

Abridged interview with Wayne Pearson: 11/04/06
 Subject: Australian kiln glass with specific reference to 'style' and glass artists Deb Cocks, Warren Langley, Jessica Loughlin and Richard Whiteley

With glass what qualities attracted you?

I'm going back to the beginning, but also it relates to now. It is definitely how glass holds the light. Before I did any making my first intrigue with the material came from an architectural influence. My dad was an architect, so I learned a lot about how we live with light, and glass is such an integral part of that. That's what intrigued me. It attracted me to the material straight away.

Looking at some of the work I make now, I love semi-translucent white glass. I think that's because (visually again) it looks like it's holding light. Even though I might work with lots of different colours, it's definitely the 'soft-ness' of the colour. Colour and how it can become blurry around the edges is my favourite.

Architecture implies spatial, is it to do with volume and space?

In some ways when I looked at your questions, it's almost how and why we make stuff. I could analyse that and say my attraction to glass wasn't about volume & space so much, but then all my work is about volume & space. I might not have attributed that to architecture, which I still love, but obviously you can make that relationship.

If you ask me what my work is about, and what I want to feel, then 'vastness', the hugeness of space, is a 'glass-able' idea for me. That's the first thing that comes to mind in terms of what my work is about.

You can analyse why I treat the material in that way. I could work the white glass because then there isn't a definable start to the surface because it's got that fuzzy quality and because it holds light and because it's really soft (it doesn't have a hard edge), so where does space start and where does space finish. But that's not what the work is about. That's just a quality I'm using like a tool to help communicate ideas.

You're dealing with that quality in the glass – ambiguity. Maybe that's the wrong word for it... maybe a space to create feeling.

That's right; the number one thing for me is emotion. When someone looks at this work (and first that's usually me), I want to feel. For me the most important function of art is about feeling.

An openness in the glass, a space for you to feel something?

Yes, that's right.

There's been a cultural background for you in architecture and glass; A cultural environment that leads you in the way you see the glass?

Yes, in terms of pathway that's why I started with this material. Then I can talk about my life; I suppose it's why I'm making work about space and vast spaces. It's about incredible deafness of quietness. It's about when you're in a vast space. You're in the landscape and in your mind; both are creating a sense of boundlessness – psychologically and environmentally. They're what my work is about.

That 'horizon line' started when I was at school. That was one very strong visual image where I could say: "I feel something about this space – I'm going to take that image and work with it".

Talking about the ideas, I've almost only worked with one singular idea for the whole time I've been working with glass. But actually, trying to work out what that idea is has developed massively. I'm still trying to get it and I've got a long way to go. It's, "Wait a second, it's not just the image horizon line" then it's, "Wait a second, it's actually not that landscape, it's about the mind-space."

In terms of development, the one thing I want to create the whole time is a sense of emotion and feeling of 'sublime-ness' (indefinable in some ways, and definable in other ways). How I describe that in word or idea is one path, and how I make it work visually is another. When I'm talking about either the idea, or about the work, you're never going to be able to describe it. It's just going to be these suggestions that go around the perimeter of what I'm (and what the idea is) about.

I definitely don't start a piece without knowing how it's going to work in terms of the physical making. That's not my process. I'm mainly using sheet glass. I play around a lot with the plain, raw sheet glass and do lots of tests. I play before I make pieces.

In some ways in that process I might be trying to figure out what I can get. It's only then, through those little tests, or playing around with the light, or (not so much now, but in the past) I'd play around with other materials like paper and velum and spray paint and stuff like that, and then I would just go, "Oh yeah, there's something here".

There is definitely a certain amount of control in the way I operate when making the actual glass. There's knowledge of the material from the amount of time spent with it working in very definable areas.

Infinite space and the void are 'open'?

That's right. In some ways in the end it's indefinable, but then in terms of the process, you just pick a point. One way of communicating it is through words. It's not going to communicate everything. So you pick one point and communicate that. Then the piece of writing is next to the work, which is a different point. That is not going to describe everything you want to describe either. So I suppose with those vast areas that interest me, when making a work in the end you have to choose something; otherwise you'll never make anything.

In terms of the personality, I don't think you can separate any work made from its maker. The work is always going to reflect the material it's made in, the maker, and the ideas in the work. But each artwork has different amounts

of those things. I never thought that my work had my personality in it, but I've always looked at what it is that drives me to make my work. I've never looked at why it is that I'm driven towards that idea.

I feel in some ways someone else could tell me why I am making work, because they're looking from the outside. I bet you my mother could tell you why. But you know what I mean. It's not something I've looked into psychologically. I'm sure there are a lot of reasons why I love these vast spaces away from everything and that feeling of insignificance I love in greater spaces. There would definitely be reasons why everyone makes work about what they make it about. It's completely tied into who they are and their experiences.

I definitely looked into the idea of the search. That gets close I suppose, but I haven't looked into why I need this.

Are there characteristics that would help you identify Australian contemporary glass?

That's a really hard one. There's definitely work selected from Australia that could have an identity, but I'm someone who is 'anti' going "that's Australian" because other people who make work that doesn't fit under that umbrella shouldn't be labelled as not fitting in.

I find it very constricting and almost problematic. When I think of all of Australia, from the work that I see, I think there's a size similarity.

Scale?

Yes; that exists; in the work that is visible (which is a whole other thing). I don't see anything big. I don't see many installations. It could be totally to do with the available content for that work in Australia, also a context / market for that work. That makes work where there is a context, or a market, a lot more visible. There may be more of one type of work than another very much from that standpoint.

It's to do with the commercial, but you can still do works that don't have to be completely commercial. The group, or the artist run spaces that are set up are big enough to have that work exhibited.

For pragmatic reasons, from an overseas standpoint, it's really easy to see what happens out of Australia. There is a definite style, because that's the type of work that gets overseas.

because it's marked by the landscape?

No, not at all. It's marked by 'the commercial gallery' for curatorial reasons. Some ways that gets into 'signature style'. I would say if I go into a gallery I could probably recognize everyone's work. I know the people's work that is in the galleries. At the same time, I can see that everything we make has to be categorized in some way so people can access it and put it into some sort of box. If you make something 'in-between' boxes, then it's really difficult to find a spot for it, even though that work is just as valid – possibly even more so.

Implying an audience is in conversation with the artist through the work. If they can put it in a box, they can relate to it?

Absolutely. But that's how we operate. In some ways you could say that my work has a signature style – there's a very strong theme that runs through all the work. I'd be interested to give you maybe three different pictures of my work over time. You could definitely argue that visually they look very different, but emotionally they are the same (hopefully).

Just going back to how people see and can relate to work. We were just talking about how they relate to it – whatever the category. As the maker you've worked so long and spent so much time with your work that you understand it inside out. Now if someone has seen your work running a similar theme, or has seen some thread that is similar over a number of years, then when they see the next piece; they're not starting from zero. They are already intrigued by these different aspects you've introduced them to. Therefore they can embrace that next piece of your work they see.

A relationship?

That's right. That can be the same with pure 'decorative arts' work, or any gallery showing a 'certain' kind of work. They see a lot of different artists making work along this specific line and they are 'educated' and interested and therefore they can accept that 'next' work so much more easily.

It does mean that if people make work that differs vastly from one piece to the other (or they make too few artworks) then it's much harder to grasp.

A problematic issue is work being directed into a narrow space?

That's right. Signature style in terms of what is perceived from beyond the maker. Outside – from either a curatorial or commercial standpoint – but if there is a place for your work in the end you decide as the maker how you are going to work and how you are going to fit into the landscape of our industry?

You choose your ground?

If you have a relationship with a gallery (and it is a relationship in a way) – you don't just do anything you want. It's a 'give and take' situation.

Another dialogue?

Yes, that's right. And it's a very important dialogue. It's definitely confining to a certain extent. To what extent is vastly different with different people.

With your interest in space and the horizon, your work meets both needs. Open, with infinite space to explore, but still 'marked' by your concerns. People can have an on-going dialogue.

Yes, they'll be able to recognize that. Everyone operates differently, but that's a definite advantage for the viewer. Also, at the same time there's the big advantage, that (hopefully) if you work on one idea for ten years you're going to know a lot more about it and have a lot more to say than if you worked on just one piece.

Dialogue becoming deeper – possibly profound?

Absolutely, very much so.

In your case the dialogue is the need to express something in yourself, or to resolve something in yourself. Then you have that on-going knowledge of the material?

Yes. Number one for me is that expression of the developing idea and the 'emotional' outcome.

Your deep concern is with those issues?

Yes. I'd say that, but another element is that I'm not working in different types of materials, or different ways. I am working with glass and pretty much with kiln-form glass. There is a long-term commitment to a material and technique that I feel I've got a deep understanding of. It's actually even narrower than that. There are two concurrent things running next to each other.

One's the language.

The other being the idea, the concept?

That's right.

You are becoming more articulate in the language

That's right.

The qualities of glass give you a language you wouldn't have in other materials?

Absolutely. It is beneficial to use other materials to explore the idea. The finished work might be this work, but the exploration and understanding can be helped by opening up a little bit more.

An openness and willingness to explore?

That's right... as a starting point.

Your general impression of these other artists?

I find it very difficult. It feels as if the number of people making glass I see out there is small. I would be surprised to go into any gallery around the world and see work I didn't know. You have knowledge of who is working. I would like to be able to see work from 'uneducated' eyes.

Yes, be more intuitive. I would also like to do that more with my own work.

A visceral reaction.

Yes?

Trying express something that doesn't come out in language.

That's exactly how I want it actually. That's perfect. That means the language is not overtaking the idea. The idea is not bound by the language.

Let's start with Richard Whiteley. I find Richard works often quite monumental forms, very often about structure.

More the volume of the form rather than the detail?

Totally. The forms have 'hugeness'. They have a presence about them. In terms of expression in glass, they are quite formal, but they are not particularly in their expression of colour. I don't see colour as relevant.

He sees colour as separating him from the Czechs.

Right. Another thing, I think of his work of about four years ago and his work has change quite a bit since then. Maybe what's changed in Richard's work is the use of colour? But for me it's the use of two different colours in Richard's work, rather than the colour itself.

I think it's the structure that is important. If I saw it as a painting I'd see structural forms on the canvas. Formal composition, yes.

Richard's personality. Planned and ordered.

I can agree with that, very much so. Actually Richard is the only person I know (of the four selected glass artists).

But you know Deb Cocks' work?

Yes. I've seen a bit recently. Obviously she reflects a narrative in her work. I have an image of the importance she places on activities that have to do with living day to day. I find the glass less relevant. The form is definitely not the most important thing except for the fact that the one form I see her using mostly – the form of the bowl - is the perfect form for the narrative she's got on it.

I don't want to negate the form. It's tied into the imagery. The bowl is a functional thing and it involves a daily routine and having a relationship with an object. That's from the work I've seen (nappies hanging on the line) that relationship with a ritual, or a routine of living ties into a bowl.

The work is very honest. It's not trying to be 'big glass'. It is honest in what it is talking about and the ideas are honest, paying attention to how we live.

Warren Langley's work?

First, areas of clear, or frosted glass with intense areas of colour. The frosted glass tends to be not formed and the areas of colour are quite formed and patterned. There's a freedom you can see in his 'light' work. He is unusual in glass for his large work and also for doing more installation work.

The last works I saw were at *Collect* in London. What is interesting about Warren is having within one career *Ozone* glass, his neon and the work at *Collect* – all extremely different approaches to working.

I would expect to find his mark, like a fingerprint on his work.

Absolutely, but that is also about what the work commands. What comes first is hard to know. Talking about the fingerprints, I suppose that has to do with the finish of the work. If I could get away with fingerprints on my work, I would, but suppose that is all you see when the work is finished, therefore you can't get away with it. If I knew it was on there, but it didn't distract from the work or the idea, I wouldn't care.

The material can command certain things?

It's not actually the material; it's the form of use. You can be overly anal. I don't think Richard [Whiteley] is. You could look up quotes and see stuff with Richard's work. It doesn't matter because it works well.

If there's nothing wrong with it don't fix it. It is hard enough as it is.

Some of these issues relate to how I see work perceived overseas. How the Canberra School of Art is perceived overseas. Let me point out who made work in my year and describe the work to show the diversity. You only see one work from one student from one year and think the whole school is about that. That is because that is all that is shown in the galleries.

A school style as marked by curators?

That's right, but it's not just the curators' fault. It's also marked by market as well.

Maybe the difference from a painting or a drawing is the fact that glass is usually very expensive to make. It is technically very demanding. So it is very difficult to work in terms of producing work without financial assistance, or being able to spend the amount of time learning how to put it to use. That's different to other materials where there are a lot more possibilities with cost and with technique.

You hinted at relationship with landscape?

What I'm interested in is the reaction to landscape or environment, and a mindscape or headspace. Therefore it figures strongly in the work. The spaces I am interested in – those landscapes are vast and boundless in the sense of that reaction in your mind, in the viewer. That could as easily be walking through Hong Kong.

The landscape and the art object are both portals, entries into somewhere deep within the viewer's mind?

Yes – they are a vehicle. That's the same thing, yes? Then absolutely, it's a vehicle into the mind's space.

Then standing on that hill in the Flinders Ranges you had entry into somewhere inside you. That's what you are seeking in the glass – the same entry?

Absolutely, it's a particular experience. A lot of people would have had an experience standing on top of a hill looking at something huge. They then get an incredible sense of quietness and insignificance from something that is vastly beyond them.

It's obviously the reaction I'm interested in and some work looks a lot more like landscape. In other work there is a deliberate move away from any look of landscape, but I'm seeking exactly the same reaction. Wanting to portray the stillness, not the landscape. Some works are towards that and others are a lot more towards the little bright, white line. A lot of people have experience of it. It reminds them of a visual experience they've had, and therefore an emotional experience.

I would like to add that you often find the person can be opposite in outward personality to what their work portrays. Not quiet, soft and contemplative, but loud.