

*At the time of this interview Anna Grigson was an owner and director of Sabbia Gallery*

*How do you see your role as curator?*

The curator in the context of an art gallery means somebody who has come up with an idea, put together the exhibition, present it. Usually there is related text to go with those shows. Some exhibitions have much more of a curatorial stance than others – those that require much more curatorial context with regards to the selection process and the reasoning behind the show. Some exhibitions are as simple as being an organiser or manager of an exhibition.

With a commercial gallery you have a stable of artists. With these two shows [Maureen Williams and Helen Aitken-Kuhnen at Sabbia], my curatorial input was much less with Helen's show than it was with Maureen's. I worked with Maureen on her exhibition because she asked that of me. The initial idea was that we have a solo exhibition with Maureen's work. The show was to present new work by an artist who has been working for a long period of time. That is a role for a commercial gallery and when you have a commercial gallery you need to fulfil your commitment to your artists by presenting them within group and solo exhibitions. That is very different to a 'not for profit space' which obviously has a lot more leeway (all their shows are usually curated exhibitions).

With Maureen, I worked with her over the course of eighteen months simply because she had not produced such a large body of work for a long period of time. We worked on what she had been making over the last ten to fifteen years and how she felt about the new body of work and what she was going to present. Then I suppose my influence (I didn't tell her what to make of course) was with what sort of reaction I would expect from a Sydney audience in this gallery space.

So if this exhibition was in another space I would probably tell her different things. Everything you do within a commercial gallery has to do with your client base, your current market (the city you present in has a lot to do with that), the space (in with respect to how the gallery presents itself) and with the artists themselves of course.

There are opportunities that we had (less frequently now, but that's not a bad thing) when our stable of artists wasn't such a large group. We had more time. We had more group shows (shows that we did curate) and there was a particular basis to them. We don't do those so much now simply because we have a commitment to do solo shows. Some artists want more interaction, some don't. That's where the role of curator comes in – depending how much the artists want that.

We have the 'Masters of Glass' show every January and I consider that more of a curatorial based show. We have the ceramic show in the middle of the year. They are the 'grouping of artists' shows and each year there has been a different 'idea' behind those shows. With those shows I work with Kylie Johnston. We work together in formulating ideas and selecting artists. We throw another show in through the year if we can.

I find that with some of the solo shows, like with Maureen Williams, there is more work involved because she asked that of me.

*Are you 'framing' the artist's work?*

It's a fairly casual way that happens. It is not written down that Anna Grigson needs to help me get my show together. It is your role as director of a gallery to guide your artists, I suppose. If they want to be presented in your space, then you need to work together making sure that it is a successful exhibition. At the end of the day this is a commercial gallery. We have to sell the work. One of my ideas has always been that I would like to educate people along the way if I could achieve that. I still feel there are not enough venues that do that. Whether that be in technique, in the whole concept of Australian glass generally, or specifically about a particular artist's work – that is what we work on together.

I told Maureen right at the beginning that people want to know how you make your work, because your work is very different. They want to know about you. They want to know why you are important. Why they should invest time in you. Why they should invest money in you.

I always ask for a lot more. I always ask for more images of artists working, a lot more reasons why they work, information about technique. Just a simple artist's statement isn't enough. People aren't content with that. I like to be educated when I walk into a space. I like to walk out better off than when I walked in. I like to think people who walked out of here would feel that.

Most people want to do that through text. They don't want it through verbal interaction, so we try to give them as much as we can.

*You are surrounding the artist with relationships.*

I think it is important. My point still is that we compete in a really tough market. Glass is still not considered to be up there with contemporary painting, sculpture or even photography. But there are those few that have the luxury of being so well known that the galleries just need to present them and that is all there is to it. Although you need to think that even those artists are often in arts magazines. There are profiles of them. Where they live. What they did growing up. Why they were inspired. Where they studied.

It is just not enough for us to say here is some great glass and they are really innovative. You need to give people a lot more if you want them to pay enough attention to come back, or to tell others about what is going on.

The main thing I would say is that a role of any curator is to educate. There has got to be a reason why any exhibition is put on. It can't just be to make a few quick sales. It has to be for the advancement of the artist's career and education about glass generally.

*Talk about what you present to a customer who is walks into this gallery for the first time.*

We are very much guided by the way our space is laid out. We try to focus on every single work. Sometimes the relationships between works are more important than presenting them singly. I have worked in quite a few galleries and they have all done things differently, but they have all been guided very much by their space. I think it is a

combination of many things. The way your space is put together to present work. The way you do your lighting.

I have always wanted to present the work at the highest possible standard – museum standard almost. I think the way this place is put together is the combination of the two directors who run it and how we feel about the work. How we want people to interact with the work.

We want it to be a personal experience. We want people to spend time here so we make a point of not overcrowding. We try to place ourselves more in a fine arts context – less work within a larger space and being a lot more selective with how you present that work. We don't want work to overlap if there is a group show here. We don't want there to be any confusion between what artist belongs to what work (again I am talking about placement).

At the end of the day, we have a price beside the work. It is for sale, whether we make that obvious or not. We are presenting work that is at the higher price point. We are not in a retail environment here. We are a gallery. If people are going to invest time and money in work, they need to get as much out of it as they can. They need to see the work in its best light, hopefully understand it and want to spend more time with it.

If we were more of a retail environment then the way we would put this together would be very different, because there would be a different reason for us being there. The reason for us being here is that we are trying to represent artists and we are trying to promote their careers. We are trying to educate people about the standards being achieved. It has to be of the highest quality.

After that (in the gallery context) comes the 'after sales service', the relationship with your clients and the collectors. That is just as important as how clean your plinths are. You have to make sure your after sales service is of the highest quality. You need to be sure that what people get afterwards is just as good as what they are buying – all the paperwork, all the artwork declarations.

This is not curatorial, but a lot of our clients use us as a source of education. They want to know more. We provide them with as much as we can. We have regular collectors and if there are articles and magazines, we make sure we get those to them, where ever they are around the world, with reference to what they should look at.

*How important are those magazines?*

It's important for some people and not so important for others. It's a good resource. We use it. If a client is particularly interested in an artist and there happens to be an article we might source that from two or three years ago. We will use it as a reference. All collectors are great researchers. They all spend time on the Internet looking, so they come in fairly well educated anyway. They generally would have seen those articles and been aware of them.

Some collectors have guidelines. They would not acquire a work unless that artist is in a public collection in Australia and/or overseas and has been published. A lot of people will not invest any money in someone who has not fulfilled certain guidelines. Articles and publications tend to be one of them. It is obviously important for a group of collectors.

It is a fairly blunt comment, but I'm not convinced those articles achieve a lot at the end of the day, only because the audience is still so small and because of the level of knowledge in that audience. We pick up some along the way, but we are still trying to compete in high-level markets. In Sydney in particular, it is still really hard.

I have a consultancy role as well. In a gallery you tend to do that. You sometimes work with architects and interior designers, or clients on building a collection. In Sydney unfortunately that tends to be putting works that match the paintings in your house. What is quite disheartening in those situations is that you will get the one client who's really interested and the work is just as important to them as anything else in their home. Then you will get other clients for whom it is literally just a red piece of glass and the sofa is more important. People have different priorities. Everyone has different reasons for collecting and unfortunately sometimes in Sydney you do all this work, but it comes down to the work being the right height.

*Would you place work into a category as you are seeing it for the first time?*

Yes, it's a way of explaining the work. You develop a stable of artists and hopefully when you look at that whole group you are representing the broad cross section of the most innovative techniques being used in glass. It is a way of covering everything that is good in Australian glass. If someone approaches me, or I'm interested in someone's work, but there is too close a relationship with another artist (that's not just through technique) then I tend not to pursue that much further, unless there's a development in the work.

I look at Kirstie Rae. She is a kiln caster, but recently she has gone into another realm altogether (architectural glass with blown elements). I like that development. I like to see artists doing that. I think that to have them categorised with one technique is fine, but they still need to develop their work some how. It doesn't mean changing their technique, it means expanding their technique, or revisiting ideas from years back and incorporating new ideas.

I am always interested in someone doing something new. Maureen Williams is an exceptional in the way she approaches glass. There are other people who paint glass, but she is very different in the way she puts it together.

Yes I do categorise. There are artists here that are cast glass artists. There are glass artists here that are a combination of things. Cobi Cockburn – there is no particular way of describing Cobi's work, so when we talk to people about Cobi's work we run through the whole process. That's the only way you can do it. With Maureen her technique has a lot to do with her work. You say she is a hot glass artist who paints. Richard Whiteley, he's a cast glass artist. You can't explain Richard and his work unless you explain cast glass as the medium. The only technique that is relevant to all these artists is that they are all cold workers, but that is something that can categorise Australian glass.

*Is the descriptive language you use the language of technique – of craft?*

Pretty much, yes, skills base is always really important to me. I do tend to explain technique a lot. People want to know too. I don't use it as the first point of reference though. I don't say you should come and see the 'painted glass' artist we have in the

gallery. It's Melbourne glass artist, Maureen Williams who has a series of works, you might mention blowing in there – a combination of blown glass and painted imagery. It comes out eventually, but it is not the first point of reference.

I do all the media releases and all the graphics so I get sick of my phrases. When I explain an established artist like Klaus Moje, I would explain Klaus a lot differently to how I would explain Cobi Cockburn, or Charles Butcher. I would probably use the word innovative. Exciting is a horrible word, but it does come up. These words would describe their approach to glass and their techniques, whereas with Klaus (even though it is a great word for a man like him because his technique is great innovation), I would explain his importance to Australian glass as a founder.

I suppose as an artist develops their career there are other reasons why they are important. It is not just because of the way they make their glass. It is a personal thing. It is not just about their work. It is the artist. It has to be. When you describe an artist it's not just about their work, it's got to be about them as well.

*Is the stronger response you have to work intellectual, or visceral?*

I suppose that is the old question of my response to work I have in my gallery. I think there is always an emotional response first. I don't think you would be human if there wasn't, but I don't select artists for the gallery simply because I love their work and I want a piece in my collection. I choose artists for various reasons. Sometimes it's technical reasons, because what they are doing is interesting.

There was a South Australian artist in Tassie [2009 Ausglass Conference]. I was really interested in how he presented himself. He was a great marketer. His photography was superb. For that reason I am keen on watching him. I didn't like the work personally and I didn't think technically it was brilliant either, but there was scope there for something fantastic to come.

I think you need to be able to identify people who can do that. Maybe if you want to, you can invest time in them. You can work with them and get somewhere that you think will work in your gallery. There are people whose work I deal with where I don't have an emotional response, whether that be negative or positive, but I see scope for them running somewhere with their work.

When you approach an exhibition, marketing a show, there is always a different way you do that and it has a lot to do with how you feel about the work personally, maybe even how you feel about the artist, and how you feel about how they approach their work. A lot of artists let you down by letting themselves down. They just don't give it enough. It is up to you to try to push them to give it. At the end of the day it is a wonderful opportunity for them to develop a new body of work.

*Picture a work to which you had a strong emotional response. What are the elements in the work that did that for you?*

With one work that I'm thinking of, it is the subtlety of the work. I ended up acquiring that work – that is how I felt about it. The other work, it was just the amazing way it was put together. The whole idea behind it I thought was incredible. It was like nothing I had seen before.

Brenden Scott-French has pretty much blown me away. I was watching Brenden's work ten years ago (his work at Quadrivium). The next time I came across it was only a couple of years ago. It was so different to anything I had seen before and really exciting. He had an installation at the Canberra Ausglass Conference with the 'Hunks of Glass Show' and that wonderful wall installation which I still think is one of the best things I have ever seen. The way he put it all together really excited me.

*Because it was unexpected, unusual?*

All those things, but still really well put together, really well thought through. Everything about it was interesting. On every single panel in that installation he just push himself and pushed himself. Visually it is wonderful to look at.

The other work I am thinking of is ceramicist Simone Frazer who is probably the other end of the scale. She has been working for a really long time. Again I have seen her work over that course of time and it has changed. It has become a lot simpler. She used to do a lot more sculptural forms. Now they're vessel forms. It's the subtlety of the work. She just got her glazes so right. In a series of work, this one was just beautiful to view. It was beautiful to spend time with. Then again, I think it comes down to knowing what came previously, then being happily surprised by what you see.

Whether you know the artist or not obviously helps the way you feel about the work eventually.

Brenden Scott French is going back to sculpture now and the response we got to the only one of his works (a little vehicle) that we had in a show last year made it one of the signature pieces of the show. Its scale, its technique, its colour - just everything about it was just fantastic.

*Do you find differences between the way you are seeing the work and the way it is being perceived by people who walk into this gallery?*

I'm not convinced I know enough about any of our artists honestly. Although that is my role, I'm sure I don't know enough. There are a couple of shows coming up where I didn't understand the basis for the new work. This is the artist and me dealing with each other. The education process develops with you as the gallery director as well. You learn along the way, whether it is about new techniques, or about the reason behind the show, or the selection process (the artist does that, I don't). Then it is probably a matter of being informed enough. So it isn't a matter of seeing differently. Everyone's interpretation is different.

When we have people come through the gallery we will spend time talking to them. We will give them as much information as they need. We don't tell them what to think about the work. We give them the information so they understand what they are looking at. Some people know about glass, some people don't, so we give them a general cross view of what they are looking at. Then we focus on the artist they are looking at and we tell them a little about that artist. A little bit of history, a little bit about the technique, then we might talk about the work that they are looking at, the series, or where it has come from.

People always throw something in, something that they see. It is not for me to say, "No it is not that". It is not that I have missed that, it is just the way that they see it and it's

different. I don't think any artist is that determined that they must have people see their work in a particular way.

*Have you had works change over time?*

We hold work here, sometimes possibly for too long. Some pieces sit here for a year before it is time for them to move on. I think what happens from the time you first see that work, is that other works from that artist come up (whether that is in books, magazines or other galleries). You see other work they have made, or you see work that other artists have made. I am not saying there was a piece that I thought was brilliant, but then six months later I had a negative response to it.

New developments in work excite me, but I also like to see relationships with previous work. So if there is a piece sitting there from a year ago and then I see the artist's work in a solo show, I like to see relationships and that is a time to revisit that earlier work. I always tell artists to take as many photos as they can of their work and to look at those photos and the work will take you somewhere else if you are ever stuck.

There is not one way of seeing a work. It is all conditional.

I want people to spend time in this gallery. We interact with people while they are here if they want us to interact. We want them to come back. We want them to be happy to be here. We have spent time putting this show together. The artist has spent a lot of time emotionally and physically, making the work and it is only on for four weeks. We want people enjoying the show, so if we can get any conversation going with them that is fantastic.

We do not expect that people to come in with a credit card and say I will have that thanks. Everyone that walks into these doors here is important, because they have taken the time to come in. We want them to feel welcome. I like to think that we present the space so people can have a little time on their own if they want to as well. We are not hounding them. There are a lot of little areas you can sit in, to contemplate and watch and view. That is why we keep the lighting the way we do. I don't like all over blasting light. It is more an intimate relationship with the work, that's what we like people to get.

The only other comment I would make is the relationship between the curator/gallery owner/whoever and the artist also has a lot of influence on what we discussed. The personal relationship between these two people will often impact in a positive way on how we approach the work, how we present the work. I would say that relationship was as a friend. You develop a strong relationship as a friend. It is a friendship at different levels. Everyone has different reasons why they are here and we have different reasons why we have them here, but that's the only way you can have successful relationship in a gallery. That is having some form of respect for each other. There is always going to be testing times, but as long as you have open dialogue it is much easier. So when you do have situations where you need to be much more professional, it makes the process much easier. It is still a business. We are both running a small business and we need to support each other along the way.