

At the time of this interview Deb Jones was studio designer at the Glass Studio at the JamFactory



Deb Jones
Grey Pillow
 2003
 cast lead crystal
 37 x 33 x 9 cm

I can call myself anything at any time. Since I trained as a glass blower that has made it very easy for me to say what I am, even though I don't do it much anymore. When you say you're an artist that's big and it doesn't help a lot of people in understanding what that really means. I was working as a glass blower for quite a few years and I started saying I was a glass blower.

You don't get asked often, but it is an easy thing to say and it has a place. It is more of the tradesperson than saying you are an artist. I find that with saying you are an artist (or even in scenarios where people 'meet the artist') I don't love the response I get. Recently working for a council with a public lighting project for example, there were a lot of people I worked with on the Board in that project. Some of those people had a very negative attitude to artists. That was the out-dated notion of an artist as 'irresponsible', 'take the money', 'get up late' – and that's where you start. You then have to prove to them you are not like that. That's where I started and it was quite a difficult process.

Often if you are working with an architect, or a builder and they want you on board – that's fine. Sometimes if you are working with a broader team and there are people who don't want you on board – that makes it difficult (that was the situation here). It is a situation of ignorance. I consider myself a businessperson, an artist, and a tradesperson, and to have people with that perception of 'an artist' was really difficult.

Having said that, it is not a big deal. When I worked with *Hansen and Yuncken*, which is a big building company here [SA], they were fantastic. They were a bunch of blokes where you would think, if I was going run into narrow mindedness it would be there, but not at all. They treated me like any other tradesperson and were absolutely sensational to work with. They thought of me as 'the artist' in that circumstance, but I

do try to avoid it because of the times I run into the idea that an artist is not going to be good at business, or they are not going to be reliable.

Pragmatic and down to earth.

That's me.

Why glass?

That's easy. I was studying graphics at art school and I did some printmaking and I worked with a guy called Peter Herel, who is a Czech printmaker. He does very obscure, bizarre etchings. He was my teacher for four years and a fantastic man. I was concept driven and that coincided with being at the Canberra School of Art and meeting people who worked in the glass area. I had an idea I wanted to make out of glass and that is the reason I jumped over and did a post-graduate in the glass studio.

It was all clear glass. It was that you could float images on glass – have them float because of the transparent material that it is. It grew out of that. It was years ago and in retrospect it may have been a flimsy concept. (Laughs) That's what got me into glass. I got in there and I did it for a year as a post-graduate, and then thought that if I wanted to continue with this material (and it is a great material), I needed to skill-up really fast. I had done years of art training, but I didn't have any technical experience in glass. I needed to fast track that. That's when I came here [JamFactory].

It's a material very demanding of technique?

It is. I still work in quite a few materials and I think it is a demanding material.

You would want more than transparency to take it on, because Perspex would give you transparency.

I am a believer in good materials. All materials have their own intrinsic quality and they carry their own weight. You have to use materials acknowledging that. You are right it is more than transparency, but I would never compare Perspex and glass for example. They may have some of the same qualities, but of course they have so many different qualities.

When I come to my cast glass (which is the area it is best to talk about), it is the physics of the colour (depth equals colour saturation), and it's that access to the internal of solid glass, and it is light and transparency. When I do my cast work I am looking at real fundamentals within the glass. It is different when I am doing my concept driven work. There I go into an idea hand in hand with the glass. There I am almost being pragmatic in the way I approach it. I like its function and its reason for existence to determine what it is going to be. In the cast the material determines what it is going to be.

I don't know if you know the piece I did as a square with a half sphere in the back. I liked it because although it was formal in its structure the end result wasn't very formal – weird. What happen because I used an extremely dark grey, here this image is very blurry. Everyone calls it 'moon in a box'. So it became something else.

I did one, which was lighter in colour and it was very formal. That one was in a gaffer light grey I think and you could actually see the cube and the sphere together. I quite like that one. It was purely about thickness giving colour, but it was lacking a little poetry. If something is too straight and formal then I find myself missing the poetry. So I recast it thinking it was not quite right and when I recast it in a darker glass, instead of being able to see this form you could only see this blurred image. That seemed to work better.

That body of work was called *Emotional Science*. It was kind of using the science of the glass, but I was definitely aiming for an emotional response. I do bounce a little back and forth between interest in that straight formal thing (the science of the glass), then it is that thing of not having the poetry I need. I seem to do that a bit trying to find that balance.

I am not a fan of strong representation, because I look at it and that's it for me. I lot of figurative paintings I don't want around me so much, because I don't go somewhere with them. But then again I don't believe I said that because there are two photos I have just bought which I love. One is of a cement factory near where I live.

Your question asked does the unexpected, or accident play a part in my work and I would have said no, (laughs) but I reckon in this piece it probably did. So there you go. In general I usually know what I am heading.

Your path took you through design and then skills development.

But then you don't realise what effect that is going to have on your understanding of the material and your practice. I didn't understand. What I think happens when you do delve into a material you change the way you think about the material. You learn and you become very sympathetic to the material. You think about the material in a deep way. That's very different to having an idea and then grabbing whatever it takes to take that idea to reality. It is almost like making something with someone else. When you make something with someone else you can't have that exact thing [your concept], that is if you are going to let them have any say.

The benefit is you end up somewhere new.

And that's what I love. It is often why I work with other people so closely. At *Blue Pony* [Adelaide artists' studio] we made a definite decision to make it a glass studio. I was there for ten years and it was great, but going into this new studio [*Gate 8*] I just think we wanted to be broader. We wanted to have broader conversations. We wanted to listen to other people having conversations about other things and now with Lauren there we talk about contemporary jewellery. I would never have those conversations, but now I'm quite opinionated. (Laughs)

So that is great. It comes with its own problems in terms of a studio because when we were at *the Pony* we were a glass studio. We had glass equipment. It was very clean and easy to work out. It was worth a similar amount to each person who was in there. That's like anything you minimise. It is cleaner and clearer in what you do, but hey that's life.

Glass seems to have developed as a self-referential sub-culture.

They probably do that in other areas too. I probably do it less, because I have never thought of myself as a glass artist. I have thought of myself as a maker – whether it's building a house, or anything. I'll make anything. It doesn't matter. Then somewhere along the line I got involved in glass and it is a beautiful community to be involved in. It is sometimes comforting and handy to have an area you relate to rather than being set adrift.

I feel I don't know a lot about visual arts practitioners. Some are my mates. They often find it amazing when they come into the glass community to see the support. I mean we make each other's work. There are great things about that. I don't actually make that many glass things (laughs), but I link in with that community more than anywhere else.

It is good to get up and look out. We always encourage the young people here [JamFactory] to look at everything being made and designed, especially outside their material. I think more exciting things happen if you let yourself go.

What about language?

When I read that question I thought you were talking about a visual language as opposed to a spoken language.

You move across all sorts of areas.

I would say you are very right there. I do. I just move around. It also depends on who I am working with in a project, because I have done quite a few projects with other people and that easily takes things in other directions.

You mentioned sharing before.

Sometimes it is a relief just working by yourself. I think that is where I am at right now, only because I have just done a big period of working with other people. But it is very exciting working with one or two people that you love to work with. Then there is the joy of getting together and ending up in a place you never thought you would end up. A place you could never end up at by yourself.

And working alone?

It's to do with scale. When you are working on something that is public and large, it takes quite a few people to pull it off, as opposed to the piece I am doing now. It's small [gestures the size of a small soccer ball] and only related to me. I am starting to work towards a show for Megan Bottari [*Tour De Force. In case of emergency break glass*]. She is curating a glass show that is going to be on next year. She does *Glass Central* (blog). There is myself, Tom [Moore], Tim Horn, Nick Folland and Jacqueline Gropp. She has picked a group of people who make glass sculpture by looking at people who are a bit outside the square.

What does working small give you?

Manageability, but with the piece I am working on at the moment (I was saying that I was missing a bit of the poetry in my work and I felt that. Again I swing back and forth between the poetry and the more formal) is working from a quote (I think it is Walcott)

and it is, “Ten minutes is perhaps the longest silence or perfection lasts”. That is a nice line.

Often I read lines, or I think of lines. They stick with me for a while and then work will come out of it. That was interesting when I read the question *Are titles important*, and I wrote, yes they are, because they come my way and sometimes it is years before the work comes out.

They are springboards?

Yes. I had a show called *Similar Existence* in Canberra about five years ago and once you start thinking about those words you start seeing everything through those words as you look at life. That is the way my brain seems to work. Work will develop out of that.

The titles are open?

I guess they are. I don't know if you have seen my piece called *Starting to Understand*, that's like that. *Starting to Understand* was very much about that notion of me working with the material and trying to get the concept and the material working hand in hand. That was figuring out that difference of working hand in hand with the material as opposed to just using the material.

To that question of how I classify myself and if it was important – my response was, in terms of my artwork, my passion to become a well know social artist has diminished and now professionalism and classifications are someone else's business. (Laughs) It is interesting that when you are younger you worry about how you are going to fit in, you get older and pffff! If they want to fit me in, let them.

Sometimes you can box yourself in.

That's right. You have to make sure your not thinking you are free when you are not. You have to keep checking yourself and sometimes you have to be careful what you wish for.

And what the hell did I know about being an artist as a kid growing up in country New South Wales. I decided I wanted to be an artist – like I knew what that meant! So you slowly figure it out over the years (just by being it) – what it is to you to be an artist and how to feel comfortable with the fact that you are an artist.

Sometimes if I feel I'm getting a 'bit boxed', I have to realise I am in total control of that and 'unbox' myself. (Laughs) I think about it a lot now as someone who is responsible for helping to train a very small group of young people. We have five people here and I think about that more now that I have a direct influence on people.

Are there other areas where you have responses similar to those you have with your work?

I know I do. I relate to buildings and built structures and I have a friend who is an artist and who works on notions of construction and constructing. I wouldn't say it is the same response, but I certainly get overexcited. Very engaged. I remember going to

see a Rothko show (but that is an easy thing to see). Possibly to some of Amish Kapour's amazing work.

Overwhelming emotional responses to glass works?

I think you can, but Oh God, I wouldn't go that far as to sat that with my own work.
(Laughs)

I was thinking of Jess [Loughlin] and landscapes.

Yes, when she goes out into those open spaces (which she does regularly). I think there is a great term in Portuguese, which I tried to learn once but failed. It refers to the feeling you get when you look at the ocean. That loving, longing, lost feeling, joyous and sad at the same time. That's a feeling that I would like in my work.

After you have made the work do people react to it differently to you?

Often I don't get to see it, but once I remember Gab Bisetto was looking at this piece in the studio and she said it had made her feel an emotional response. I said that was good, because that is what I was trying and hoping for and she said, "Really? Is that what you were hoping for?" (laughs) That made me happy, because often you don't get to hear what people say. Usually work is gone, or in the studio. I do get to hear Jess [Loughlin] thinks.

Do responses surprise you?

I think they are pretty on target usually. It is not confusing work though, is it? Lately I have been into colour saturation and colour density. That is enough to keep me going for a while.

Coming back to work made after a time does your reaction shift?

Usually if I think it is quite good when I make it, then I will think it's quite good later. If I am not happy with it, it is rare that I will find it in a couple of years and say it wasn't too bad. That is different for other people. Jess just had that show with some old work in it and she was happily surprised by some of the pieces, but she is very harsh on technique with herself and her work. I am not. As long as there is nothing irritating what I am trying to get at, I don't mind technique. I have had pieces crack and I have still loved them. It takes Jess time to get over technical disappointment and be able to see that the piece is actually quite good.

I try not to get too involved with technique. I am completely opposite to Jess in that regard. She is a fantastic technician. I try to simplify the idea and the making process.

You mentioned scale earlier?

I do love working large. I really do. I like special concepts. But it is hard. I mean glass and large. You can do some interesting stuff in flat glass and I'm thinking of the piece that Jess and I made that was a mirror.

In a passage between buildings?

Yes. I found that really interesting, but again that was a huge thing to do unfunded and a huge thing to set up. I don't know how much scaffolding was under that mirror – heaps. It was great fun. Really worthwhile, but you just can't do that thing all of the time.

What about the plinth?

I like being off the plinth. It is the limitations of cast glass. I would love to make them huge and I definitely would if it was manageable, but it is not. I think that is why I don't do that all the time because I look over there and go, I want to build something big. If you have been to the studio you will see I am building a room for the sandblaster and I am going to make the biggest shadow-board in the southern hemisphere here. I can get just as much thrill out of that. It has to be for a good purpose.

Tim Edwards once asked does everything have to be art to you and I said, "I guess so". (Laughs) Everything has to turn into art, but I think that is a good way to end up with a good-looking world and a thoughtful world and a functional world – all of those things thrown-in together.

An aesthetic response?

It is more than a response. It's an aesthetic life really. We went to a guy's place today to deliver a chandelier we made. He is an artist and his wife an artist and walking into their apartment was like walking into heaven – beautiful materials, beautiful attention to details, beautiful old things that they had found. Of course in the same area where we live at the moment we have this hideous development with these developers making this cheap, high-rise shit. To live in a world where there is more attention to materials and aesthetics has to be a better world. It's also about space and how space effects the way we live and feel and the way we move and function. I get cranky if things are set up badly. I like redesigning workshops and spaces so they will function. Some people will walk around something for years. I find that amazing. "Well, maybe you should chop the end of that bench and your space would work so much better" – "Hey I will do it for you now". (Laughs)

Refers me to conference publication *Open House* as documenting her thoughts on concept work.