

*At the time of this interview Andrew Lavery was Studio Chair, Glass at Sydney College of the Arts*

*If you had to put a name to your practice what would it be?*

The way I'm positioning myself at the moment is within a contemporary art context. That's why I call myself an artist as opposed to a glass artist (which is very much what I used to be). That's very important to me. My reasoning is that I see the studio glass context as quite restricted for its practitioners in that it cuts them out of some exhibitions. Contemporary art doesn't necessarily want discipline specific artists. They want concept to drive the use of materials.

Because I have branched out a little more in the last couple of years in terms of the way I am operating my practice (now concept drives material) it is important that I call myself an artist, as it allows me to broaden the exhibitions I exhibit in and the types of venues and galleries I approach.

*There's the implication that glass artists see themselves within a certain history and thus a certain exhibition space?*

Yes. I think that is right. That is what is unique about the studio glass movement in Australia. There is that strong sense of community, togetherness and belonging that comes along with being a glass artist. A lot of people really identify with that, but then there is a group of people who do that for a time and then it does not necessarily work with what they are doing, or with their intentions or objectives for the future, so they make a change. There is a core group of studio glass artists where that identity and that feeling of belonging to a strong community works very well for them and I don't think there is any reason for them to change.

In my role as an academic I try to get people to identify their audience. It is a very important part of the third year studio theory program that the student identifies their audience. For some it might be a 'studio glass audience' with studio glass galleries, or studio glass museums and that strong, rich history of craft practice, but you are setting a path for practice and if you want to shift it later it is a long process. It worked well for some, but for others it would be better to start out more broadly as someone who considers their work as positioned within a contemporary art context and shifts through that. That is difficult if you define yourself within one discipline (here I mean the medium glass).

*The success of those 'glass artists' implies a cliental that might be narrowly focused?*

It is very contained, but in saying that, it is well established and successful. The difficult thing is (and this is always a difficult argument) the material we work with is very expensive to produce and it takes years to master the skills. Yet you do need a regular income to sustain a practice. I am interested in finding that happy medium in producing artists who can work across contexts. They could be in craft/design, or contemporary art. They could swing across all of them, but at the same time maintain the skill base of their practice, that is more of a flexible practice, or a multi-disciplinary practice.

Answering the question, what we have are these collectors who have put together these fabulous collections and they want to protect their investment. They want to

collect a particular kind of work. Some are more flexible than others and are quite open to change, but with others the focus is quite narrow in terms of what they will have in their homes. That is also what you are willing to live with in your home and have to look at. I know one collector who is becoming more open to experimental work, but it is all about education. We can sit back and say collectors are really conservative and they are just collecting well-known corporate studio artists, but it is about education. The particular collector I was talking about is open to collecting new work, but they want to know a lot about the artist first and the direction they are going. They also want information on the direction of the movement and what is being done with this material.

*You see the movement changing?*

Internationally I would go as far as saying things have been changing. Studio glass is very well established. There have been academic papers that argue the movement in itself is complete (William Warmus for example). The work of the pioneers has been done. The collectors are established. The masters who started with nothing have mastered all the European skills. In some countries they are even surpassing the Europeans in their skill base and the way they are operating their practice.

Yes there is a lot of change. There are museums and galleries that have completely changed their strategy in the sort of work they are exhibiting. It tends to be less formal, more progressive in moving away from the vessel and traditional objects that sit on the plinth to more experimental works that often involve installation.

From what I am reading in the journals (and from what I have studied) I do sense a change. *Urban Glass Quarterly* is a good example. A lot of the writers within that magazine are questioning the whole idea of serial production (producing the same thing over and over), which has historically been that whole North West movement in America. They make variations of one object in all its various incarnations and you can watch that over ten years. What some of these critics are saying is that they have stopped going to these exhibitions, because they know what they are going to see. When there has been an example where one of these people has tried to break out from the serial production in a gallery solo show, the response from one critic was that it is really brave. It is brave because it is a big financial risk. If you make too much of a change you could possibly jeopardise the interest of collectors. It is a slow transition. Some people are in a position to do it more easily and some are in a more difficult position with families and an established practice that operates perfectly well. It is a financial risk and it could be quite a catastrophic one. That makes it a difficult argument.

*Academic tenure supports research and the academic/artist is not dependant on sales.*

An academic should not have a commercial imperative. This has driven the latest change in my work. It is quite radical and it has surprised a lot of people because I had a series of work that I was well know for. I could have quite easily gone on and made it over and over in its various incarnations for fifteen years (as it is done in the studio glass movement). But the further I got into my academic role the more important it became for me to use this role as a way of researching, developing and innovating with the medium and not just within the context of the studio glass movement, but out into broader audiences. This is a community minded approach – in that I want to take it to broader audiences, but I also want to innovate with the material in a way that people may not be doing. I feel as an academic that is a responsibility I have to my students

and to the broader community. I should be doing something different and not just using the role to make 'my work'.

That is a responsibility and a big part of this job is advocacy. I think it is important that all of the academics push the use of the material into new places and kept it fresh, and that the students are encouraged to work in that way as well. Then we will have innovation and development and the movement will move forward, rather than just holding in a pattern, (although there are always great things being done and I acknowledge wholeheartedly that great work is being done in Australia. It has reached a level of resolve that is quite remarkable). The academy is a place where people should be pushing, researching and innovating. I think that is the case at SCA [Sydney College of the Arts] where pushing the boundaries is encouraged.

I not dependant on a commercial gallery and I don't care whether my work sells or not, so I will take a risk with my work. If it is an unsaleable – so be it. It may be a really interesting work and I know I have one sitting out the back there that no one is ever going to buy, but it is an interesting piece that might lead somewhere. Hopefully it will get to be seen in a museum, or travelling show. If it is out there in the community and people are getting to see it and its different use of the material, then I am happy.

*You have a powerful position from which to do that.*

To be honest I don't think I could ring up a museum and say I wanted to exhibit my work there. They generally find it somewhere and if they are interested they may invite me. The gallery I am with at the moment will actually place you into competitions.

A lot of people do call this a position of power, but I don't see it that way. It is a position where I have to look after a studio and the direction of its undergraduate program (whereas the research of the post-grads. is completely self directed).

*But you are an information hub?*

You could just live within a microcosm, unaware of what's happening internationally. It is important that I read all that sort of information (journals) and travel is really important in gathering new ideas and keeping up to date with international currents. It is important that I make students aware of what is being done and that I encourage them to look broadly in terms of where they see themselves and where their concepts sit. We do that with every work. They position themselves within a context. We find that position (whether that be art, design, contemporary art) and we find a number of artists working in the proximity of that area. That is the way we teach the students to critically place their work.

*What are the roles of museums and commercial galleries?*

It is important for galleries to be showing progressive work as well as traditionally commercial work. Shortly I am going to have a conversation with Anna Grigson [Sabbia Gallery] about that because she has the space to do that now. In the end there will be a next generation of collectors. You need to begin to educate that next generation. This next generation (whoever they are) may not necessarily be interested in the more formal objects that are now being exhibited in galleries like Sabbia for example. She [Anna] needs to begin to slowly introduce progressive work in unison with the object-based work. Often those objects become more attractive when you see

them with the more experimental work that you may not be able to fit within a home. There can be a relationship that gives more depth.

I think this is a way of the future. People are going to work across disciplines and there will be a lot of installation work and maybe video. It is going to be a really interesting future in terms of the way the glass is being used. Commercial galleries could keep going as they do now, but from what I see overseas, and on all the websites I visit, some big American galleries will support that type of work (*Heller Gallery* is quite open to installation), while alongside that they will have traditional object based work.

The territory becomes difficult with some of the newer work being produced by people who work with glass (and they can be glass artists) – me for example. I'm someone whose primary medium is glass, but I have to be very careful with the glass. I won't use it unless I need to. Sure it is my primary medium and I like to use all the metaphors attached to it, but if I want to build something bigger I will just use wood, because the message is still there and the glass elements still all play a role. That sits well with contemporary art, because the materials are driven by the concept. It could fit well with one of the contemporary art contexts. Then you have some studio glass practitioners (say working with the vessel as their format) who can't understand why their work isn't accepted within a contemporary art collection. They get quite incensed about that.

The most important thing is that we help people understand, because there is nothing wrong with being in a decorative arts collection. When people say it's the craft/art debate and it is too hard – all they need to understand is the background and then to unstitch it is actually quite easy. You just need a little bit of patience and it is really simple – it flows from the concept to the material.

The conference [Auglass, 2011] is going to revisit that and already people are unhappy about it.

*Why?*

Because money comes into play. When you start to draw lines in the sand and give things definition (what is decorative art and what is contemporary art) everyone knows that contemporary art sells for higher prices than studio glass and then contemporary art doesn't necessarily want studio glass within its field, because it diminishes the pie. They don't see a formal object (a vessel for example) being contemporary art unless it is part of a broader concept. It is not accepted.

*You were trained at Monash. How did that affect your philosophy?*

It's a good question and an interesting development. It was more how I developed here [SCA] that changed what I do. I will be completely honest about it. When I started working with glass at school (I was eighteen) I was very interested in the process and the material with not much emphasis on the concept. I found the school that I went to was very process based. I was trained as a glass blower in a very formal way with skills being very important to me. That led me to make work that I continued for a number of years and it brought me a reasonable amount of success (it is included in a number of what are seen to be important books). I still enjoy having those skills and I draw on them all the time.

I trained at the art school. I did the honours degree and then the masters. I had a year off, but at the same time I was working in a factory where they made architectural glass, so I picked up a lot of kiln forming skills (how to bend glass, toughen and texture it). I got to work with the designer working from plans, working with very large kilns and a lot of research and development (right down to the fittings). That experience was just as valuable as doing the masters degree. Then I did a lot of training overseas with more glass blowing at Pilchuck (twice). That invested a lot of money, time and energy and I was very passionate about it. I just loved working with glass and I still love working with the material. I am quite happy to make traditional objects and hone my skills.

But then things changed. Some people argue that those traditional processes are always embedded in glass, that anything that is made in glass carries the tradition of the material. I disagree, although you can find a history in anything.

*What qualities drew you to glass?*

The way the light travels through it. There is nothing else like it. I also like the way it fuses and bends in the kiln. I started off cutting glass making leadlight windows. I like the many possibilities in working with the glass. I moved to the kiln really quickly and that is where it started to become very interesting, because although you are not touching it, you get to see this organic process with a liquid working and fusing. That was seductive for me. It was also the control of an unusual medium that not many people got to use.

Then I saw glass blowing and I had to try that. That was instant. For some people it is a show. For me it is the challenge of controlling the material and having some sort of relationship with it where you get it to do some things you want it to do. Having an idea about what you want to make and then to make it is a very satisfying process. It is satisfying now that I can go in and make the ideas that I have.

What is also satisfying is the scope. I can see beyond the vessel a lot more than I use to. I will use the vessel as a primary thing to get to something more sculptural. All those processes surrounding the vessel that I learnt were important. You really had to learn to make the vessel to do anything in the hot glass studio. Now things might look like a vessel for a while, then I will cut them up or change them. It is more about the expression of the idea now. I have learnt so much about the traditions and the processes (and I value them highly), but now it is important that my concepts are delivered correctly. That is the challenge now.

*Do you see yourself using a language?*

It has changed a little. I used to talk about the form a lot, the design and how considered the composition was, but that was in terms of a group of objects. Balance, rhythms and relationships between objects and the space in and around the objects were a strong part of what I did. I started to do a lot more reading. That mainly came from working here, because I had to teach studio theory. I had learnt a lot of theory during my masters' research, but I also had to revisit a lot of theory I learnt as an undergraduate. In studio theory you look at the various ways people approach the medium and that is quite diverse. Some might work with installation; some might work in decorative arts. I can break it into parts now, where before I didn't have the ability to do that. You need to communicate that to the students so they have the ability to do

that with their own work. We teach them to talk about objects and talk about their own work. That is the process of being here with colleagues in a contemporary art school.

This is a real art school in the true sense of the word. There were ones that were TAFEs beforehand that never got out of their technical base. SCA [Sydney College of the Arts] began as an art school and I think it will always be one in the sense that the theory is strong. It is a real culture and that culture in a way has defined what I am doing now.

That is what you want when you move interstate. You want your work to change, not stay the same. That is why artists move. It took me a while, but I really wanted to develop.

*With technical mastery does the accident, or the unintended play a role?*

No, I'm still pretty tight. I am a perfectionist. I think everything I am going to make is going to be pretty hard-edged in the way it is put together and finished. That is the way I operate as an artist. A lot of the concepts I am working with at the moment deal with those ideas of perfection. A lot of the people I am referencing in my work are interested in modernist style objects.

There are different stages of modernism. There was a real socialist ideology. Then it became 'trendy' and then elitist. Some of the objects you see now are elite objects – not everyone can get them, like an *Eames* chair, or a *Gucci* coffee table.

My way of working at the moment may change and if I have a concept that means I have to make a rough object I am going to force myself to do it. Tightness worked well for the current body of work, but there were elements of that work where serendipity came into play. With the skateboards for example I was never going to make a glass deck, the whole meaning of the work was in the glass wheels - the whole absurdity of the fragility of a glass wheel. That was not working so that drove me to glass deck and I thought that was unachievable, but it worked. Because glass was my primary material I decided to take the risk to push it, to try to make it work and it did.

*What is the response you have to your work when you look back at it now?*

An interesting question (laughs). These ones I look at [formal geometric vessel grouping on desk] are the detritus. When I use to make that series of objects that ended up in vessel groupings, there were always the ones that didn't quite work, so I still have them everywhere. They were offspring that didn't quite fit with the family. These came out of the masters' research and I was looking at Modernism. I wasn't necessarily looking at a social/political stance; I was looking more at the aesthetics of the movement and applying that to these groupings.

These [points to another grouping] are resolved. I like to keep an archive and those [pointing to another grouping] they are satisfying and I like to look at, but these [another grouping] are always a frustration, because you end up with these single vessels that you have worked on for hours (concentrating really hard), but they just don't fit.

*They are disconcerting?*

Yes, but I still love them. It was a period in my career that was really satisfying and I learnt a lot from it.

*A warm memory?*

Yes. I got to work with a lot of great people and we learnt a lot from each other. It casts a wider net than that, because you learn to work with galleries. Curators invited me into exhibitions and museums, so there are those attachments too.

*You are the first to mention them as containers of memories in that way.*

Oh yeah, they are phenomenological objects. I could tell you stories about these works. I could go to different states and all the people I use to make them with. They are all good memories. They take me back. I used to be so critical of them, but now I see them as part of the story of my career as an artist. They are really important to me.

*The same with that piece [beer bottle with brain]?*

Yes. For me that work was a real risk and quite an emotionally charged risk. It was a break into unknown territory for me. For me that was a steppingstone. It was not necessarily resolved, but I exhibited it in an artist-based space. They are well known galleries for taking those sorts of risks, because you don't have commercial restraints. This reminds me of that, because it is where I started with this kind of work.

A lot of studio glass people looked at it and asked why I was making that 'silly' work. (It was a new direction for me and I was quite happy with it.) The irony was that *Art Bank* (which never collects studio glass) came in and collected one straightaway. That's why I am doing it.

*Your 'glass' cohort looked at this glass and asked why?*

And some of the collectors too. Then when I made the glass skateboard one of the collectors asked what I was going to do, make skateboards for the rest of my career? I said no, this is one of many things I will make. Some of the collectors expect the artists to keep producing the same thing over and over again. That's the culture and that is why my new work was such a rude jolt for a lot of my colleagues.

*There is a difference between the way you see your work and the way others see it.*

Yes, depending on who the people are. There is always that. You don't know what people are going to see. The interpretation you bring to artworks is very personal.

*What is it that enables people to have different readings?*

I think the formal pieces would have more consistency in the readings. They are futuristic. There have interesting things happening spatially. When they are backlit there is an interesting interplay of light. That is an aesthetic experience. There is a sublime aspect to them in their simplicity. They are devoid of decoration complying with all those modernist principals. The reading of those is visually stimulating. These ones [beer bottles] are more cultural in a sense. It is not a beautiful object, but it is culturally engaging (with all those ideas about Australian culture – ideas of mateship and alcohol). This is one people immediately engage with (young people love it). I've

created my own narrative within the label quoting Henry Lawson. I'm jabbing around at different elements of culture. These are more conceptual pieces. They are 'thinking' pieces.

*Do you put much importance on naming a piece?*

Yes. Even in the older more formal pieces that became really important. When I started bringing other ideas to those formal pieces it was the relationship between the sound of words and the form of objects. The names of these were *Kiki* and *Takata* and there was a shape to those words. The object's form was reflected in the inflections of the name. This is *Bowba* with its rounds forms. *Kiki* is this sharp tall one. The name became really important as part of the concept.

*The names themselves were formal exercises.*

Yes. I was looking at ideas surrounding synesthesia. With the later work (when I was referencing Australian culture around drinking and mateship) I called the first set *Rick and Shane*. Then I might call future pieces the *Gathering of the King Browns*. A *King Brown* is an Australian term for a long neck [beer bottle]. They were on what was supposed to look like a bar table. Right down to the skateboards, where I called that *Dream Ride* because it is about idealism and having the ultimate sex object.

With the *Gathering of the King Browns* it was named even before I made it. I didn't make it and then name it. I wanted to do a piece called the *Gathering of the King Browns*. Like all the people gathered around the table.

The name is where I started. I got names from these psychological experiments that studied the relationships of sound to form. I drew all those names out of the experiments and then designed a work. The names came first where before I used to think of them last. I know people look them up in a thesaurus as a generic name, but now that is all integrated at the beginning of the concept. It is a plan. This one is *Specular Reflection*, that is the perfect reflection. There is the ideal and a person riding across their reflection on this glass skateboard. I am challenging the idea of owning the best and latest objects and the notions of narcissism that those objects are attached to.

*Realizing that in a tangible object then becomes the problem.*

Yes. I needed something perfect for the imaginary person to slide across.

*General comment*

There are a number of people working here and outside SCA who don't necessarily fit within the studio glass context. They probably learnt within that tradition and develop all the skills and they probably have a really strong knowledge of the area, but want to work on the edge, or outside it.