

At the time of this interview Karen O'Clery was owner and director of Narek Galleries.

*Continuing from introductory chat...*

I'm having quite a few conversations with Wendy Fairclough at the moment because I'm curating a show of hers at the *Drill Hall Gallery* in August and she is currently casting brooms. She is on a great journey of discovery. She is finding it very difficult, but she finally got one out of the kiln that worked brilliantly. In amongst all of the difficulties, at one stage when I was talking to her she said, maybe she should just be making them out of tin. They are mundane objects and maybe they should be made from a cheap material.

*But she plays with a mystic quality in the surface of glass.*

Exactly, and she is also working with narrative in her engraving, but also with the metaphors. When Wendy talked of not working with glass I was a bit shocked, but then I thought it was actually a great idea. I did ask could we leave it until the next exhibition, because this one involves another institution (the ANU). I had to put forward a proposal for acceptance and I have already changed it from that original proposal. These things are organised so far ahead and I put forward one proposal involving what Wendy was excited about and was working on at that time. Twelve months later I talked to her and she has worked her way through it – done that.

The reason isn't that she is a 'flighty' person. It is that with the particular subject matter and the way she was working, she wasn't happy with the result. She kept going back to a piece she had made previously (and that had been on display here in an exhibition). She really wanted to work further on that theme. I had already been to the Drill Hall and said the work wasn't actually about water towers any more, we are going back to that '*Five AM*' piece, but it is a much bigger subject. That's what really concerns Wendy, and she's really excited about it at the moment.

*Audience have expectations as to what particular makers 'do'.*

They set boundaries, but I don't think that should happen. If at some point in time Wendy said to me, I really want to do those tin brooms, I would say, great go for it, because I trust her judgement. She is what I would classify as a highly intelligent artist. That is why I trust her judgement, even though she is often self-doubting. Some times it is the people who self-doubt the most that in the end are producing the work that has the greatest impact for me.

*Because they are pushing into the unknown?*

That is part of it, but it is not just that. It is that intellectual thing about questioning their reason for being, and why it is that they are making whatever it is that they are making, and why they are using the materials they are using. It is the particular issue they're questioning, or they actually feel in their gut and have to get out.

*So the expectation of galleries, or collectors is secondary?*

Absolutely, but I had to spend some time considering how I was going to approach the Drill Hall, seeing Wendy had already changed once. It is a trust thing all the way through. Fortunately, because I do shows at the Drill Hall fairly regularly (and have done so over a period of time) and I am one of the few people who puts through

proposals for exhibiting works of three dimensions (where mostly they have proposals for paintings and prints), or for what people in the fine arts classify as sculpture. There is very little 3D work that comes through. There is very little ceramics, glass or textiles. They trust my judgement. When I informed them about the change that Wendy was going through (a change I was actually very excited about) that was okay with them.

When Wendy wanted to move into tin, that was just like a lightening bolt of inspiration. Another reason for asking her to leave it for a bit was when you are working through a body of work you must be careful to stay focused and not be sidetracked. You need to consider those tracks as you go, but not be deflected.

*There is no hierarchy of materials?*

No.

*You say that emphatically?*

Yes, but it is raised in many areas. I have to admit, over a long period of time (and perhaps I am being intolerant) there are many people, in many institutions, who are working within the arts that I don't even bother to engage with any more, because I feel they are too narrow. When you are young and enthusiastic and you want to change the world, people ask you to be on a committee for this and a selection panel for that. You do that for a period of time and you often come across people who have diametrically opposed views (it happens in all walks of life). They seem narrow. There is a way of engaging with those people and sometimes you learn from them, but a point is reached when you have distilled your own beliefs and although they are not rigid, you just think you are not going to waste your time with that anymore.

You feel, "I don't want to have that 'hierarchy of materials' debate again. I have done it too many times with 'that' institution, or with 'that' person. I will be open to what comes in from somewhere else, but until something changes it is not worth it". You realise as time goes on, your time is ever limited and the conversations you want to have are those where you are learning still, or where you can spark and both sides come up with something that hasn't occurred to anybody before.

*When someone walks in your door with a body of work what determines your level of interest in that work?*

It is the work. I understand and I realise that people need to make boundaries and classify things – because it makes it more comfortable for them. Sometimes it is difficult for people to accept something for what it is. I think perhaps our art training is to blame for the fact that people need to categorise. Maybe not just art training, but education as a whole.

I give the example of the way my children were educated. I sent them to a French school where they learnt everything totally in French. The reason I did that is that I did a bit of research and to me the French (certainly in Australia) educate people to think, to analyse and to come up with their own theories and ideas. They are very disciplined, but they don't seem to be rigid. They are more philosophical in approach.

My reaction is more visual and more the feeling of the heart. I am responding to the work because of its composition, its form, its luminosity, its hardness, its softness, its

strength and how all of those things relate. It is not necessarily the material. You get to the material at some stage, but it is all happening at the same time for me.

*This has developed over time with experience?*

I think so, because I had absolutely no art school training what so ever, I am assuming it is experience. I have been running the gallery over forty years. I don't know if my aesthetic has changed. It has matured and I have learnt a lot, but I think that the basic ingredients are very much the same as they were originally.

The nucleus of it is the composition. That obviously is a formal approach, but it is also taking into account all of those elements that one would normally consider in a composition.

*Are there elements in the glass that make it an interesting material for you?*

I find that really difficult, because to me glass is one of the most problematic materials. That is because of its seductive qualities. There is a lot of glasswork that I just do not respond to at all. I find it ugly, badly decorative junk, but the reason that it is out there and people are buying it is because it is luscious and it glints. Maybe I am a bit jaded, because I have gone to SOFA for so many years and if you want to see colour and movement and glitz – go to SOFA and look at all the American galleries showing glass. It is scary.

The first time I went to SOFA I took the work of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott [Australian contemporary ceramic artist]. I felt like I was sitting this incredibly quite, still space amongst a cacophony of noise. It was terrifying. Because of my understanding of the American political and cultural situation was not a complimentary one, I had been very nervous about going, but I thought I really needed to try it. I was thrilled there was a small percentage of people who came to that show (I don't know what percentage) and actually responded. When they reached my booth they stopped and you could see that they were melting and softening. They were awestruck and they said it was so beautiful. When talking to many of the ones who stopped I found they were actually quite well informed. They were there to find those quiet places. That was exciting.

*Glass can have soft luminosity that is almost meditative.*

They are the qualities I find that I respond to in glasswork.

*This gallery [Narek] was a church.*

I don't know how this fits together, but well proportioned buildings allow people who spend time in them to have a sense of well being. For me that doesn't have anything to do with religion, or Gods, it has to do with composition and proportion, volumes and space. A lot of people say to me that this is such a beautiful building and they tell me it makes them feel calm. It is a building that I respond to.

The reason that I am in this place, rather than in the city, is that I respond very much to natural landscapes. I don't like to have manmade cacophonies around me. I don't need to go to have a coffee with everybody at eleven in the morning, or have a drink with everybody at six at night. I would prefer to sit on my little deck out here and watch snakes or birds – watch natural behaviour in a natural landscape. Their antics amuse me incredibly. The forms I see in a landscape fulfil me.

*Could you be talking about the object as a landscape?*

In a way, possibly that is right. It is the way I might read the form and patterns in a shell, or a bird skeleton, or a rock.

*Your hand went to your chest. Are these are 'centring' responses?*

I think you are right, but I don't see the analytical business of the composition as being a separate issue.

*Works can range from 'right in your face' narratives to 'open' landscapes that draw the narrative from you.*

I am open to that broad range. I think the success of it (whether it is direct 'in-your-face', or incredibly indistinct – leaving you to draw it out) still harks back to all the other considerations you are making at the time. I would never say a work is too much in my face, because sometimes that is an element that is absolutely necessary and very much part of it.

*You feel as a responder it is important to bring that openness to a work?*

Yes, I think so.

*Are you surprised when works take you to unexpected places?*

That is a hard question because it implies an expectation. I can't answer that.

*Do you recognise ambiguity as a quality in the glass?*

Yes, and that can also be a quality in the glass if it is sandblasted, or it has a clouded surface on it.

*Is there a difference in the way you read glass and ceramics?*

For this question one has to presuppose it is not a situation where a new work is in front of you and you are not sure what material it is made from. It is going back to presupposing there are qualities in certain materials. I find that hard.

*There is a resistance to classify based on material?*

Yes. I do have a resistance to that. For me to enjoy a work the material that it is made from is part of it, but it is not an important, or an essential part. I can think about the material after I really respond to that work. Then I can talk about (or think about) the materiality and the surface that would not have been possible in any other material, but it is not what I'm looking for initially.

*You talk of the object as something that causes a reaction in you. This is as an event. This is an 'art' experience.*

Possibly. I think that is a reasonable assumption.

*You are looking at works as art experiences, not as decorative objects.*

Yes, but the decorative can be part of it. The thing you have to be careful of in that process is that a work that I'm particularly responding to (that becomes an experience), I believe doesn't have to be in this beautiful building, or in the landscape, to allow that experience. I think a work could be sitting on an asphalt pavement and you would still be able to have that experience. That is if the work is so successful that it has that timeless quality.

*The context doesn't make, or break the work?*

I don't think so.

*But there are places conducive to certain readings.*

I agree with you. I think in many instances more people than not read works based on context, and I think that is sad.

*Do you find artists working from the wrong premise?*

Absolutely. There are many different 'wrong' premises. Often it is to do with personality. Possibly there may be lack of intellect and a shallow vision of life. It may be narrow vision. Sometimes they may not have it in them to be good anyway.

*You're implying that someone who is an intrinsically good artist will intuit the correct direction?*

Yes. I also would not preclude the fact that somebody (like Wendy for example) could go off track for a period of time, but I don't think it would be because she is working from the wrong premise. She may have been distracted by something. I think the premise is at the very core and I don't think an artist like Wendy would miss that.

*Words like 'classification', 'categorisation' and 'strategy' were all 'red flagged' by you?*

Yes. For the same reason I was just talking about. It is closing off possibilities and that is not a good idea. The word 'strategy' is a real problem because of my background. Having lived in Canberra for a long time I dealt often with public servants and that was the antitheses of what I would be thinking about as I was working to develop my art practice. I am reading 'strategy' as an artificial structure. Then there are 'targets'. You have a 'strategy' to reach a 'target'. The 'strategy' has steps that are noted down as 'dot points'.

*You don't want to see anybody manipulating you through a series of calculated decisions to an end point because that will 'kill' the work.*

(Nods positively) Yes.

*And words like 'context' are containing words?*

Yes, but also 'context' to me is a prop word. It is a word that is sometimes used to support, or justify, and I don't like it. After I read through that information from you I briefly watched QandA where there was Peter Garret and Christopher Pine. I only saw it for about five minutes and in those five minutes the word context was used so many

times I switched it off. I became really angry, because it was used as a justification for all sorts of specious arguments.

*In your judgement there are absolutes that are not altered by context?*

Yes, totally. I feel that strongly. For me to be responding to a work the 'absoluteness' is there without the necessity of a context. It can be on the pavement, or on a plinth in a church.

Like any curator, or person who is wandering around from one place to another with great lumps of clay and glass, obviously there are stages where you will place a piece in a particular position then pick it up to move it somewhere else. You will feel a great degree of satisfaction if that the second place feels even better. There are heights and eye levels, but the work itself should still be able to speak to you no matter where it is.

That said, one of Wendy's pieces in her last show here was an installation piece and she came and spent a full day in the gallery getting it right. I had sent her internal images of the building and I had set up the rest of the show. I had left a certain space, which I felt it was going to work and she had also agreed. I allowed her to spend a full day. Normally I don't allow the artist to be here with me when I am setting up a show, because I enjoy doing that quietly and individually. I do not like people 'rabbiting' in my ear about placement. I prefer to come to those conclusions myself over a period. I am very happy for the artist to come in once I have finished. If that artists asks me what I thought about some point, I am happy to have those conversations and even try a couple of variations, but generally that doesn't occur. With Wendy doing that installation I left her to it, because she had already approved of what I had done up to that point. I knew she was going to take a long time and I knew she wanted to familiarise herself with the environment and the space and how it was reacting with the other work, so I just went off and did other stuff.

There is a very interesting end result to that work because once she had finished (we were both really happy with it), a client came up from Melbourne to view the work and actually bought it. But obviously it is an installation work. There is no way it is going to go in the same space. So the first thing I had to do was contact Wendy and ask how she felt about this going into a different space. The client was more than happy to send me images of where it was going. I asked did she want that and then negotiated. She said yes sure and I sent her the photos and we had chats, but we were a bit concerned and Wendy said she thought she needed to go to the site herself.

I rang the client and said I thought Wendy needed to come to the site, was that all right with them. The client said they would be thrilled. I then said that the artist can't pay the airfare, so it looked like you and I will have to do that. She agreed that we pay half each. So the work itself ended up in a totally new situation.

Wendy's work went from the second window, right out and up the main body of this building, up the steps and into the second part of the building. It was brilliant.

*It is an interesting point that any work may move out into a space. It is as if a decent work has an aura.*

I think that is quite correct. In this sort of situation the work needs to occupy a space bigger than itself. I have a responsibility to the artist and I know Wendy is so incredibly

particular about how her works are arranged (and all of her works are arranged). It is never one work placed on a plinth. Everything is a combination of components.

*In your forty years in this role have you noticed trends in the glass movement?*

Oh yes. My first exposure to glass would have been maybe in the mid-seventies. Sam Herman had just moved into the JamFactory and he was making his [blobs] (laughs) and everyone thought he was fantastic because he was from America. I fell for that as well. From there I think glass in Australia has been on a constant up and down curve. It has really been dependant on which particular personalities held sway at any particular time and which institutions had the funding.

You would probably have to say that the Canberra School of Art has had a huge impact because of the international connections that Klaus had before he arrived. [The Bullseye connection.] In some ways I am a bit sad about that Bullseye connection because even though I am aware that it has provided enormous opportunities for a number of glass people in Australia, I think it has also been restrictive and has streamed some people into a particular direction. Although I am aware that Klaus has always negotiated with Bullseye to enable them to make glass that can achieve what makers want. I am concerned that it has had too large and encompassing an influence.

*Obviously it is technically focussed on a specific material and that material has certain qualities that can channel the works.*

Absolutely, and that I think is a restriction.

*Have you seen a growth in installation and 'off the plinth' work?*

That's a movement that has been occurring in Australia for a long time, but again that has had ups and downs. It depends on the artists who are using it at any particular time. A lot of the installation work that I have seen I feel has just been created because it is trendy to make installation work at that time, but you could say that about any kind of art, couldn't you? It is a tricky question because some people talk about moving away from the plinth for reasons other than their own creative drives. They talk about it because they think it is going to have a greater impact on curators, or because you can't sell work on plinths any more. It can be a political decision and I find that hard. I am sure that if anybody did a study of three or four of the major art schools in Australia over a period of fifty years they would be able to track very heavy influences by particular heads of schools and/or departments at certain periods of time. Then you will see radiating out from those schools a number of artists who are following particular influences.

*Going to venues like SOFA how do you read the standing of Australian studio glass on the international scene?*

It is very highly respected. It is possible to say that Australian glass is recognised as being of an international standard.

*On the general scene how is glass seen as a practice?*

Youthful.

I understand that people who are working with a particular material do love the materiality of it for certain reasons (I don't know what those reasons are) and they have a very deep engagement with that.

Again referring to Wendy, she came from a background of sculpture and printmaking. Then she saw hot glass and wanted to participate in that. She does have a love of the material, but she is not restricted to that material. That is my point. It is also that she can then go on and think about how some of her ideas might be fulfilled more successfully in another material. That isn't in any way inhibiting her love of that material.

*Returning to the list of questions are there points that have not been raised?*

There is an interesting point where you ask does my response to a work change over a period of time. Some times it does, but I don't know if change is the right word. I think it certainly develops and that can keep on occurring. The other point that occurred to me about that was over a forty-year period of time I can look back now at work that I thought was really good forty years ago and I think now it is probably mediocre – but not an enormous amount. There are certain artists whose names occur to me and I think of their work as [ums]. There are others that I have known for all of that period of time and I have a huge respect for them as I always have.

*What of the relationship between the time a work is created and its power to engage?*

When I talked of liking those early works I was talking of my ability to be able to read it. I am more experienced, I have seen a lot more work and my level of maturity is much greater. A powerful work is always that. Obviously when it is made, it is of that time. It could be a metaphor for a major humanitarian crisis of that time, but that should still resonate in five hundred years time.