



Clare Belfrage
Shifting Lines #4 and #5
 2002
 21 x 27 x 10 cm and 30 x 24 x 8.5 cm

At the time of this interview Clare Belfrage was Creative Director, Canberra Glassworks

How do you perceive yourself professionally?

- As an artist. I don't see that in terms of being important, or not. It just is. It is as simple as being a doctor, but a doctor could say, "I'm a healthcare professional" or "I work with indigenous health". There are different ways you can open things up and move into them, but the broadest term is doctor, or for me, the broadest term is artist. It is simple, but I understand it is not very specific.

Over twenty years ago when I graduated I wouldn't have called myself an artist. I found that a confronting term. I felt that it was not up to me to call myself an artist. It was up to you out there to deem me an artist, or not. It took me a while to develop the understanding, but also to catch up with what I was doing. To catch the idea of myself - and what I was actually doing with my days. That is definitely something that has evolved in terms of understanding, and my level of comfort.

Twenty years ago (and when I was a twenty-two year old) my understanding of 'artist' was 'old masters'. That had a particular status and because of that status I wouldn't have had the confidence to make that association. When you are talking about status you are implying hierarchy aren't you? I would not have had the confidence that what I was making was good enough to claim that for myself.

It implies a personal maturity and where you are up to in your making.

Are there qualities that enable you to claim that status now?

It may sound strange, but in a way no. This is what I do and what I have done for a long time. It just is what I do. It is how I feel about it. I also use the term 'craftsperson'. I do talk about being a glassmaker, or maker, but number one (if I meet someone and they ask what I do I say) I'm an artist. I work with glass. In a way I see

artist as the umbrella term, not as a single point in a hierarchy. I see it in broad terms the same way I would call a musician an artist.

Was it your training or your practice that set up that philosophy?

It was more the practice. Your experience is your experience. I did a four-year degree [Monash] that was intense. I have taught at universities too and it might be sixteen contact hours now, but what I went through was thirty contact hours. I had twelve subjects in a semester – modelling and mould-making, glaze technology, throwing, hand-building, flat glass.

There was a high level of training and it was a very technical kind of training. What that set up for me (and it has carried through my practice) was a high standard of finish. The making was very important.

What has developed during the twenty-one years of practice is the importance (for me) of working in a community. I have sought that out and I have also worked on creating and establishing that. I have got so much from the people I have been connected with. All of the discussions around art making (and small business too). That has been the shaping. In simple terms I have probably moved along a path where the idea has become much more central to what I make. That has become more important than the technical training I had at university. (I also had a year and a half at the JamFactory in a traineeship – training through production and making – making - making.)

Is there a 'language' you work with?

Not very much from my uni days, but I would say now I definitely have a language that I work with. I feel I have developed a whole visual language with what I do. I work within that as a way of developing work. In talking about this I find myself describing a kind of method that I have in creating a piece, or a series. It is safe to say that I think in glass a lot. In one way that is saying that the process is driving something, but on the other hand as I said my work now is much more idea driven.

These days I feel confident that most ideas I have, I am going to be able to make. That implies that I'm really limited, or really good. (Laughs) There are a couple of ways that I approach developing a new idea. If you glance around you will see there are some strong themes at play in my work. Because I am focussed a lot on pattern and details in nature, I might have particular line-work that I want to be carried into the world on a piece of glass. (As I said I think in glass.) Then I will draw and draw that pattern, expanding it in different ways. Then I will have an idea as to the form that will carry that pattern. That is not for it to be a decorated form (I moved away from that). I am aiming for something much more integrated than a form that is decorated. I am looking for a form that will carry that line-work. That is an aesthetic judgement.

That is one way I might approach a particular thing. Another is, that although I might be interested in the line-work, there is the whole experience, or feeling of a place that I want to bring into the piece. I will play with that and again as I go through the process of determining a form. Again I am not starting with that form. I am starting with the experience of a place, or a detail that I have come across. I look for the form that will carry that.

My forms are pretty simple. Those pieces on the windowsill [oblong shapes], I would love to make everything oblong, or roughly squarish. It is all about a section. I don't want to make a 'glass leaf', or a 'mossy rock'. Obviously my work references those things, but I don't want to make a glass copy of something. It's not representational. I want it to abstract it because I think that is where you get into more of the 'feeling stuff' and that's what I'm much more interested in. It's the emotional response. What I try to do in a way (for example those 'leafy' ones) is capture that.

I remember seeing the kind of line-work where most of it is straight and really ordered and then you just get this quirk into those tangential lines. It's that line-work I saw on this eucalyptus tree where I went, "Oh my God, that's amazing". This is what I do. I just go, "That's incredible", then I have to find out why I have that feeling. I have to go through a cerebral process to find out what it is about it. That bit that makes me catch my breath is the bit that I want to capture and then put into the glasswork. There is an intellectual process in it, but that is not the drive. It is actually an attempt to find what the wonder is about, the interest, why are you pulled into this. That's the bit that I want.

It is in the making. I believe you do an amount of research through working with the material. There are things I have looked at, thought about and done a drawing of and I have gone into the studio and made that drawing. Then I've thought that was it. It was so beautiful. That was the bit that I wanted to capture. It has worked straight away. But it may not be so with other works. This (holds up 'leaf form' glass piece) is the most literal work, such a familiar form, I tried all sorts of other forms - because this is uncomfortably close. It is too literal, but none of the other forms worked. I had to finally say this is what worked Clare.

I like things that work on different levels both literally and in areas where I might get a response. Working on this background area was the part I developed when working on the piece. What I like about the leaf is not the archetypal stuff, but the leaf showing that it has had a life - with decay, or has been eaten in an area, or become skeletal. That intrigues me.

What emerged while playing with some stuff was a beautiful sense of being above the ground (this is a 'macro/micro' thing going on) - a sense of mapping. This was looking for something to carry this line-work. This is how I develop my work, which is largely about beauty in nature. It was a human response to an experience.

You have hopes for an audience reaction to this?

Absolutely. I want them to perhaps feel some of those experiences. I have joked about 'leaf art' being dodgy. In fact my kids say 'mummy look at this one'. Sometimes I feel I might be sending my career into a noise-dive doing 'leaf-art', but in fact I would love to curate an exhibition called that because people do find leaves wonderful and awesome. One of the things I am 'into' is this detail in nature. There is this incredible life force that surrounds us. When we slow down to stop and look at it, it takes you somewhere and I really believe there is nurture for your spirit in those experiences.

The glass gives you enough to do this?

It does. It is safe to say that I think in glass. Even when sitting out in the bush (we go camping a bit) I see a lot of things and I translate them into glass. I have never

thought that an idea I have been playing with should be in another material, or expressed in a different way. I have never found glass was not enough. That is where I would say that I was a craftsperson, because I am so connected to the material and the processes. That is a twist on me saying I was much more idea driven. I am so connected to the material and the processes that I am not even interested in doing anything in the kiln. Even those things that people may think of as doing in a kiln I am thinking in terms of a glory hole still. That describes my limitations, but it also reveals my passions. I do not experience this singular material or process as a limitation.

Beyond its versatility, what attracted you to glass?

I went from high school into university and I had a real love for art, music and sport. There you go – I got it all in glass (laughs). That is it. For me there are qualities about the process (hot glass) that capture those things (the things that I am interested in). It was absolutely the experience of falling completely in love. I almost roll my eyes when people say that in talks, but it was absolutely like that. I would lie in bed at night thinking about how I would do things. I would go to the pub after uni and just talk glass all the time. It was an absolute infatuation.

That is something about the alchemic nature of glass, the drama of it that can appeal to some people. I sing a lot and have had classical guitar training. I am from a big family with a lot of music. There was always music making that I was involved with and grew up with. Some was a solo exploration and experience. Then there was a whole different music making that you did with people when you play music together and you have that incredible intuitive process occurring where you move together to create something really beautiful. That can occur in the hot glass process where you have to work with other people. People often liken that to dance. In terms of not having to talk or explain everything (in that intuition that happens and is working well) it is fantastic.

The process is always open?

I probably have implied that, but it is not completely accurate. There is a challenge there. It does not just happen naturally. There is a point (particularly when I was doing a lot of production work when you are in front of the furnace and working extremely hard) where my brain turned to porridge. With that period of amazing skills development there was definitely a decline of intellectual maintenance. (I was going to say exploration, but it is simpler than that.) I am incredibly respectful of production work, but I also saw a need to incorporate my glass knowledge (and being a maker) with having greater intellectual stimulation. That is when I started teaching. Contrary to how people talk of it, I did not move into teaching because I needed a job or money, but because I needed to get out of 'porridge land'.

With those embodied skills do you ever find yourself 'losing' time? Where you don't realise it has not been a minute, but rather ten minutes?

Absolutely and in that way it is like playing music. You go to quite a different space, or place. Probably so with production work, but there you have to keep an eye on the clock to check you are getting everything done in your fifteen-minute cycle, or whatever. With the drawing [glass onto glass] that I do – particularly dots – it is the nature of some of the work that I can mark out the key-lines in a mapping that I fill in. It is a beautiful process where the rhythm of the making is inherent in the finished piece.

But that could be knitting or weaving. It is archetypal craft practice. I like that a lot. With some of my work you can chat with your assistants, but not very much because you have to come to this point and the just maintain this level of concentration and get into the rhythms and the groove of the heats.

You talked of the glass community. Do you think work is evaluated within glass rather than as broader contemporary practice?

I think it is self-referential. That has got its good and bad sides (or positives and negatives). I love that within my field I can travel to different places in the world with my work and be almost guaranteed to have this nice connection with quite a few people. That is because it is 'boundary-ed' by the medium. That is a cool thing. The negative side is that it is a bit inward looking. I am involved in an interesting project at the moment where a glass collector wants to put on a show of 'glass artists' at a fine arts gallery that has never shown glass before to say why can't it just be accepted into the 'art world', but the exhibition's main curatorial reference is the material. So already you are doing exactly the wrong thing. It is a contradiction and people get twisted up about it.

It is weird in a way to be a glass collector, but on the other hand I am an artist who only works with one material.

Like trying to enter a cat in a dog show?

I see it more as it's a cat, why can't I enter it into an animal show? Part of that is because the 'animal' people think 'cats' are kind of something else. Then another part is that the 'cat' people really like each other and like doing things together, because we are interested in some similar things – there they are also creating their own separateness a little bit. It is interesting because I have also had a few shows at *BMG* in Adelaide. It shows mostly painting and some 3D (which they would call sculpture). Showing my work as part of two solo shows (my work and a photographer's). The sales weren't very good (the state gallery bought a few pieces) and the gallery people said there was a resistance, the clients still say they don't want to pay five thousand dollars for something that looks like a vase. There is an audience resistance due to these associations. It is a combination of things, and then of course there are some artists who work with glass who have definitely broken through.

The classical example is probably Josiah McElheny (USA). He has won some of the really big sculpture awards in America and is represented in major museums. In broad terms you would say his work was concept driven. It is partly his business skills and the way he has marketed himself. He has pushed in that area and marketed himself in that way. He makes large collections of particular objects that he might arrange in a particular way, or get silvered to take on another feeling. He propelled himself into success in that 'fine art' world. He would take a famous painting with a glass object in it and then he would remake that glass object and have a print next to it. He also had a whole lot of work that was about originals and fakes.

What could you say about perceptions of the Australian studio glass movement?

That is a big question and I will start at the beginning by saying I have been creative director here [Canberra Glassworks] for eleven months and in a way I feel my view of what is going on has got narrower. That is for a couple of reasons. This is a big job

and I have my head down. I can totally see that I should have a greater view. An example is that I went to Craft ACT a couple of months ago and saw ceramic work there and some textiles and realised that all I had been seeing was glass.

Since I have been here we have had six exhibitions, but I would say 'only' six and I have been to maybe two exhibitions up in Sydney. In that aspect my world has got smaller. In the last decade my 'work' has been my own practice and in some ways I was talking to artists quite a bit (also I was in a share studio at *Blue Pony*). It is confronting, but I have to step out of *Canberra Glassworks* (its new hiring documents and how we are going to structure this or that) and say well what is going on?

This is broad in a way, but part of what I believe in (my philosophical base) is what can come out of a community and a pooling of resources, because one of the other things about glass (but not all of its processes) is its need of big equipment. It makes a lot of sense to share that. In the last eighteen years or so I've come out of two studios/facilities/communities were we've done that. One was a private studio (*Blue Pony*) that I was part of for thirteen years. I don't know how many people have gone through it (not that many). We started at six and we finished at four, but it keeps going and a few people change. That was an incredibly rich experience.

By being in a group I really believed that we enriched each other's practice and reached a greater potential through being together. That can happen in any art group. It does not need to be glass. It is also about conversation and sharing opportunities and going, "well I'm really interested in public art", or "I'm aiming to get the American collector base involved in my work". It's really great stuff about your practice as well as your art making, as well as the sharing of the resources.

The other really important place that I was a part of was the *JamFactory*, which I have been involved with in various capacities since about '91 when I started a traineeship there. That is government funded, but community based (when I talk about the *JamFactory* I am really just referring to the glass department, but of course it has a bigger context). That is where there is a fantastic sharing of significant resources (the furnaces, the hot shop) out of which twenty people run their professional practice. I think that is amazing.

I think it is incredible what that gives and one of the huge things it has given (particularly to senior practitioners who in turn give a whole lot to the middle practitioners and so on) is that you can work and work and make a body of work and then you can go overseas for three months and teach and tour around and you still come back to a furnace which you can rent again for your work. When you own your own furnace (which is the other basic model) you have expenses happening whether you are there or not. You have to make a certain worth of product out of that furnace because it is running all the time. You can turn it on or off to a certain extent, but it is not a small thing. It is huge what it gives to be mobile and therefore access the world, access the market in a much bigger way. It is from the life that you are living that come the experiences in what you can do. You can go and teach at *Pilchuck*, or do this, or that.

Those experiences of the last twenty years are why I can be here (*Glass Works*) doing this job. I really believe by artists pooling together to share resources and becoming a community creating the dialogues, that you can get so much more. There is so much more potential.

Of course I am not saying that someone who has their studio out there can't do great things. It is a different thing. This is a hot glass circumstance in one way, except *Blue Pony* wasn't hot glass.

I am someone who says pooling resources and working together is a really good thing to do. I am active in saying come here into this place (*Glass Works*) because that should allow you to do this and this and this as well. You can connect with people. For some they will base their art practice here and for others there will be a particular project that they can come and do for a week or three months. Having all this set up will enable that. It synergistic.

There are other interesting trends. I think we had a decade plus where there was great interest in Australian glass overseas and an increasing interest here too. Definitely there were a certain number of people who could make a reasonable living, particularly by accessing the bigger market outside of Australia. That's dwindling a little bit and then with the Global Financial Crisis it has crashed down. What is interesting both in Australia and with our friends in North America (who were much harder hit in a way) is that they are being forced to rethink what they are making and why they are making and what sort of artist they want to be. I think that is a good thing, but it is also clearly a tough time for people.

I know there are people who make a whole lot less because it is expensive stuff to work with, as you know. My gut feeling is that there is a little bit of an overlap in the natural coming off a crest that is going to be a shift and a juggle. I am not sure what kind of impact that is going to have in terms of making.

There are people in universities who are practicing without the constraints of a commercial imperative.

If you are talking about the academics that's only like six people in the country and that's tiny here. Gabriella Bisetto [University of South Australia] is a very good friend of mine. We did *Blue Pony* together and she was going on about wanting to be a glass blower, but none of her ideas headed there. Another interesting thing about the universities I observed when involved in teaching ('94 thru to 2000 at Curtin University setting up hot glass and then at Uni SA and I did a six month stint at OSU [Ohio State University] in the States) here in Australia (through the Liberal years where there were huge cuts to tertiary education when Howard came in) was a much greater accountability in universities. The impact that had in education in glass was that it became in one way much less a technical education and drove much more to concept.

Weirdly there was a much greater push to vocational training. It is contradictory. We have it here. Andrew [Lavery] [Sydney College of the Arts] would have it. "What are your students doing one year out of graduation?" That is the way your courses are measured. In the Arts that is generally difficult and there is always a constant need to justify your existence and that forces the universities to show off their students a whole lot. There is some great stuff about that, but then again I think there is a much greater push for students to finish university and have a product that they can sell, that can be an exhibition product, or whatever. That is an interesting thing I saw happen. There was a much greater push to wrap a student up and send them out with something that was recognisable and looked good, and that is different to really deeply exploring things.

I did a four-year degree, as it was when I started teaching at University SA. Then they just lopped a year off. That is 25% and you need to get those students out in much, much better shape. I am not anti-change and some of those pressures can be OK, but it has to have an impact somewhere. Students now expect to come out and make a living. Maybe that is a good expectation, but I think there is a much longer path to developing an arts practice.

There was the patronage involved in Klaus's ANU link with Bullseye and that would be positive.

Positive for some - of course you hear of the couple that develop that link and got something out of it, but not of all the others that didn't. I guess you have to ask, 'do we focus on those couple, or should we be looking at all of it?'