

Abridged interview with Wayne Pearson: 14/03/06

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 Jan Karras was owner and director of Raglan Gallery*

*What led you to be involved with glass?*

I was a painter and an illustrator. My mother had a shop and people were always running off and not paying the rent, so I started working there. Diogenes, one of the potters I knew, asked me if I wanted some pots for the window. I had a very good window area. Warren [Langley] was the first glass artist I exhibited. It started there.

I had no intention of having a gallery. I had a workspace, but slowly the workspace grew smaller and the gallery area grew. That was 23-24 years ago.

*So 23 years ago your mother offered you a shop?*

Yes. And then I opened here in Manly, the first gallery was right on the beachfront. I have been in this gallery for 18 years. So it was not long after (a couple of years) I opened here.

I was interested in glass. I liked Warren's work. I knew that he was working here in Manly. There was an old bakery or something. He took it over as his first studio.

*What attracted you to the glass?*

It was the colour and the size of works that he was doing. I have kept some of his earlier work – blown pieces. He was just entering local shows (like the Warringah Art Prize) and he was starting to move more into glass.

*You were doing enamel on the glass?*

Yes. I was actually doing designs and they were silk screened on glass. I was making screens. I think that is when I started to become interested in glass as well, working on it in a transparent way, but thinking that the design was where you could not see through. You had to be able to pick up the glass and look at it and not be able to see through it. You had to be able to see the design. It made you think in a different way about glass.

*What was exhibited in the gallery?*

There was some very large work and some small. It was glass and ceramics mostly. I started with Diogenese Farase work. He was doing some incredible ceramics. I think because it was a large area I tended to be more interested in larger work.

*Large pieces in glass would not have been common.*

No – and I was probably one of the first to show glass and ceramics with painting. A lot of the artists were horrified.

*They saw glass as...?*

Craft. I had a few battles in the beginning. There is much more work in making a piece of glass, or porcelain ceramic, than there is in a painting. There should be mutual respect.

*Because of the technique required?*

Yes, and thought. I don't see a great deal of difference in the difficulty of thinking about a painting, or thinking about a piece of glass.

I was working in all sorts of jobs in illustrating. I was doing very commercial things like Caterpillar Tractors of America. You never knew what you were going to be asked to put on glass.

*When you see a work, how do you evaluate it?*

As far as being in the gallery goes I have to be attracted. If I am not, there is no way I can interest anyone that comes in. Yes - enjoyment. I get very excited when I find new work. I think there is a lot of talent out there. Australian glass particularly has come a long way. I think it is exciting.

*Are there unique things that glass will do as a material?*

Yes, I think so. I am being accused regularly of turning this into a glass gallery. I just find it very interesting and I do get excited about it. I like the different textures that you can get with glass. You can have a very delicate form of glass, or you can have a very strong statement.

*Is it important for an artist's work to be recognisable?*

Yes in a way. I have one artist that I represent overseas and he is continually giving me bits and pieces; one style, then another style, then another and I think it confuses people. I think they need to see some continuation of his idea. It helps. The same applies to all forms – paintings, as well. If [makers] jump from one thing to another, they are not really following something through, whereas, if they work on an idea and develop that idea, there is more worth in that.

They probably discover a lot more than if they just touch the surface and say, "Right, that is it, now for something else". Working like that they lose a lot on the way. It sometimes will lead on to something else. I know it is a vicious circle because people have to earn a living to be able to do one off work. That is a lot of the problem.

*Commercial imperative is a needy thing? You feel you have to keep producing 'those ones' because they sell?*

Yes. That is not good. You flood the market with something and there is no more interest.

*Warren Langley?*

He puts a lot of thought into his work. I find him very interesting to listen to when he is talking about his work. That gives you more of insight into what he is trying to achieve.

*A story-teller?*

Yes. This is interesting for people. A lot of people want to know what the artist is trying to achieve. What they are thinking about. What they are feeling.

*What about the way he approaches his work?*

He works quickly. I have often heard him say that his is not the traditional way of working with glass. He goes for general effect, rather than being nice and gentle. It's boom! It's the same with his light. It is strung between trees, gullies, across water. Even though the lighting can be quite delicate, it's still a bold statement.

*Richard Whiteley?*

I like the solid look of his work. It reminds me of buildings – when you walk through buildings looking at different shapes and colours that come through.

It does not remind me of landscape, although I suppose if you thought about it some of the colours might. His work reminds me more of something solid like a building – interesting angles that you get.

Richard is making form with the glass. You can walk through his forms. He has the scale, but not massive. Richard's are solid. You want to see what is going on in the form, whereas I think Warren's confront you – are in your face.

*You know Deb Cocks?*

Yes. I own two of Deb's pieces. I love the humour she brings to her work. There is always a story, or you can make a story in her work.

*Where do those stories come from?*

Where she lives – looking after house and family and out in the bush. She picks pieces from her surroundings – fish keep coming back all the time.

I really like her work. It is something different. She keeps coming up with these different approaches in her range of imagery – though using the same technique.

*The fourth one in the group is Jessica Loughlin?*

Yes. I don't think fine is the right word, but that is what I think about when I see her work; very fine – 'refined' is a better word. I recognise her work because it is so well executed, and to me it reveals a landscape – like still water, or very calm scenery. Yes, very calm. Makes me think of somewhere at night, or evening when you are looking out on water, or stillness. That is just what I see. I have only met Jessica a couple of times. I don't know where she is coming from.

They are all very different . This is Australian work, isn't it? I have been dealing with shows for twelve years now in America and you see a lot of difference, but Australian glass has its own feel. I think Australians are not frightened to come up with a new idea. There is quite a lot of very colourful glass. We noticed this the first year doing the show in London. [In those shows] their glass was a lot more subdued. People would walk to the Australian gallery and be dazzled.

I think it is influenced a lot by the landscape and the strange thing is (I am side-tracking here) the English when they come here buy colourful pieces. The colour must attract.

*What aspects of Warren's personality come through?*

He is always going to tackle something new. He will jump in. When you see the couple of really large pieces that I have here. I often think of his work in the corporate situations, where the works make an impact when you come into an office. That scale suits a certain market – the corporate market.

*That exuberance, confidence is Warren?*

Yes. He has been around many years and he has tackled many things, but he is still tackling his projects.

*Is there any particular moment in glass when something dazzled you?*

I was doing a show in New York and I had met these collectors. I had known them for a few years. I met them in Chicago and when I was in New York. They invited me to their home and they had Chilhuli's incredible pieces. I think that was before I had seen his work here.

To actually see his work – I had seen it at shows – but it was such an impact to see the work in somebody's home. That comes to mind. It is the forms also; the movement in the work I find interesting. It is not only the colour. It is the form and movement going through his work. You can have colour just in a flat slab of glass on a wall, but it is not the same thing as seeing through the glass.

*Glass has life?*

I would say life. It is not just the light through it. It is the form. It is what glass is as a form. What can be done with it.

*Do you see a driving force for these Australian studio glass artists?*

Yes, particularly with somebody like Deb Cocks. If she was living in a cold country (a very different atmosphere) her work would be entirely different. She is one in particular who is very influenced by her surroundings and probably being in a family situation. She is locked in a way to those surroundings.

Warren is influenced a lot by the country – by the colour. I would not say that so much with Richard, probably not as much as the others, but I feel that his colours and his combinations of colours seem to be Australian.

It is something that comes from being here in Australia. We have a different way of developing glass. It is a lot more casual to start with. I don't think Australian artists feel as restricted. I don't think we have got any 'time' factor – generations of Australians working with glass. Most of the young ones jump in. They don't have to conform to what is known to be 'Australian work'. Back in Italy they have certain limitations – traditions. In Japan we see that with ceramics – all very traditional.

We are a young country and it is probably the attitude that comes through with a lot of the art that comes out of here.

I kept [this gallery as] all Australian work, because I think we are doing some fantastic things. I would like people to know what is happening here. I get excited about certain pieces and it is a great boost when someone else thinks they are wonderful too. It

sounds stupid, but if somebody comes in and really likes something that gives me a great charge. That they really react to the work is fantastic.