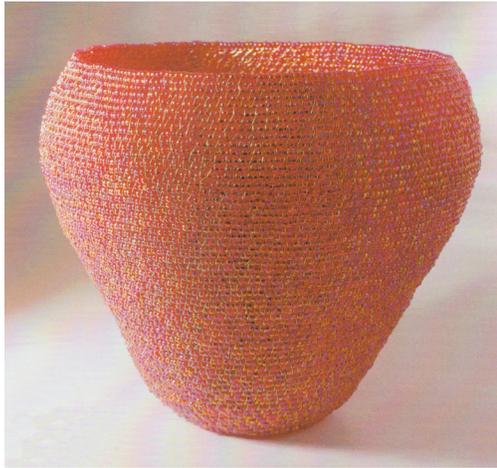


*At the time of this interview Jane Gavan was Associate Dean, Learning and Teaching and Senior Lecturer Glass Studio at Sydney College of the Arts*



Jane Gavan  
*Rose Bowl*  
 1998  
 iridised glass beads woven with gold wire  
 26 x 22.5 cm

*If you were to name your practice, what would that name be?*

I do this exercise with my students in their first year. It's where we say, if you met someone in a café after you graduate, what do you call yourself. I tell them I have been through it and I have tried a couple of different things. One was 'glass artist'. I went through a big 'sculptor' stage. 'Designer' can be a consideration sometimes, but I find it best (and I tell them this) to keep it flexible. Every opportunity that comes up may require you to see yourself in a different way.

There is a pool of things, but respond to the opportunity – the context – where my work is going to be and what that opportunity is. That will bring out 'that side' of me.

*How then do you 'read' those terms?*

In some sense I see them as very interchangeable. It is a mindset. That's why it is not important to have one name for yourself. 'Artist' is an overriding one that's easy. People see a lot in that and it gives me a lot of flexibility. I don't like being boxed in and my work changes every time I do something.

*Giving a name to what you do points to a way of acting and clarifies the way you might approach a work.*

Yes, and I'm reading a book at the moment called *The Craftsman* [Richard Sennett]. Crafting things is still a great passion and the idea of craftsmanship is important to me. Design is equally exciting and fascinating and there is a place for that. With my work (you came to my talk at GAS [Corning '09]) part of that is thoughtful design and being careful with materials. I design my artwork. I design my sculptures. Designing is the activity.

*You draw up your concepts?*

Yes, usually. I make exactly the same way I teach. That makes it easy for me to teach that way [laughs].

*Is there change between what you put down as the concept and what you actually end with?*

I usually say that there's a refinement, and when you look back at the original drawing it may appear 'ugly'. It's a word that is easy to use when it is in the past, but the work may seem clumsier, less resolved. The germ of the idea is usually somewhere there and the germ of a couple of ideas usually runs through all my works. These are interests, passions and responses. These are threads.

When I conceive a work I sometimes make it exactly as it was conceived, but within my skill-set obviously. Sometimes it ends up being better than my original drawing.

*You appear to have strong narratives running through your work.*

Yes. One of my interests is invention – understanding and pushing the material. That is because I'm a student of Maureen Cahill. Pushing the material is something she talked about year in, year out, when we were students. She wasn't interested in the banal. She hated cut glass and used to call it the death of a thousand cuts.

She wasn't interested in the traditional. Her 'Stourbridge experience' formed that. I went back to looking at cut glass and thought, "Great – there are things I can do with this. I can cut it up and deconstruct it." I'm interested in the material and what it can do, and I need to keep myself excited because I work here [Sydney College of the Arts] all day long. Everyone knows glass is a fascinating material and I'm not over it yet.

Social narratives come out in the work I'm making. One was a work I made as a reaction to place. It was down on the Murrey River during a *Triennial of Sculpture*. The theme was palimpsest. I made a work in glass that skimmed over the land and rewrote its story. The land was degraded by salinity issues, but it had been good pasture and before that as aboriginal land, it was perfectly healthy. You could walk past my ten-metre piece of glass. I used devitrification – ridges on the glass and scouring – as a representation of the state of the land. That one was called '*Landscape Document*'.

*Do you relate to the glass with a particular 'language'?*

It depends on the job. Whether it's a design competition, an exhibition, or if it's something I want to make for myself – those things might vary. I'm a good one for following the brief. The language in that brief is vital and it would colour my decision-making. Also all those elements of sustainability, the notions of invention, the idea of the hand-made are important.

*Being so conscious of the brief implies 'designer'.*

If that is the job at hand, yes. It might be that I am making something for myself, because I have the privilege of doing that. Very often we work to brief. Recently I pitched for a job for an outdoor sculpture and there was a brief. It's an artist's work, but the brief is from the client.

*Does the 'accident' still play a part?*

Yes the accident is always part of making. 'Accident' is a funny term for it. Modifications, or nuances – that 'eureka moment' when you realise you can make something 'this way'. You thought it would be in clear, but suddenly colour works for the project. I allow myself that.

You can work within the brief and still have those moments that change things. It is a bit like writing an essay – as long as you have met all the requirements you can deviate and be creative. With my students writing masters' essays for me, as long as they have met all the formal requirements, they can be quite creative in the way they put it together.

*Do you relate working with glass to any other experience?*

Cooking and soaking in the bath (Shar Felmorman said that). Yes, when you are aching and in a hot bath at a certain temperature you soak and that relaxes you. That is how she explained 'holding' the temperature in the kiln for annealing. Mine's more about cooking – the patience, the experimentation, and the finesse you can develop.

*That's equating process to process. What about emotive responses?*

It's like a love affair. I get infatuated with an idea. I get infatuated with a material. It's exactly the same as having a really good relationship. It's my chosen field. I had a time away from my career when I got married to the wrong fellow (in terms of him not wanting me to creatively pursue my career). That was a big deal, because when you get it back you never want to lose it again. I realised it would always be in my life. I am never going to stop being an artist. It's my chosen field. It's a vocation. It's a core element. I often test my core elements and it's always in the top three.

*Do you name works, and of what importance is that?*

Sometimes, and it can be strategic. If I'm entering the Ranamok and I can't get everything into those fifty words [work descriptor], I put it in the title. Sometimes it's poetic – summing up what I want to get across in a couple of words. That's a big deal, but I enjoy that, working with a thesaurus. I spend hours writing artist's statements and making up titles. Other times I do it quickly. It's a blue vase so its title becomes 'Blue Vase'.

*Poetic implies opening out. Is that what you want a title to do?*

Yes, when I can I practice what I preach. When I want people to look at my work (or the students' work), I want them to understand it without text, unless it's a text specific work. I'm hoping my work speaks of my intention without me having to use a label or a title.

That is my discipline. It is what I ask my students to work towards. Then they have this conversation with me about not caring what people think and taking what they want from it. I'm more ambitious than that. I want to communicate, and if there is something beyond that it's great. My intention – I want to get that across. There is a basic joy in what I make. There is the material, the patterning, the colour, and you can have a

visceral reaction, but if they miss the point, that's a shame because then I have not done my job.

There is a whole lot of other work I make just on colour, and I like working with that colour because it makes me feel good. I know that at some basic level it is going to make someone else feel good.

*Visceral, poetic, intentionality?*

Yes, but I've had a long time to play with it all. I'm very open to different avenues - otherwise I would be bored.

*Do you see issues we should be addressing as the community of glassmakers?*

It's the opportunity to spend time on the idea behind the work, because the rest – the technique – will come. You can develop the skills to make the idea. It's foregrounding the idea and then being open to a response that may not be your standard response. Try to let the idea inform the process and the material. I don't know that is always the case. I would love to see some people (who have amazing technical skills) allow themselves that. It would take time and a little bravery, because sometimes it won't be their comfort space.

*You're in a position to see what is happening in other contemporary fields (ceramics, jewellery, in painting, in sculpture), but we are in glass.*

It's a good point and a tricky one. We have the opportunity to be interdisciplinary when the idea requires it. When you go into this field you are learning skills and learning about material. That becomes part of your toolkit. We, as material specific learners, have that in our toolkit. When we conceive of an idea, because of our sensitivity to that material, we are often interested in light and colour as well. Glass is just a medium, a carrier of light and colour. When you have your ideas on this side, you see out your projects with the skills you have and our skills are often skewed towards this material. I'm a printmaker as well and I have that background of graphic design and print, but a lot of students have one strong point. Like a lot of glass artists they think through their material. I ask why they made it in glass and they answer it was the 'easiest'. I don't like the excuse that 'I made in glass, because I'm in glass'. I think that is about 'what we are really good at', but I won't allow that in my classroom. If I'm good at spaghetti bolognaise the family gets that a lot. It is the same thing.

*But if you're spaghetti bolognaise specialist and you call yourself a chief...*

Don't get hung up on the labels.

*Only in terms of perceptions, if you say that you are exploring light and colour and glass is the thing that intrigues you, but glass is such a powerful material. It is an 'alpha' material.*

You are using loaded words there. I don't know if it is any more powerful than any other material. I think that's a loaded statement. It might be a material that you find powerful, but you should be careful about being all encompassing and generalising. It might not be everybody's opinion. I love wood and metal. You have got to love wax. Paint is great. I delve into all of them.

It depends on the idea. I have the privilege of not always making things in glass. Once you step outside of that – you use the glass when you need to use the glass and when you don't, you don't.

*Glass has such a grouping of attributes that you can find yourself 'dedicated' to it.*

I think that's your personal opinion. I think a metal worker would say the same thing about their material. I think it is because you have fallen in love with that material. If you allowed yourself to have a moment with some copper it would be 'pretty good', or some silver-leaf.

The other day I made something out of the spine of a cuttlefish because it is transparent like cyton, but an underwater clear cyton. It is like glass only it moves and it is strong and it is from nature in its beautiful form. You can fall in love with anything.

*But glass tends to be a real chameleon. It can give you a wide range of possibilities.*

Yes, and that's one of the attractive qualities of it.

*Last Friday the jewellers were talking about some quite visceral approaches to jewellery and cutting the body. Do you know glass artists that are pushing the boundaries?*

We have had a few artists do that. Glass has that 'sharp-edge' quality that does allude to that, but the fact is the jewellers have been trained to think about their craft in relation to the body. That brings them into that realm. Our work is more general, so only specific artists who are interested in relation to the body will go that way.

*Do you see people who are working in studio glass moving into the more 'contemporary' art field?*

I think they are already there. More than people think. It's about the way they position themselves, and give themselves labels. I know people like Andrew [Lavery] are actively trying to push themselves and tailor their career in that direction. It is strategic. Young artists build a career by making decisions – where to exhibit and things like that. That's the structured side of it, but you could take any artist who is part of the Ausglass group and it wouldn't take much to reconfigure their thinking into being a contemporary artist. There is Nicky Savis who is a contemporary artist who works with glass, so it is about contextualisation. It is not really about what you are making.

There is the Joseph Kosuth work on light in the [NSW] Art Gallery at the moment. It is pure neon and it is the biggest work in the gallery. It's glass, but no one calls him a glass artist. I was staring at it for a long time because I'm doing light with my students and it is perfect for me. I turned to my partner and said, "It's a glass work". He didn't understand what I was saying, but that artist had contextualised himself in a certain way and everybody can do that. It is a choice as to where you exhibit and that is how you think of yourself and how you describe yourself. It is not a big deal. It is there if people want to go that way and I have done it. Certainly coming back here [SCA] into a more conceptual environment, I never for one moment worried about it. I went into triennials. I sold in regional galleries. I made installations in the street.

I am not going to be labelled as 'glass artist', because that is not what I need, but I do love going to the conferences and being in the 'tribe'. The tribe gives me something, but I don't need the tribe as a label to exist as an identity. I have more avenues than some people choose to have in the tribe. It is an expanded field for me.

*Aren't there boundaries for that tribe?*

No, because I'm one of them and that's the beautiful thing about it. They accept me and that, for me, is the future value of the tribe. The more open and accepting people are, the more valuable the tribe is going to be. When we are at those conferences I find it a beautiful, nurturing place to be and I go all glass mad for a while.

My next conference is the Society of the History of Technology, another tribe I belong to. I am about to give a paper in Pittsburgh. I'm interested in how artists have driven technology. It is what you do when you are thinking about all this stuff, and I can't stop thinking about it.