

At the time of this interview Peter Kolliner was the owner of Kirra Galleries

Peter starts by showing works within his collection. He shows an Emile Galle glass piece given to him as inheritance from a governess who saved him from the Nazis in WWII. After his family fled communist Hungary it is one of the few things he has from that period in his life. He says he lost many pieces in the collapsed of a cabinet, but managed to have that particular piece completely reconstructed from its fragments.

How would you describe your collection?

Eclectic. First of all there were a lot of works of French masters that once existed, but now don't. They broke in that cabinet catastrophe. They were all bought before I found myself in the Kirra [glass gallery] business. Then again by happenstance I fell into the modern glass world. I started having a liking for glass. I found myself in *Distelfink* [founded as a craft gallery in seventies, but turned to glass because it produced higher monetary turnover than other media]. This was a suburban gallery run by four ladies. It was their thing. Their husbands were well to do. They held exhibitions and that's where I met Tony Hanning. Perhaps I also met Richard Morell there.

I was driving to work one day, I past a shop and saw that it featured glass. There was a perfume bottle made by Richard and it cost me all of forty-seven dollars (he doesn't make perfume bottles anymore) – an exquisite piece of work. The more I saw of glass the more I liked it.

I had a dog and two kids and we use to walk the dog. We met a girl (about eighteen years old) who used to walk her dog. It was Mandy Loudon and she became our babysitter. She was casting about for what to do at university and liked our glass collection. So we encouraged her and she did a course at Monash in glass. In her final year she needed a commissioned piece, so we commissioned her to make a Passover plate. We use it every year and it's beautiful.

One has a propensity for something, and without realising it one goes in a certain direction. I also have a collection of paintings. That was done on purpose. My father left us a largish house and it had paintings in it. We moved in here and there were a lot more walls, so we put paintings up. We started commissioning paintings, or going after paintings that we liked. There's a painting in the entrance hall that has no commercial value, it is just that we love it. We had a baby in a pram so we didn't want to take it into the gallery, so I went in first and Barbara went in later. If she liked it too we would buy it. It was a huge seascape. She liked it, so we bought it. It was worth \$200 then and it is worth \$200 still.

You said the Richard Morell piece was 'exquisite'. Is that the quality that attracted you to glass?

[In response Peter brings in the work, a small virtuoso piece and describes it – continues] ...The piece is perfectly formed, then perfectly ground held by hand. Little things like that catch your eye. This in 1970 (whatever) was forty-seven dollars so it wasn't a cheap piece right at the beginning of studio glass in Australia. This led me to befriend Richard Morell.

I already had a number of glass pieces. They were mainly French and frankly I collected them for the signature and for the connection with Galle (the original small

glass I mentioned earlier). I started reading about glass (that is something I do when I get involved in something I don't know about).

A number of American collectors won't buy a piece unless the maker is referenced in magazines.

These are the 'collector' collectors. They wouldn't collect a piece unless it was a name piece. So they don't have a perfume bottle, they have a 'Richard Morell'. That to me is just not on. It reminds me of *Hearst Castle*. Randolph Hearst was immensely rich and he decided to build this castle and build it he did. Then he had two or three collectors who went around the world to buy objects, and that's all they did. You go into this enormous palace and it's wonderful (or ugly, depending on your taste) and it's full of 'stuff' and this stuff is very expensive. These are objects that are just 'stuff' because they had nothing to do with the bloke who bought them. That does nothing for me.

There should be a connection?

It should resonate with my sense of aesthetics, or sense of the moment. That's all. Now it's mostly the beauty of it. As one goes along one's taste becomes refined. 'Refined' is the wrong word, 'defined' perhaps.

The more experience you have, the more you have to judge a work by?

Yes. The colour in this kitchen is built around the *Waistcoat* [a Sally Atkins' glass work hanging in the upper corner of the room].

Are relationships with artists important?

With Amanda Loudon we were her patrons when she was going through college and she was the first supplier into our gallery. We still sell her work. We just had an exhibition for her.

In the kitchen cupboard from underneath a collection of bean cans on a Lazy Suzanne he out pulls out glass.

It's not studio glass. It's a functional object.

You have an integrated approach to the glass? It's part of your life?

This piece I think she gave us for a birthday when she was studying.

You went from there to running a major gallery?

That's happenstance also. That goes back right to the beginnings. My father started a little business in his garage disassembling electric meters. Then he found a mound of what looked like backyard fillings. It turned out to be brass dross that was over 50% pure brass. He found a way to clean it for melting and struck the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, because this all happened during a world copper shortage at the end of the Korean War. I independently developed an interest in metals and went to the Royal Melbourne Technical College then Melbourne University where I became a metallurgical engineer and I'm still a fellow of the Institute of Metals. As I graduated my father had a collapse when his business came under attack from big business. All the

people he thought his friends suddenly found ways of doing business with his competitor who was Australian and not Jewish. By this time he'd already been through the Holocaust and Communism. Every time he found success someone came and said no. I entered the business and worked twenty-four hours a day and managed to salvage something out of it working for my parents. In 1971 my mother died from cancer. My father had died the previous November. I inherited the business and took chances I couldn't take while they were alive. The business prospered. By 1990 I was employing 160 people. I sold to an international company. So in my early fifties I had a cheque with a lot of zeros on it, but no other income or activity. I invested securely in real estate and walked into a sculpture foundry that was about to go under. That is how I got into the bronze business.

A very good position to compare the aesthetic 'qualities' of materials. What are your thoughts on the qualities of glass as opposed to bronze?

Both are used for making objects of interest and beauty. Both are used in technical and functional ways, yet both are used in creating art forms. You want to touch the bronze, but you know the glass is fragile. There is that quality of fragility with the glass that attracts people in a way. They wonder how someone can make this without breaking it. The other thing about glass is its translucent and transparent nature and the way that it plays with light. You don't have to have special illumination the way bronze does to make jump to life. It is something that has been attracting people for three thousand years. Where ever you go in Israel, put a shovel in the earth and you will come up with a fragment of glass.

You went into a Gallery selling glass not bronze.

I had sold out of the bronze business after it had reached a point where it was good enough to sell. At the same time I came across another business that was struggling called *Pewter Products*. After building up the bronze foundry I was going to do the same with this. I lost a fortune on it, but as a last gasp I was going to show the world how beautiful Australian pewter was. I leased this little shop in Southgate and put pewter in it. Pewter is a grey monochrome material. We needed light and colour to go with it, so we bought some glass and our first supplier was Mandy Loudon.

Glass took off, but pewter didn't. I had a cathartic moment when I went walkabout one day and I discovered the pewter objects that we are trying to make and sell were available in retail shops for less than it cost us to make them. If something cost us ten dollars to make you could buy it in souvenir shops for eight. For us to compete we would have to get our cost down to four or three dollars from the factory. I was out of there in a week, but I already had the shop with a five-year lease.

We put in less and less pewter and more and more glass and bronze. We took our time to find out what we wanted to do. Although glass was of particular interest to me, we had ceramics, weaving and fabrics and so on. This was twelve years ago. Gradually we became a glass shop, then a glass gallery. It was thirty-seven square meters. The opposite shop in Southgate closed (a Rebels shoe shop) and we took that over. Then we had sixties-seven square meters. Then we got invited to join Federation Square, which we did and we were the first tenants to open. When [Premier] Bracks opened the National Gallery we were setting up. At eleven o'clock I said this is bullshit and we opened the doors. As I opened the doors there was the sound of applause coming from the Federation Square National Gallery and that was when Steve [Bracks]

said, “I declare this open”. About two minutes later he and his retinue, which included Steve Vizard and all the hangers-on, came in for a photo opportunity. They left without buying a thing (laughs).

A glass gallery placed at the entrance of the National Gallery?

Yes, why do you think I accepted the invitation to join Federation Square? The interesting thing is that as a matter of principle (and this is a real sore point to me) the Victorian National Gallery refuses to exhibit its collection of Australian Glass. It has stopped acquiring Australian glass. It has turned its back on glass. They haven't got cupboards in which to exhibit it, or spaces provided. They are not exhibiting Australian glass full stop. You will see international glass in St Kilda Road.

The gallery opposite me is an Australian gallery, but has no Australian glass. I don't know what the statement is, but whatever it is, if you were to put it down on paper it would be gobbledegook because it just cannot make sense. I don't believe the ring would fall off anybody's finger if they went into the National Gallery and found some Australian glass.

There is a trust to which you can apply and get money towards your studies, and that trust is associated with the name of the National Gallery. If you accept money from that trust and are successful in becoming a glass artist and make a museum piece that piece will not go into the Victorian National Gallery that bears the same name as the trust.

They have Janet Laurence up there currently, but that piece is not glass.

That's right. I've talked to the National Gallery and they say it is just not our policy. “We have no curators. We have nowhere to show it.” They have aborigine message sticks. They will use bark and show all manner of things, but not glass.

This is a policy for this particular time?

Maybe in twenty years, or fifty years or a hundred years they will show glass. All things change, but as at this moment I couldn't give ‘a rat's’ about that.

Picking up on the commercial competition mentioned earlier. What is your thought on the Chinese producing studio glass and putting it into the Australian market?

What separates us is the fact that we are making ‘art’, the fact that every piece we make is unique. If we try to make ‘sausage glass’ in the sense of drinking vessels, then we can't compete. We are not making glassware that is made in Australia. We are making unique one off hands-on pieces, and even then there is a lot of imported stuff, the same with bronze. That piece (large female figure base for table) cost \$12,000 to mould, cast, chase and patinate. You can buy a piece like that for half the price from Thailand, but in Thailand they make those by the hundreds and this is a one-of. A Japanese artist working in Sydney made the glass above it. That is a unique piece and it's Australian, and we have a desire to buy Australian glass.

Wealthy people here still go for the Czech, Italian or the Scandinavian glass. When we get people from those European countries coming into Kirra Gallery their jaws drop because they say this is better than theirs. So, there is a quality differential. Our artists

are as good as anywhere in the world, and the fact that they are made in Australia fits with the visitors wanting to take home a piece of Australia. Some don't want a five or ten dollar koala. Some are quite happy to pay two or three thousand dollars for a unique piece of Australian hand made glass.

And the thing that makes it recognisably Australian is?

OK, well now you are getting into the aesthetics of Australian glass as opposed to the aesthetics of European glass. A lot of the studio glass in Europe is mass-produced, or semi mass-produced and I can show you examples. Here we do not have factories. We have individual people making individual pieces of glass and then decorating that. That lady [pointing to a piece] blew her own glass and then she spent an enormous amount of time carving the edges, which is very difficult to do. She then spent more time decorating it with copper-wheel engraving. Now there is just no way of short-cutting that. The Chinese could do it, but they won't because the mass market is just not there for a thing like that. You will not find Chinese work where people want to buy a one-of. If you want to buy a one-of then wherever you go it will be expensive.

Then you have a discerning audience?

Yes you do. That is where you see *Kirra* working its bum off trying to cultivate people's taste. To do that is very hard, because within those parameters that I have just given you there are still areas where there is semi mass-production – as with paperweights. You can buy incredibly beautiful Chinese paperweights for a fraction of the cost of Australian paperweights. We charge \$100, \$150 even \$500 for paperweights depending on the complexity of the piece (and frankly the name of the creator). You can buy similar in Myers for \$50. We just have to live with that, but on the bottom of the one from Myers says, 'made in China', and you are not going to take that home to America as a souvenir of Australia.

A narrative surrounds the piece?

Yes, of course. That piece there was made by Miki Kubo (she assists Brian Hirst and was studying with the late Anna Dybka and is now involved in a dialogue with the Gordon family to study glass carving). She is like a sponge soaking in Australian glass culture. That knowledge comes from the fact that I know her. I know Brian Hirst. I have eaten with her and drunk with her. I have had her as a guest in my house. When she went up to Western Australia she stayed here a couple of nights. Yes I have a connection with that piece and with Miki.

I can't say that I have a relationship like that with every Australian glassmaker, so I can't recognise everything. Then again I think I could recognise Australian glass from American glass, because my take on American glass is that they are now starting to worship the process. There is an American glass artist whose name I wouldn't know because I don't follow American artists except a rare few. This guy makes composite pieces from crystal and they are ground to a millionth of an inch so they fit together perfectly so there are internal surfaces that reflect and refract. These are curious objects. They have that quality of translucency and all those qualities of glass that we ascribe as significant because that's what makes glass, glass. But to me they are what they are because there are machines driven by computers that can make them fit together so perfectly.

To list the qualities that make an Australian piece of glass would be very hard. It is more the collective. I would not be able to pick out the Australian piece from hundred, or even ten pieces of glass. What I can do is say that Australian glass as practiced here (and as issuing from our university schools) has an amazing variety that I don't find so much overseas. If you look at Venetian glass for example, or Scandinavian glass you can recognise the Scandinavian glass because it is so perfectly flawless. It hasn't got a bubble in it. But there is homogeneity about Scandinavian glass that says this is Scandinavian. The Australian glass not so, it is more diverse. In a hundred pieces they are different. Look under the piano. That's Australian glass. [continues pointing to pieces in his collection]. That's Australian glass. Up there is a huge piece of cast glass. There is nothing that ties the three together, except the diversity. That is wonderful.

It is interesting to classify glass by its diversity.