

Abridged interview with Wayne Pearson: 12/04/06

Subject: Australian kiln glass with specific reference to 'style' and glass artists Deb Cocks, Warren Langley, Jessica Loughlin and Richard Whiteley

*At the time of this interview Frank Howarth was Director, Australian Museum, Sydney as well as a collector of studio glass.*

I collect specifically contemporary Australian and New Zealand glass (with a couple of minor exceptions for odd reasons).

*Why collect glass?*

I get asked that question quite a few times and there is no logically coherent answer. The factors might be that my grandfather was a very keen opal collector and gemmologist. I went on a few trips with him. I did geology at university, though never worked as a geologist. I was more interested in what scientists do than the science itself, more 'science in society' than geology. Certainly at some ends of geology you are working with what is effectively glass.

There was a lovely experiment that one of our lecturers did in first year geology when he was talking about a phenomenon called 'rheid flow', which is to say rock under sufficient temperature and pressure will behave like a glass and flow like a viscous liquid. While he was talking to us he had this handful of silly-putty, which if you hit it with a hammer shatters, but if it just sits there it flattens out and flows as a viscous liquid. It is quite an interesting substance. Glass will do that.

Then somebody pointed out that sufficiently old glass in windows is fatter at the bottom. That I found fascinating. Then there's the character of glass, the mix of transparency, surface texture and colour. All those things it can do. You can cast it. You can grind it. It is fascinating. It was the sum total of that and then some indefinable aesthetic.

It wasn't a series of causal linkages. These are influences in my background. It may be a cultural predisposition, or something like that. The other thing I should mention (because it was quite influential) was Maureen Cahill at the Glass Artists Gallery (I first started going there when the Glass Artists Gallery was still in Paddington).

*What criteria do you use to evaluate glasswork?*

It has to have a personal appeal. I am absolutely not attempting to build the perfect, definitive representational collection. One of the discussions I've had with a couple of people is that it is interesting coming in here and seeing how a museum builds a collection. The drivers for that can be (and usually are) quite different from a collector. In fact before I had anything to do with museums I heard Robert [Bell] at one of the glass conferences, (probably Ausglass) talking about that issue. It was really obvious when I got here [Australian Museum] where we make day-to-day decisions about whether to acquire something, or de-access it.

I have met an Australian collector who was after the 'perfection of the collection'. That was what was important to him, rather than the individual parts.

*Like stamp collecting?*

Yes. It's not that from my point of view. I don't consciously sit down and think 'themes', although I have collected things that are of less interest to me now. You run out of room.

I heard a talk at the Museums Australia Conference the year before last where a woman from Germany was talking about collections. She mentioned some guy whose rule for collecting is that he would never own more than one hundred works. So if after he buys the one hundred he then wants another, he first has to dispose of one. I am pretty close to that point and I think there are things I will probably give to Wagga City Gallery because they are of less interest now than they might have been when I got them.

*Are you interested in a narrative in the work?*

It's probably not as logical as that, just a mix of aesthetic appeal. Interestingly I have a Deb Cocks' plate, which is really beautiful. (I don't have one of her later, but less plate-like works.) I still like the plate. It is a beautiful work, but it does not have the appeal now that it had.

I'm now interested in less 'form-like' things. I bought a student work from Maureen's show that was on just after Christmas. It was by a woman, I think she was from Adelaide, the work was a steel grate with glass. It's sensational. As soon as I walked in I thought it was fantastic. It is conceptually so different.

I had a session the other day. I am on an *Object* forum and we had this discussion about risk taking: that students will take more risks because they don't have a reputation to lose. I really like that. I find there is a convergence that happens to a lot of people after they get out of university. They get onto a path.

*This is getting into signature style. Do you want to see a recognizable pattern to a person's work?*

There are very strong pros and cons. There are some people I like where I can see an evolution and Richard [Whiteley] would be one where there is a very nice evolution of style. I can pick Richard's work, but it is changing and I really like that. I like new. I like change. I'm not into stasis.

There are others, Warren [Langley] is a little bit more that way, where they are a little less changing in style and there are others like Deb who have some parallel styles. Then there are some who for ages got stuck in a groove for whatever reason (that is value laden, but) keep doing the same thing. I think for a long time Ben and Kathy Edols were like that although their recent forms are moving on a bit.

There are all sorts of factors. If you're successful can you afford to take a risk? Start doing things that are digressing.

*There is a commercial imperative.*

Absolutely. I was in Darwin for a meeting (part of the Darwin Festival). The aboriginal communities all bring work into the galleries. If you have the name and you work in a certain style they sell. They sell in an instant. There was one artist where Janet Homes a Court bought the whole gallery before the show even opened. She bought the whole collection.

There are others who are trying to be more radical. Some worked and some didn't, but not one of them sold. That is the market up there.

*You produce a 'line'?*

If that is the same with your artwork, you can get caught in a groove. Then there's a Brian Hirst. Brian is a bit cunning. He runs a very good studio line, but he runs other things as well.

Creativity, change and risk taking. Yes, it hampers shifting onto something new. It is exactly the same in architecture, or music, or painting. You can see people who do the same thing repeatedly.

*When you talked about Richard you implied a journey. Is that possible within a signature style.*

Yes. That evolution is nice, because there is an element of surprise. I know if I go to see Richard's work it will be a bit different. I will pick it, but it will be different. For a long time I would walk into Ranamok and say, "Oh yes, that's Ben and Kathy doing the same thing again" or "Mark doing the same thing again". It got somewhere near a signature style that was almost too definitive.

*A cliché?*

Yes. There's a risk of morphing into a cliché. It's somewhere between 'on a good thing, stick to it' and 'trapped' – too much of a risk to move beyond. That must always be a drama for people.

*You can work within a theme (or approach), yet go quite deeply.*

That's true, but there is a fine line there between taking a theme and working it to its maximum potential, and working it to death. It is a diminishing return. It must be very hard.

I was talking about this in terms of architecture the other day. Take Glenn Murcutt. I had been with some friends up to Harry Siedler's *Rose Siedler's House*. (Harry was like this and Glenn certainly is.) If you want a house by him, you say, "Glenn design me a house". You don't say, "Glenn design me a house that looks like this". He will then decide whether to design you a house, but you won't have much say in what it is going to look like, whereas to other less well known architects you can give a narrow brief.

*If signature style becomes a closed loop?*

If it is truly closed, but using the architecture analogy again and ask what are the influences on signature style. It might be the person's own evolving aesthetic. It might be formal concerns. I can't remember his name, but he went off to Japan and worked for a year and came back and was doing very different things strongly influenced by Japanese aesthetic and to some degree Japanese technique.

It is a cultural landscape. Part of the loop was being immersed in a different cultural landscape. It could be a number of factors, but if all of those factors close off and the only influence you have is commercial success for instance, then you risk stagnating. You keep producing what the market wants, and the market will buy it. There is a feedback loop there. If the market stops buying and you haven't experimented you're stuck. No matter whether you are making glass, or making cars – you're caught if you don't ever do anything else.

I want to be surprised. I want to see something different.

*You like to see development in an artist's work?*

Yes. You can get a linearity that is evolving. Sometimes you get quantum shifts and it might be that trip to Japan, or something that creates the big change.

*Do you enjoy relationship with the artist through the object?*

Yes. Most of the artists I've met. I know Richard and I see him here and there. I've met Warren.

*I meant rather the relationship that is via those pieces.*

Oh yes. They are mediating the relationship very much. Certainly the fact that something doesn't change will lead me to make some judgment about that person. If I see they are making the same thing forever, I will make the judgment that they are not open to new ideas, that they are either stuck in a creative groove, or they are a slave to the market, or all of the above. Maybe they are striving for perfection in a very narrow frame of reference, but because I personally need change, I won't stay in a job for too long if it's all steady as you go. I need that sort of stimulus in all sorts of other places as well.

*Change and surprise can be part of the quality of glass.*

There was a work in the design awards show at *Object*. (The woman who won it this year was one of Richard's students [Janice Vitkovsky].) She uses Giles Bettison's technique and when you bring your eyes down and look through it, you are surprised. It was the surprising quality of glass. What I really liked about it was that she took a very old technique and did something that is far more creative than Giles has been doing.

Giles has been using a very old technique beautifully executed, but in a relatively traditional way. She's taken it and applied it in a way that is very different – that really works. There was a layer of surprise there that I thought was really great. Yes that is part of the quality of glass.

You can be surprised in that sense, surprised at lots of levels. Glass can masquerade as a ceramic if it wants to. It can do all sorts of other things.

*Do you see qualities that mark Australian glass?*

My perception has shifted a bit. In the late 80's and early 90's my perception was that Australian glass was very adventurous. It tended to be smaller in scale because we didn't have the huge furnaces. You didn't get someone like the Czechoslovaks doing huge casts. I think that has changed. I look through the glass magazines and books and I think we are getting less adventurous, which is one reason I like the student shows. The 'name' makers are now such names. The market in Australia is pretty small and there is almost an aesthetic saturation.

We have a work here in the museum by Zeppo. Zep was a student at Sydney College of the Arts and her incredible animal cloak based around an owl is on show here at the museum. It is a beautiful mix, art inspired by natural history. It is adventurous, but the main body of Australian glass art...

*is driven by?*

a combination of market and institutional curators. My perception was that the industry went through a literal and a creative boom in the 90's, got known on the international

scene and has reached capacity. It is hard for people to edge in with something new and different.

Look at some of the international things. There is too much blown that looks blown. There is too much fairly orthodox cast. I bought a work from last year's Ranamok show. It's the little gun, the hand grenade and the snails. It's conceptually different, but there are probably not many people willing to buy it.

*Do you recognize an Australian style?*

Put it that way, no.

*But you are talking as if there is such a thing as individual signature style.*

Absolutely.

*Then talking about these selected artists, starting with Richard Whiteley.*

It is a self-fulfilling loop. I recognize his style because I recognize his style. I like the combination of cast and polish. I like the translucency and colour. He uses colour beautifully. He uses form beautifully. I like the one in *Object*, the one I've got. The way he used those old industrial moulds, took those as a core and he has worked on from that. I like the chunkiness and the texture of the work. It is all those things.

*Formal qualities?*

Yes, form. Colour and such comes under that. It's a direct aesthetic appeal based on the visual and tactile. It's not based on me sitting down and talking Richard through his story about why he is doing that. It is not at all like that. He just happens to produce things I find aesthetically very appealing.

They are technically very good, aesthetically extremely good, and creatively extremely good. One of the things I often find with student works is that they can be very high on the creativity and they lose out on the technical. They just don't have it on the technical.

But Richard has both, exquisitely produced, technically as well as aesthetically, a really good blending.

In fact with all four artists you have mention I wouldn't fault on a technical front.

*Do you assume a personality in Richard's work?*

Only in that it evolves. I assume a personality that welcomes change and evolution and the gestural. I would contrast with Deb's 'drawing on things'. If I assumed a personality I would say this person is probably more a detail person than Richard.

*What do you think is driving Deb's work?*

It has more literal concerns, because it is representative – pictures on works, but the early works (one of which I have) are more representative – fruit and things, more orthodox. Latter on the figures become more tortured. There is more 'sword and sorcery' going on. The little figures she cast in a box [Wagga glass collection] – there is a 'story-teller' in there in a more literal sense than there would be for Richard. Yes, quite a strong narrative.

*The glass is a surface upon which she works?*

Yes, figuratively and literally. My guess is that it is a canvas, particularly the plates. They are all the same shaped plates.

Warren is more akin to Richard in the scale. His work has never wildly appealed to me. It is a strong, bright use of colour, the texture of the glass – it's just a personal aesthetic thing, but it is very much a signature style.

*When you bought Deb's work what appealed to you?*

It was a show at the Glass Artists Gallery. Here was someone who was exploding onto the stage, probably influenced from talking to her, but as I said before one of the works I will probably donate to one of the galleries, because I've moved on from the appeal of her work into much less representational work. There have been exceptions to that but more towards the 'hand-grenades', or the 'blobs'. Deb's work is too neat. It is like a Mozart symphony whereas I'm into twentieth century music. Using a musical analogy, Deb is in the classics and I'd put Warren well into the big romantics and I'd put Richard into the minimalists where there are fewer notes.

*What would you wish others to feel when they saw your collection?*

Probably that it is diverse and there is an element of challenge. There are things in there that are not aesthetically easy. My partner is more into paintings and it's either completely abstract, or it is the rough end of impressionism, but they're not comfortable works in a sense that Mozart is a comfortable thing to listen to. They're much more certainly in the visual arts, much more atonal. The glass I have ranges right through. If you put it all together, people would say, "I can't pick a theme, or style running through this".

*The theme is excitement?*

Yes and change and difference – rather than stasis. There is no sense of convergence.

*Qualities of glass.*

Yes, absolutely and that is one of the things I like. You can make a cast of a gun, or you can have a big blob of glass that looks like water, or you can have Richard's work.

That reflects what I dislike about people being static and predictable – glass is ambiguous and fluid.

*You are attracted to the glass in the way you are attracted to the artists.*

That's true.