



Lee Mathers  
*I'll Believe Wording* (+ detail)  
 2012  
 fairy lights, wire, blown glass  
 100 x 300 cm

I'm an artist who uses predominantly glass. I don't say I'm a 'glass artist' because there is typecasting that goes with that. I have issues with that (laughs). I think it's quite a closed view, quite single-minded – like it's all 'studio glass'. I think there is a much broader spectrum.

There are studio artists who work in a very formal context. I don't see my work as 'formal' at all. I guess it's the intention in the way you approach your work. My intention is not to represent 'something' as much as to experience something. What I am trying to get across with my work is an experience. I am trying to remove the 'object-ness', that is – the work being viewed as an object.

Ultimately it is still an object (and that is a very old argument), but for me it is about removing it from being the 'pretty object' class that glass has been boxed into. For me it has a lot more potential than that. My intention is to try and break down the formal aspects of how a glass object could be read.

When I say form, it is though you are doing a visual analysis. With any work of art there is form and there is content. When looking at someone like Tom Rowney in comparison to someone like Silvia Levenson. To me Tom Rowney's work is very formal. It is sitting within the history of the craft. Silvia Levenson, while her work is still quite technically proficient and she has to work within those boundaries, because it is a craft based material, I think the way she places those objects within her artwork shifts it into something less formal in the reading and so it is more about the content. The work is a catalyst for an experience. It is an opening.

I do make smaller works, but ultimately to me they are like stepping-stones to an installation. There are a lot of smaller things that I make that I don't look on as works. People look at them and go, "Hahh" and want to keep them. That does not sit comfortably with me. These are me thinking through 'the how' of arriving somewhere.

*Are you expressing a fear of the ‘prettiness’ of the material?*

It's not fear. It is almost a disdain (laughs) of how it gets categorised. For me it's about being aware that it is an issue especially (and this comes back to the first question) because I want to see my practice as 'contemporary artist', not as a 'glass artist'. There is much more scope. The pond is bigger. It's a bigger realm, and for me that is more of a challenge. I need to be challenged more and there is so much more there to work with.

*But what of the ‘singular material’?*

Since I have been here [SCA] it is the first time I have been using only glass. I normally integrate a lot of other things. It is quite funny for me being at Sydney College because you realise you are using a craft-based material that is quite 'technical'. There is an urgency to make the most of the facility you have access to, so you really push your skill-building and knowledge. I think that once I go out (and not have access to such a facility) other things will start feeding in to become part of the work.

My graduating work is moving back towards glass as one element in the work. The material is the language and you would certainly need a technical agility and expertise to manipulate the material in my concept for the installation, but for a viewer walking in, the pivotal thing is not glass. I am working with perception. They will see glass as part of the mechanism, but I don't think they will define me as a 'glass artist'.

*You said ‘language’.*

Yes, glass has a language. All materials have a language. For me it's pre-existing. It's social. It's not just about the material. There are intrinsic qualities – translucency, transparency, refraction – bending of light and all of that, but then there are social constructs that we associate with certain materials. I think that is really broad, but for me with my *Memory Taps* I was looking at mementos and how people emotionally attach themselves to these glass objects when something is captured inside. It is that captured memory, or that lost memory, or moment. To me that is a pre-existing language, so by doing laser etching I am utilizing a history in the glass (a history of production) to get across my meaning.

It is multileveled. There are so many levels to any material. That is where craftsmanship comes in. You know your materials so well. You have a huge repertoire to work with. It is not just intrinsic. It is social and it is historical.

*Do you see glass as a dominant material?*

No. I think steel could be way more dominant. It depends on your intention and it depends on your approach to what you are making and whatever is behind the idea. It is the intent from that beginning. If you know Anselm Kiefer's work, it is the way he uses lead. It is such a powerful thing, but it is meant to be (within his work). Then there are stain glass artists who use lead and there glass is the more powerful material.

*You attended both ANU Glass and Glass at SCA. Did they frame glass differently?*

Yes, definitely (laughs). It is a big thing. But there is also the fact that I started in ceramics, not in glass. I started at another university up in Lismore called Southern Cross under Patsy Healy who was head of school. The reason I chose Southern Cross was that I wasn't sure if I wanted to do ceramic, or whether I wanted to go glass. I did kiln formed glass and casting within the ceramics studio (they didn't have hot glass). Within six months I knew it was glass because everything I was doing with ceramics was developing glazes (essentially my own low-fire glass).

Then I moved to Canberra because Deb Cocks was one of our teachers up there. She advised me that Canberra would be the best school for me considering my work was leaning more towards glass. Shifting between the three universities definitely affects how you make and what you make. Southern Cross was quite free and open and crossing between the studios was easy. Then when I went to the Glass Workshop at Australian National University in Canberra, there was no question about what I was doing. I went into my interview and I said I just want to do glass. They took me into second year and it was hard. It was like boot camp, because I was playing catch-up with the rest of the second years. Where I had been wasn't technically orientated. Now (with ANU) I had thrown myself into the deep end. I knew that and was good with it, but what I was missing was the tactility of working with my bare hands, moulding it like ceramic. That is so tactile, so responsive to whatever you are feeling. It just feels spiritual (almost), especially as a potter throwing.

By the time I got to Canberra I suppose I was a problem student. I had said I wanted glass, and they really push technique. By third year they want you to choose a technique and really become an expert in that area. I struggled with that approach. I can't be working on just one idea, or one technique. I need five or six things going at once and they are all feeding each other across a range of techniques. When you are an undergrad you don't realise that it's a working process developing into a methodology. When I was in Canberra I had a hard time because by third year I was being pushed towards one technique and I just can't do that because the technique would depend on my idea. It came through strongly that technique depends on my intention – on what I am trying to say. I wasn't using just glass again (I worked as I had done all the way through) but there was the expectation I would put that approach aside and it would be just the glass object. That didn't satisfy me. It was boring.

Their [ANU] graduates are highly skilled and I appreciate everything I got from Canberra, because it gave me the skill level, but I had to fight to work across all the techniques. It doesn't matter what my idea is – I can make it in the hot shop, kiln cast, kiln form, cold work and flame work. That is a legacy I got from Canberra. I felt I had to fight for it, but I think they just wanted to make sure you knew what you were doing and what you were getting yourself in for.

So glass was just a component of the work and I had to establish and articulate the reason I was working in the way I was. When I got here [SCA] there wasn't a need to prove it. I didn't have to pull myself in different directions just to prove a point. That is not a criticism of Canberra. It is just the structure of their program. Here [SCA] I am a post-graduate, so it is not as prescriptive. I didn't feel I had to prove a point. Also maturity played a part because I had a two-year break between my undergraduate and starting my post-graduate honours.

That two years makes you realise how important access to a studio is. It is a very special thing. I had two years to think about my direction and what was important. It was building the objects as tools for conveying an idea.

*You did choose glass?*

There is a connection. With clay I was developing low fire glaze, which is glass. I was making ceramic forms to puddle glass into and then see all those crazed, crystalline glass pools. There was no question that I have a connection with this material. It is my dialogue. It's my language, but other materials also play an important part in that. I get concerned that it is misread if I leave it just up to the glass object. I feel I have to give it more context.

*This raises the issue of how you read your work and how others read it.*

I don't know how others read it, apart from my friends. It is hard, because they know you. They know where you are coming from. So it is hard to know how anyone else is actually reading your work. I think my 'Plumbing Structure' – my installation, is probably closer to the work I get a kick out of. The 'Taps' [3 outdoor brass taps each with a solid glass drop containing laser 'holographic' image] I liked, but there is something lacking there. They are a bit too formal. That's why I see them as steppingstones – while some people see them as resolved and are happy with them as is.

*You want that particular work to be a starting point?*

Oh yeah. Not a statement. There is a personality that leads into that too. I am rebellious. I'm anti-institutional. I struggled so much when I first started uni, but I need to be here to get this [facility and skill]. I'm a lot better now, but as an undergraduate I was a horrible child. (laughs). I had trouble with people trying to lock the gate.

*Naming a work?*

I struggle with that a lot. It will come, but usually it is circling around. My journals are really important while the work is developing. That is why I can't just work on one idea. It is important for me to have four or five things on the go at once, because they are feeding each other and while in my journals I'm getting it all out and writing it down. Then at the end it is, "Kerplunk! – Oh that was what I was trying to do", but it was unconscious. When I go back through my journal it was there from the beginning, but I couldn't see it. Then my titles come from that.

I think titles are important. I don't like to have untitled work, because I think titles are another opening, but I also like to have them a little ambiguous, so it lets people bring their experiences to it as well. What I struggle with (especially in the academic situation) is 'them' wanting to put a title to a work five months before. I have learnt just to write anything down and when the time comes I will write what I want. I struggle with someone wanting a name before the process is finished, because the process evolves, and for me the title is at the end of the process, or very rarely, mid-way through. Everything is an evolution.

*You work with the materials as a conversation?*

Yes. The *Memory Taps* came about because I was working in another way in another area. This is where I say that all artists have a connection with a material for whatever reason. There are millions of possibilities, but unrelated to my work I went to the markets and came across this [small glass blank containing a laser image]. It was actually a floating soccer ball, but now I have cut it up. I didn't know why it was important, but it was that unconscious connection where I had to buy it. It was sitting on my desk for a good eight months and there was one evening here a couple of months out of graduating when I had all my stuff laid out where I was working. All was burning and churning and coalescing. I had a tap sitting on my desk and there was the little soccer ball on one end. I was just sitting there thinking about my work (as you do) and all of a sudden I said, "That's it!"

With my honours work it was all about the memento and how we invest emotional histories in glass objects – asking why is that? It is like these become a representation of a lived or lost memory. It became a natural connection then, but I couldn't see it at the beginning. I had to go through all the other making (I call it making the 'shit') for that to come together.

That's what I am saying about the pre-existing language of every material. It's a starting point to work with. For me in my practice it is the crux of where I am coming from and how I manipulate the material. It is not about the molecular structure of the material, it is all those social, psychological connections.

*I link that to qualities of the material – transparency, light.*

Yeah, but the language I am talking about wouldn't exist without the social context. The history of glass plays an important part. The production – the process of how it is made became important in the meaning, how it is read. Because people know that it's mass-produced (the technique of the laser etching) you can draw on that production method to bring another layer of meaning. It doesn't have to have the viewer saying you are using the history of mass-produced items, which become collectables, which then become keepsakes and mementos in people's homes, on their dressers to be cherished. It doesn't have to be blatantly in your face. It is there and it is almost subliminal.

*If I came back to pieces you made a year ago?*

I usually dislike them – a lot (laughs), because I am somewhere else now. I look at them and go, "Ach! That was so yesterday" and I am usually not happy because you are always developing. Your dialogue with the material is always going to develop. Your life experiences are developing. Everything is shifting. Nothing is static.

Then again I am a hard judge. I do regularly look back at my old work because in there is usually a kernel of something else that I wasn't aware of and I can bring that out in a new way. For the moment I've had to put all my honours work away in boxes because it is too soon and I am working somewhere else now. I don't want this aesthetic relationship forming, because it is not where I am coming from.

*Do you find that connection happening in galleries with work that is not your own?*

No. There are very few glass artists that I can look at. This is where I can talk about what is probably my 'disdain' of glass. I just don't feel a connection with a lot of other

studio glass artists. There are exceptions like Jessica Loughlin. I'd walk into a gallery and see her work and it wouldn't matter. It would just hit me, but would it be a starting point for my work – no, absolutely not, because we are working in such different ways.

I would say there are other artists who do that for me – Olafur Eliasson, I think he is Danish. He just knocks my socks off. I walk through an exhibition of his and I feel it is just futile even being an artist when there are individuals like that creating what they are creating. Then because they are really experiential (installations), they gestate slowly. He uses glass in some of his work. He uses the science of the materials. He has a studio of one hundred and twenty people helping him develop his work. So he has this resource, and when I go to see one of his exhibitions I would say I have more of a relationship working in that way, than I have with other glass artists working currently.

That is not a criticism of their way of working, but it is not something I relate to. Even though I have a connection through the material, if someone said that the only way you are going to establish yourself as an artist is to work in this way, I'll just say (makes a rude gesture and laughs). I say no - because I disagree. For me there is so much more scope, and that is boxing it in. It is like painters just sticking to a canvas.

*There is nothing wrong with that unless you call it something else.*

Yes, call it something else. That's where there has to be an awakening. You can get onto 'studio glass', or with 'glass artists' – however you want to say it and there is a lot of criticism directed out at the contemporary art world because they don't accept glass. Well there is a reason for that. So don't just project out, use a bit of self-analysis and see why. There are reasons why. I think it is a time for people to start looking at their practice more closely and see where they want to position themselves.

It is time to call a spade a spade. That is why I am very careful when someone asks, are you a glass artist? When I first started using glass I used to be asked what I was doing at uni – are you doing visual arts, are you doing painting? I say, I'm doing glass and they ask if I was a glass artist. I say yes, I guess so and they asked do I make vases and stuff – an instant classification. No, I don't make vases. I'm at art school, why would I be making a fuck'n vase – seriously!

It all comes back to you evolving. You realise how something is going to be read by the way it is spoken about it. If in such a casual conversation as that [above] there are all these associations made, then putting an object in a gallery and expecting people to read it in a certain way involves considering all the aspects of how it is placed, where it is placed, what it is placed with.

*Don't enter cats into dog shows and then be surprised they aren't accepted?*

I'm in that show [Emma Varga organised group show called *Cats & Dogs*] and I am struggling. It is funny you used that analogy. It is a nice idea. It is collaborative, but with the whole concept behind it, I have boxed myself in and that has thrown me off-kilter.

*Because you have something in mind and you are trying to produce it?*

Yes and that is such a weird way for me to work. It is like I have had to think of a 'thing' and then make it.