

*At the time of this interview Martin Beaver was owner and director of Beaver Galleries.*

*How do you see your role?*

There are some people who see you as a curator because you are presenting work, but a curator has a much larger role in terms of interpreting work. We don't try to interpret the work and in a way nor should we. We will often try to explain something about the work – inform people – which a lot of galleries don't do (or are not very good at doing). Their explanation is the price and that is about as far as it goes.

Whenever we do an exhibition we do notes. We give a little bit of information – a little bit about the work, a little bit about the artist, but I don't see that as a curatorial thing. In fact I see that as the minimum acceptable standard. If you are going to put work up you attempt to make it accessible to people (that is, it's more about accessibility than it is interpretation). As a curator you may have a hypothesis that you are trying to test (trying to prove, or disprove in some way) and works are assembled to sustain, or possibly demolish that hypothesis by placing things in a certain context.

The hidden agenda is obviously that everything is within its context. Because we are only dealing with contemporary work we are not too worried about the historical context. It is pretty much about the here and now. I guess that's the nature of showing glass commercially. Our fundamental role is representing the artist. We are trying to act as the broker between the artist and the client – to get the client interested in the work, to have some understanding of the work (both technically and conceptually).

Having said that, I think glass is one of those difficult areas where people get very confused as to whether it is a show of technical bravura, or whether it is fundamentally an art form. The reality is that it is both of those things to greater and lesser extent. In particular I find the Americans are absolutely obsessed with technique. They keep asking how things are being done. I say that is the wrong question - you never ask why it is being done. When you look around a lot of the work in America that is a really good question, because some of the work is all about technical showmanship and I would say it has very little intellectual, or spiritual content. Some of it seems to have been assembled to market.

Australian work stands up very well in that context because it is quite unusual to have people just assembling for the market. It is probably largely because of the nature of our system where most of our glass graduates come through fairly rigorous training and have some understanding of art history and theory. So the artists who work in glass have a fairly good grounding in context for their work.

Some of them may do work in (say) the Italian tradition and that is about total mastery of the medium – complete virtuosity. The conceptual basis for the work is often quite literal. It does not require a huge depth of understanding, nor should it. It is what it is and of course we struggle with that. A lot of glass artists struggle with being called glass artists because they are artists who happen to work in glass. They often condemn themselves to being regarded as 'glass artists' because if the strongest aspect of what you do is that it is in glass - you are a 'glass artist'.

There are a few who have broken the bounds in Australia, but not many. Glass artists are very social animals, but they socialise with other glass artists. To a certain extent I

think there is a little ghetto-isation. They have their work interpreted through the prism of it being done in glass, so (if you like) they have corralled themselves. A few break out and I guess Janet Laurence is the classic, as she is not regarded as a glass artist. She is doing glass art without the glass.

It is a difficult thing. I don't think the market (for want of a better word because 'market' always sounds cheap and commercial) is a mature one in terms of understanding where glass fits. That's partly as a result of what the glass artists do and how they present the work. We actually enjoy the fact that here we present glass and ceramics and paintings and prints and just see them as part of a broader spectrum of visual arts practice, but that's pretty unusual. Sometimes you get criticised for doing that because you are dealing with what is regarded as 'fine art' on one side and 'decorative art' on the other side. Some glass is decorative and that is the reality of it.

It comes right from the very top in Australia where you have the *Visual Arts and Crafts Board*. They are merged and separated at different points, but the crafts have always been regarded as the 'Cinderella' of the visual arts, which somehow needed to be given a leg up and made more interesting and more valid. Usually completely tendentious arguments sustain that, rather than the actual quality of the work itself. It's that little kid jumping up at the back of the room saying me, me, me (laughs), which is a bit of a shame. Then you get the crafts councils running retail operations inside their shops that just keep promoting this same image.

*SOFA* has tried to get around that. In fact it stands for sculpture, objects and functional art (I don't know what functional art is to be honest. I guess it is art you can stick a flower in maybe), but it is still seen as a poor cousin to the 'genuine' visual arts. Hopefully that is something that will shake out over time. The same happened with indigenous art to a certain extent. It started in a different vein and it's becoming more acceptable. I think glass should be seen more in the context of contemporary practice – certainly some will. The field of glass art will expand to the point where its reach is so broad that there will be some elements that will be considered right up there with the best aspects of contemporary art practice. Then there will always be people who are making a living by doing glasswork and good luck to them too. People do the most wonderful production glass. They often straddle both areas, which is an interesting thing because you don't get many professional painters who also go and knock up sketches down at the local shopping mall to sustain their practice.

I think studio glass is still immature as a field in the way people understand and receive it.

*Do you see a change in the way glass practice is framed?*

Well hopefully yes. It's progressing. The system fights itself to a certain extent. The systems for the presentation, the observation and the interpretation of glass tend to be based on what it was like ten years ago (like traffic systems), so to a certain extent you are always playing catch up. One hopes that the institutions will move toward pulling objects into a slightly broader context. You can write essays until you are blue in the face and it doesn't matter what happens in the country galleries, or the shops, ultimately people will see the institutional state and national galleries as the places that give them the guide as to what the cultural landscape looks like. Hopefully that will be

a complete landscape rather than one that is segregated into a forest over there and a hill here.

*There is inertia within your established market?*

You are right. There are people who collect 'glass'. In fact it reminds me that when I was in the States in the very early days. I took sculptural leatherwork there from a couple in Western Australia (it was extraordinarily beautiful) and a chap kept coming back to the stand and looking at this wonderful piece. I said to him that the best way of consummating this activity was to actually buy the piece because the courtship was going on a little too long. He kept ducking and weaving and said he would come back tomorrow. I sat next to him at a collectors' dinner that night and after a few wines I said I was sorry to be so blunt, but he obviously loved that piece and money is not the problem (in fact it was cheap in American terms), so why hadn't he bought it? He said, 'Oh I collect walking sticks'. Apparently he had totally condemned himself to never being able to live with anything other than walking sticks. That is an extraordinary notion and glass collecting can be like that.

Having said that it is very unusual to find a glass collector limited to just glass. You don't go to a glass collector's home and find there is only glass. There is a broader interest, but to a certain extent they subject the glass to (if you like) a lower level of critical scrutiny. They expect less of it. As I said before particularly in America where they look for some kind of technical mastery, or just a 'real neat trick' like Mel Douglas who takes glass and makes it look as unglass-like as possible. That is a neat trick. There is something much more fundamental to what she is doing but they admire the little sleight of hand (which you can do fantastically well with glass – it lends itself to that).

*In this gallery with its broad range of mediums you say people expect a little less of glass?*

Yes and I think there is a danger in that they don't look deep enough. Sometimes that's unfair because often the conceptual basis of the work will stand up to an enormous level of scrutiny. That is the problem in tagging something as 'glass art' (it probably is the problem in tagging anything). That is you have basically set the parameters within which you observe and understand it. I am always reminded of the difference that makes (and art critics struggle with this as well). Does an 'art critic' go out and review a show of glass, or do you get a 'craft critic' to go and review it and if so, what if there is a really interesting conceptual basis with references outside the sphere of glass - how does that person deal with it. It is like the theatre critic who covers an enormous range. That theatre critic will review 'panto' and Shakespeare, but know and understand work for what it is and look at it in that context. We in the visual arts tend to be not quite so good at doing that – in understanding what it is that is being attempted and assessing how well it achieves that objective.

*It comes down to the reading?*

More an expectation rather than the reading - if you were told it was Shakespeare and it turned out to be panto you might be extremely disappointed. The start of the dialogue for any of these things (if you like the thing that happens before the dialogue) is like an introduction. What is this thing? and what is it likely to tell you? I think people

come in with their expectations very much set. The interesting thing is that you could put a lot of glass artists in something like a biennale context and do interesting installation work. Actually Tom Moore is an example. The work is extraordinarily broad and then he is also doing video based on his work. The video is fantastic. The videos are so daggy, but they are wonderful. They stand up to anything like that. Then you look at one of his objects and you think it is kind of quirky, but it is beautifully made. What could be a clumsy gag can be rescued by extraordinary and obvious skill. Then when you collect these things together and present the whole narrative, it is much more.

*Tom said he had trouble being accepted.*

That's right and he is an interesting case because he is somebody at the edge. I don't think he is deliberately pushing the boundaries and saying he doesn't want to be a glass artist. It is in his nature to do it (as I'm forever told). He has always done work like that and it is his own work. I don't think he is trying to prove anything to anybody and that is what makes it so interesting. It comes down to a question of interpretation. He had a wonderful diorama (for want of a better term) in the *Optimism* show at GoMA (Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland) and so there was work by a glass artist introduced into really what was a very highly pitched visual arts context where people were doing installation work. We had Fiona Hall, Sean Corderiro and Claire Healy – some very exciting and well-regarded visual artists – seen in the same context. Certainly Tom's work was interesting and stood up well, but a lot of these people had never seen it before.

*But the audience for glass had trouble finding a slot for him.*

I think that is right, but at the moment he probably sits flat bang in the middle and that can be an uncomfortable place to be sometimes. If you just looked at those works as pieces of glass you are really missing the point. Brenden Scott French is also an example of somebody who is doing really interesting work in glass. The fact that it is being done in glass is definitely subordinate to what he is doing, but if you know something about the glass, then what has been necessary to achieve that result actually makes it more interesting and informs you better about the work.

Glass art is definitely pigeonholed at the moment. Hopefully that will become less so, and to be honest it should only be a matter of time. It seems that if (as in *Optimism* show at GoMA) work like Tom's and Brenden's (and other people doing really interesting work) is shown in the broader context and is subject to the same level of scrutiny by a broader base of people interested in the visual arts then that can only be a good thing, although it does mean that you have to peddle harder.

*In gaining a broader acceptance our narrower support-base may disappear.*

You might lose the glass collectors, yes that is right. There is that danger, but I think there will always be people working in glass where the medium is the message. There will always be those who are really just demonstrating their skill and their control of that medium. I think that is a great thing, but for people who want to push harder I think you are right, they can basically find themselves in no-man's land.

*Have you noticed a self-referential nature in glass practice?*

Oh yes, as I said before, they are tight as a community. For introspective you can read incestuous as well and that's a danger. But glass artists work together and most work needs at least one person to assist and they all help each other so there is a constant exchange of ideas and support. They do things together. They go to the same workshops and they socialise. It is an enormous support, but you can consider yourself as living in a ghetto perhaps without realising you are the one who drew the circle around yourself.

*What about those things that surround a work that work to contextualise it?*

I guess for a glass artist it is no different to any other artist. People who are interested in the artwork often want to know more about the how/why/where/when of the work. Often their [the viewer's] connections with it are on the most simplistic level – it could be related to a place that they knew very well, or they buy a work because they used to live next door to the artist. There are all kinds of weird things, but undoubtedly people like to know (and this is true right across the visual arts). Just the art object in itself is not enough. They need to know more and markets are no different. In the American market they tend go on about finding out as much as they can about the person and the work. It gives people context for interpretation.

The funny thing is that although some artists are very pointed in the messages they are trying to convey, I would say most of them are very open and are actually very generous with their work in the sense that they don't want to impose an interpretation on people, and art ought to be generous by nature. It shouldn't be a closed shop in terms of its reading. You are always walking that line between giving people a little more depth, a little more context for the work and not putting them in handcuffs in terms of how they can read it. If someone reads a work in a way they enjoy who are we (or the artist) to say, "Well, you're wrong".

*Who are we to limit the work?*

Certainly that is right. Often we have openings when the artists are there and the artists often get back altered interpretations of their own work, images that have never occurred to them. I think it is interesting that it rarely troubles anybody. In fact, it's quite the opposite. They think it is wonderful because the work doesn't have to be anchored to them all the time. Once it goes out it gathers up all these interpretations and the different narratives that it generates. It is out there doing what it is supposed to be doing.

*I am interested in the power you perceive in 'myth-making'?*

It's tricky, particularly in the glass area because it is so young in a way. Really the history is not much more than thirty years. We have grown up with this thing and we have seen it happen. I remember when I was a kid there would be some guy in *Myers* blowing glass sausage dogs or something like that – and that was glass. Really this whole studio glass thing in Australia is very raw. So there is not so much of the myth thing in glass, but obviously for the visual arts it is a big part of the picture. It is that 'single-name fame' thing when you can be referred to by just one name. Then you think well yes, there is a whole story around this.

The funny thing about it is you can see those conversations happening. I have been involved with the *Melbourne Art Fair* for many years. I was on the board and chair for the last couple of years. It is interesting to see (because you are working with the 'high end') a collecting community where almost all communications are in shorthand. If you were from outside that community you would really struggle to keep up with the conversations and this is exactly that 'mythmaking' – the myths are being made, created, accepted, notated and become a given. It also makes it hard for artists to break out and do something different because visually their work becomes part of that myth. The problem is that it can become a brand rather than an artwork. Some have fallen into that trap. You can see that it is not just about consistency; it is about keeping the brand. I suppose the current political term would be staying on message, but then when you find you do have something different to say you find yourself unable to do it.

*What of selection by photograph?*

Sometimes you see extraordinary wonderful or dramatic images of a work and that's 'OK', but there is no doubt that you can make an image look better than the original work, and visa versa. So it can be misleading, but it's particularly true of glass because glass is often all about how you deal with light and of course photographers are past masters at dealing with light, that's their stock-in-trade. You can play some interesting games with those images. I'd hate to be in a position of choosing work based on looking at an image and then putting it all together when it arrived.

The prizes are an interesting story. We had the *Ranamok* here a few months ago and again that it seems to me goes through several stages where there is that anxiety to be seen to be addressing broader issues in the arts. That's reflected in the selection. One of the interesting things there is that you have a piece (I think it was the New Zealand girl who won – the peg screen) made by someone trained in sculpture. There are people coming into glass who were not trained as glass artists. They are picking it up as a medium to express themselves in. She had this really interesting conceptual based work that was all about women left behind during the wars and their domestic chores. I haven't conveyed it all, but it was a really interesting idea. But ultimately all the interest went to the 'beautiful' pieces. (There was a Japanese artist there whose work was the most extraordinarily beautiful thing.) It was the beauty that people were attracted to. It was the beautiful objects that people went for rather than the interesting narratives.

*The selection committee was trying to predict a direction?*

That's right and trying to (if you like) look at work that would broaden the conceptual basis. You got a show where there was some general strength to the conceptual basis that underpinned it. It is always hard when you have a diverse group of twenty-four or so artists. You are not trying to draw the thread between them. You just want each work to be strong in its own right.

*You can have a foot on each bank.*

And basically that works until the river comes up (laughs). You could put yourself in a very difficult position.

When did the Ranamok start – late eighties? It was Maureen Cahill who largely got the thing going with Andy Plummer's involvement and interest and his enthusiasm in the end is what has kept the thing going. It would be interesting to go back through all the catalogues. That is a fantastic aspect about the *Ranamok* – they actually document everything. It would be fascinating to look back in perhaps another ten years time at the thirty or so years of this thing and see how the work changed, but also look at how the selection of the work has changed and whether there was any agenda as to how this was presented. They obviously felt some time ago that if you just picked the twenty best pieces that were available that you would pretty much have the same twenty people each time.

*There was a search for new talent.*

That has been a good thing, but it moves you a bit away from what the prize intended – the fact that someone is new or is attempting something new should be noteworthy in itself.

It is true of any art prize that you actually think it naturally has a hierarchy in it. That is not always the case.

*Do you find yourself categorizing works as they come into this gallery?*

Probably not. The nature of it is that we are representing the artist and working with the artist on a regular basis. Maybe the fact is that you already did that [categorised]. Subliminally you tagged the artist and their practice and you understand where they fit in. Occasionally you get a surprise and somebody is doing something different. Often it is more of a surprise along the lines of – “Wow, that's pushed that along a little further and that's a really beautiful piece”. An infinitesimal difference (as you know) when you look at the work can have a massive impact. It can be a quantum difference. That is, we probably tend to [categorise] but don't think about it that much. I guess that with the painters and the printmakers that you represent you have an understanding of what the perimeters are to the practice and you address them in those terms.

*You absorbed an aesthetic?*

That is probably right and in a way our job is to communicate something about this person and their practice to clients and potential clients. It is long-term representation and we are always interested in seeing artists developing new work. One of the real dilemmas for any artist now days is to keep yourself anchored in work that people will recognise and see continuity. Sometimes a sale can take years and when you think about it people are spending a lot of money. They need to convince themselves and totally embrace the work. You don't want people buying just because they 'think' they like it. There needs to be some passion.

Part of the narrative is the progression of the work too. People keep an eye on that. They like the look of an artist and what they are doing then one day they see exactly the piece that to them expresses everything they felt about the work of that person – the richness they saw in that work and that resonated with them.

That's what makes it fun. There is a bit about the artist, but there is always the predominance of the individual piece and the story it tells.

*Where do you react?*

It is always gut. The intellectual side is what you do afterwards. It would be a sad dry argument if you tried to intellectualise your first response. It's got to be visceral in that you may try to work out what is different about this, what is creating this impact (and that may be part of what you are trying to communicate to your clients) but ultimately you know where their reaction will always be based. That people buy art based on an essay, or on theoretical basis and not much else is a rather pernicious argument. It is really quite unusual. Most buy because they enjoy. It is great to have the work increase in value but it is only an increased in value if you are prepared to sell it. Almost all our clients aren't buying a trading commodity.

*What causes that visceral reaction in you?*

Sometimes it's actually quite impossible to say and that is not a bad thing. There ought to be a bit of mystery. There should be a few veils left. If you could completely rationalise and intellectualise your emotional responses it may be that they are not your emotional responses anymore – you have sucked them dry of meaning. To a certain extent it is enough to know you have a response (that others might not). There are objects that just feel good in your hand. Try and explain why something (even a practical object like the weight of a knife) feels good in your hand. What is a good weight? People could say it's a throwing knife you need this and you need that, but if you just pick something up in your hand and say, 'gee that feels good', you would be really struggling to work out what it was that created that.

*With Judi [Elliott]'s work it was formal elements – like its lovely soft surface.*

It's very architectural in its structures and there are these references to shelters. Then there is the use of colour with basic colour field techniques going on there. Rendering them in glass is really interesting because you can start managing the surfaces in a way that is very hard to do on a canvas or a board.

With Mel Douglas too, it is all about that. The form is an armature on which you manage the surface and make marks in a way that creates movement in that surface. The strength of the fact that they are in glass is that it lets you create the forms that you want, but it also lets you create ambiguity. The thing about Mel's work is that you could probably knock up something that would look very, very similar in clay. If you were really smart you could possibly do it out of papier-mâché. There are a whole lot of things you could play with, but you would never quite get the depth – the surfaces would always be a little too obvious.

*The qualities glass as a material?*

I think it is a fantastic material. I can understand why people are seduced, not just by the glass but also by the making of it because there is a bit of alchemy involved. I always think with clay you are pretty much starting with mud and you end up with dry mud, but the process is a logical one. But to take something and render it liquid, massage it and have it come out and then use these tools on the surfaces where you can have light, or deny it (any light whatsoever), but somehow people will still read it as glass and still read it as a container of light, is a wonderfully seductive thing.

People just love the process too. I have to say kiln forming is not very exciting.

*Its versatility?*

Absolutely. The thing that always comes back is that it is an enormously versatile material. You can make it look like almost anything.

*A ceramicist might say the same thing.*

They probably would. If you were a seriously good glaze technician, but the other thing is that it is very hard to create eight-foot by four-foot of one-inch thick clay piece and suspend it in space. If you look at the technical advances being made in architectural glass and what is now possible - that becomes really interesting. The screen-printing techniques that are now available for glass are really quite extraordinary. That is probably the next step.

The thing that has always pulled glass back (and somehow still informs people) is that it is seen as breakable. In peoples' minds it is still fragile. That possibly holds back its acceptance. 'Lovely, but I couldn't possibly buy that because I have cats.' That may sound superficial, but it happens.

*A paradox - fragile yet they build hundred metre tall structures with it and use it for bullet-proofing.*

And it stops things that would go through steel. On the industrial side you can sandwich it, because it is an easily 'layer-able' material.

*'Fragility' is an element from its continuing history.*

Let's face it, most of the glass art making is using traditional glass and in fairly traditional ways. Ultimately the techniques haven't changed that much. Maybe we are starting to see that cross over into more industrial glass materials. Then we can get some really interesting things going.

*Bullseye is 'industrial'.*

They have been very good. They run workshops to get people into something and then to test it, push it in ways that (Bullseye) never thought would be done. If they fail in that then it is back to the drawing board and see if we can make it do this. Ultimately that does underpin the thing. When glass artists get together they talk about glass. Not 'glass art' but glass – 'that blue is a real problem', or about frits and all the rest of it. Painters very rarely get together and talk about paint.

[Talks of a painter who found a specific material that ideally suited what he was trying to achieve] He has found a material that absolutely suits his practice. He has not found a material and asked, 'what can I do with this?' It sometimes happens with glass artists that it is 'what can I do with this?' rather than 'what am I attempting to achieve and how does this glass fit into it?'

*What about the 'ownership' of glass technique?*

I think you are probably right. There are people who straight-jacket themselves to a certain extent by sticking to a technique, but also they are the ones that developed it. Glass artists are generally pretty good with sharing information. That is again one of the strengths of the community they have built. When people do develop new skills and new techniques they tend to be promulgated fairly quickly. Often they will share them quite readily in workshops. The danger is of course (if your work is very technically based) it could be easily plagiarised, but the reality is that it does not happen very much at all. Partly it is they respect the person who is doing it. Then you don't want to be seen as the person who is plagiarising either and everyone knows what everyone else is up to. So people keep leapfrogging. People develop something and someone takes it away and does something a little different with it and moves it to the next level. It is not at all like some of the ceramicists who will develop a glaze, but take the secret of that glaze to the grave with them.

That is why things move so quickly in glass. It is because people share information very readily. It is interesting too that it is local community based. The Americans were very impressed with the Australian work and they struggle with it sometimes because they haven't got a reference. They can't say it is just like so and so. But why does it have to be like someone else's work for it to be good? It does not have to be like something else, in fact actually quite the opposite. When we first started taking work to America people were quite blown away with how different it was and I guess in a way how innovative (possibly code for I haven't seen it before). It's new to them.

*The reputation of Australian glassmakers overseas?*

I think it is very strong. It is probably stronger than it is in Australia. Again it is an interesting conundrum that is being created as we have quite a small market here. The Australian artists have felt it necessary to address the international market (Europe and the States mostly). Our skills based training here is extraordinarily good. Again our sense of community is good, but there is a real rigor to how these things are made and how the science of what we are doing is understood. The thing that I really enjoyed when I first started taking works over was I found the American work very noisy, very boisterous and screaming for attention. The Australian work sat there and in fact people would come into the stand and say "I just want to stay here, I need a little bit of a rest" (from the visual carnival going on outside). If there is one message that comes across very strongly it is that. No, maybe two. The Americans love Australians. I think Americans would like to be Australians, but they still want to be able to go down to a hardware store at two in the morning for some bizarre reason. They admire Australians and they admire Australian artists. A lot of their collectors have got to know Australian artists very well and they like the nature of the people who are doing the work as well as the work itself. They see those two linked quite strongly. There is a rigor, but there is also calmness. There is intent, a seriousness of purpose and a depth that sometimes maybe a little bit lacking in some of their own work. It is interesting because you are trying to read the product of somebody else's culture and that can be really hard, but I think they enjoy. It's a welcome break for them.