalities, do people like Maureen, Klaus and Peter [Travis] form anchor points?*

I would agree with that absolutely. Each has an impact on our lives. I had a friend who died a few months ago and she was one of those people. She had a gallery in Canberra. She was only a tiny little thing, but she had such a strong personality. She was a force that influenced my life and I miss her terribly. That was how it was with Peter and Klaus as well. You are not seeing them a lot, but when you do it explodes again. You have this affinity with them and they are

the people who influence your direction in life.

*Do you find people reading your work differently to you?*

Even though I mentioned that people had revealed the 'armour thing' to me, I tended to think people couldn't see what was behind my work, but I think they can (not everyone of course). Maybe they are artists, or maybe they are people who are sympathetic to art, but they can see what is driving you more than one can oneself.

That is an about turn from what I did believe. I thought nobody really understood what I was saying, but now I believe they do.

In my catalogue I mention –

*There is no necessity to force change upon one's work. The joys and sorrows are impacted on our work as we live them, and are there for all the world to see.*

So I must believe that people can interpret it. I suppose they read their own joys and sorrows. Everyone thinks differently.

I don't talk about my work very much at all. In fact I rarely talk about my work. I mix with people and I talk about everything else – politics, books, fashion and whatever, but never about my work. I only do that with one friend and she is an artist. We look at things, talk and interpret things for hours. Talking clarifies things.

You are talking about the lines and the architectural aspects and about the fluidity of the centre. This is what I am consciously aware of doing – I fire my kilns so that the glass moves. I create distortion. I adore Brett Whiteley's work, because it is distortion of line and form. That is so exciting. I try to do that with my work. I start with hardedge work and then distort it in the firing. It distorts to such a degree that that it moves and all the lines distort and colours mix. This is where all the excitement comes in. Then I like to cut all the excess glass off and define the border. There is so much happening within the piece of glass and so much movement that you have to have a straight edge to contain it. .

*I talk of not being able to exactly repeat a work -*

I made a series of works for a psychiatrist in London. A couple of years later he wrote asking could I make another piece because he wanted one at home. I made the piece and sent it over. I was quite excited because my work had changed dramatically over those three or four years and I thought he would love it because it was so new and different. Anyway he sent a message back saying he had received the work. It had arrived safely, but he hated it (laughs) because it wasn't exactly like the one he had.