

Abridged interview with Wayne Pearson: 07/04/06

Subject: Australian kiln glass with specific reference to 'style' and glass artists Deb Cocks, Warren Langley, Jessica Loughlin and Richard Whiteley

*At the time of this interview Robert Bell was a senior curator at the Australian National Gallery.*

*Are there elements that make Australian glass recognizable?*

There probably weren't back in the late seventies. We were so eager to experiment (blowing, casting, slumping, stained glass, flat glass) that everything was taken on board. It was pretty hard to pick something that was made about 1978 and say, 'yes, it was definitely Australian' (unless it used very Australian imagery).

Of the people you are talking about, Warren Langley was one of the first to try to get a signature for Australian glass in a rather overt way – putting flags in it, nationalistic sorts of things. Apart from him there were a few people like Tony Hanning, who were early ones using 'Australiana' images (gum trees and flora and fauna images). I don't think there was anything that said, "yes, this is Australian", as opposed to Japanese, as opposed to Indian, as opposed to American, Canadian or whatever.

That has change in the last five to ten years. Not in an overt way (in that it used Australian images), because I think that sort of imagery has now moved over into much more popular glass - a kind of semi-production, unique series glass – Pantano and people like that have identified a particular market. They located themselves in a place and they make glass that is expressive of that place – whether it is the Gold Coast, Central Australia, or where ever.

*Commercialism?*

Yes and No. It is commercial, because they have identified what people are interested in. That market is possibly drawn from people, who want something that looks Australian. They can say, "I bought this in Australia". It looks Australian. The guy lives in the Gold Coast, or in Alice Springs, the work is located by place and that's a valid part of practice

But the more studio-based work is driven by concerns about art, concerns about sculpture, or design or whatever. I think most people are now moving away from anything overt and their work is now taking its place in the international market. I think what makes it Australian is that they are Australian. You can walk into Heller gallery in New York (as a hypothetical example) and you could see Jessica Loughlin, Richard Whiteley, or you could see anybody. It's not going to scream Australian glass art, but what makes it interesting for that market is that the artists are Australian. On the other hand these artists are actually not flouting their 'Australian-ness'.

You pick up *New Glass* magazine, or any of the glass journals and you see an advertisement for the Bullseye Glass Gallery in Portland, or a glass gallery in Europe. There are the names. There's Richard Whiteley, or there's Matthew Curtis, or any of the names. They are there, and they are taking their place along with everybody else. There is no little bracket afterwards saying this artist is Australian – but people do know that.

*'People talk about 'grabbing it from everywhere' as an Australian characteristic.*

It's a characteristic of anybody who is enthusiastic about a field. I don't think it's any different from the way Americans actually approached contemporary glass – American glass up until Labino and these artists right here in this gallery (Australian National Gallery) – the studio artists who brought glass into the universities.

Before then American glass was *Steuben* and it was *Tiffany*. And it was commercial glass. There was almost no 'scene'. With the great fervour of the Americans, once they realized they could actually make glass in art schools, with small kilns on their own, with small groups of people – you didn't need the Steuben factory let you in the door, it was open slather – the whole world was there.

They were drawing from anywhere in the world as much as anyone else, so I don't think that's a particular Australian trait. People could say it's a Japanese trait to borrow from everywhere. It's a little bit too easy to make that assumption. We had to draw from somewhere because we didn't have our own traditions.

For Australian in 1965, if you said 'glass' most people would think *Crown Corning* pressed glass. Any tradition we had was probably carnival glass. There are huge armies of collectors of carnival glass – high colour, high imagery and sentimental subjects.

The excitement for the first lot of Australian [studio] glass was that we could do anything. It was amazing that somebody could actually blow glass. It didn't need to be 'Australian' – it just needed to be done here.

*By what criteria do you evaluate glass?*

Depends on why I am evaluating it. If I am doing it for my job here – as a curator for an art museum – we all contribute to a collection strategy, a ten-year plan. In my case for Australian art: What do we already have? Where are our strengths? How do we match those up with perceived strengths in the field, and what can we achieve? What do we expect the end result to be? You narrow it down to each collecting area. I deal with ceramics and textiles and furniture and all sorts of other things.

We are the only museum that actually did start from scratch – with a policy. Every other museum in Australia started with 100 years of collecting. We decided we would show in Australian art achievements through most of the key people working. It's not encyclopaedic, but we try and identify who are the leaders in the field – whether they are the one-shot wonders, or whether they are going to go on.

*What do you look for?*

I go to all the shows – final year shows, and universities – wherever I can. They are often students you have followed through their courses. You know clearly that they are people who know what they are doing. There are others who are struggling. At the end of the three or four years study you expect them to be on top of at least the techniques they want to be involved in. It is easy to be impressed by someone who has had access to an art school (to the technicians, techniques, state-of-the-art kilns, grinding machines, whatever). The big crunch is when they get out of art school; they are back in their garages, or their studios. Then they really have to swim for a few years – to find out how they are going to translate their interest in art school into their real life.

*Are we talking about a 'voice'?*

Yes, a voice and a technical capacity to do. In every 'end of year' series of shows, there are a few that stand out. You log those away, thinking it will be interesting to see what they will do. They pop up again about a year later. They are in their first group show. They've got a mentorship; you start to watch them a bit. My feeling is they need to be out of art school for a few years before you would be starting to think about their work for collection because inevitably they are bearing the influence of their teachers. You go through a program of study; you come out of Canberra School of Art and you are infected by it. That's a good thing. It's a school and a trend and a part of the landscape of Australian glass, but I want to see how they deal with that because that is their training.

*There's the signature of the college on their work?*

There is, even if it's not overt. If they are going to go somewhere they need to work on their own terms. You need to know what they are standing for. They come out with a Masters degree and they've chosen a topic and they will do that to the best of their ability.

Usually that's really interesting – whatever they have chosen. If it's investigating technique, idea or concept, the good ones will do that really well and it will be a great springboard for them. But you don't want to pigeonhole them at that point – "At art school you said you were going to do pate de verre and investigate family relationships." Then a year later they are blowing glass and talking about the environment.

We wouldn't be acquiring their work at that point. It's just the beginning. I watch people for a long time. There is no limit to that time. If in three years out they have done something sensational, well you'd probably want to consider that, with others you might wait for ten years, then others never at all.

*Are you looking form a relationship?*

Yes I think so. The relationship is not with the person; it's with what they do. You need to understand where they are coming from, say five years later, after they have graduated, they do their first, or second show and there is some really competent work there, I need to know how they come to it. I have to write a report on this to people who are not expert in this field. Every acquisition we make has a five or six page 'scientific' report that says why this is important, what is the history of this person, and why the government should spend money to look after this for hundreds of years? That forces you into a very analytical assessment, which is good. The more you know about the person, the more persuasive your argument will be. "I've watched this person for five years I've seen that; they've gone down this track and they've experimented here and they have done this and that and I believe, with the experience I bring to this, that this is a particularly interesting moment at which to consider their work."

*A 'journey' put into context?*

I think so, because if you don't know, you are just saying it's a very nice blue vase.

It's an object. But the object really stands for the idea and the idea is resident in the person. On the other hand, there are anonymous objects you may want to consider for other reasons, but these are probably not contemporary things.

*Aesthetic judgment?*

That's part of it. Any collecting agency pays for that in its staff. That will be different for each person. You might look at ten works from an artist at an exhibition and think this is the one. This really works. It's got characteristics about it that, on purely aesthetic design and craft terms, it really holds together in my view.

*But beyond that it has context?*

Yes, and it may not be the piece the artist wants you to have. They may say this is my favourite. It's not that cut and dry, but usually you're aligned. Usually an artist looks at a body of their own work and they make an assessment about what may be the best out of a group of ten things. It may not be the one you think is the one that will work, because you might already have work by the artist in the collection and you might want to show some development. You might have work by other artists in the same circle and you might want to show a different aspect of that way of working with the material as exemplified by that artist.

*You are looking for technical competence, but more than that, something of a journey, a development?*

That's right and once you have acquired someone's work you don't want to abandon them either. They are thirty years old. They have been working for seven, or eight years since graduation. They've had a major couple of shows. This is a major show. You say, "let's get something". At that point you don't want to draw a line through their name on a list. Once you acquire something you have a commitment to them for a long period. They could have fifty years of creativity in front of them. At the point of acquisition you amass a lot of information. You start a file, catalogues. Suddenly they're in, their work is in the collection. We know everything we can know about them to this point. So you want to be able to stay with them, watch them. In five years time they may take some new direction, some will not.

*A relationship?*

It is. We don't abandon them at acquisition with "got that". It is not 'stamp collecting'. A lot of private collectors want that 'one of everybody'. We can't have one of everybody, in some ways it might be better to have ten of one person's work.

Sometimes you are not acquiring somebody's work until quite deep into their life. I've been here five years and I know there are people we don't have in the collection that have been working for twenty-five years. Klaus Moje was an interesting one in that sense. We had two pieces in 2000 and they were both from the early eighties. So there was twenty years of work that we didn't show. Yet he is here in Canberra running an art school. He is a key figure. We started to re-balance that.

*Is there such a thing as an artist's signature style?*

Yes. We are sitting in a gallery now full of 'signature style'. Take a glance here and you know what you are looking at. They are all signature styles. To the ordinary public it might all just be glass and they may not even know it's glass. They wouldn't know anybody's name. None of these are world famous names. Chilhuli might be because he is a personality. Anybody else people wouldn't know, but they probably recognize the style. "I saw this glass and it was this squiggly, organic thing" and you think Marvin Lipofsky, that's his signature style. He's moved on from that now. People would probably recognize Tiffany, or Klaus Moje if you were deeper into the

field. People do have signature styles. They needn't be compelled to stay with their style.

*What are the advantages and disadvantages of signature style?*

There can be advantages to the artist in the market place, because they have something to market. Possibly at the high-end collector's market, which is quite a potent force for people working in contemporary glass, collectors want a guarantee that what they are buying is not just a fad. They want to see a development.

We [the National Gallery] don't want to see anything. In a way we should just be responding. We (in museums) don't want to direct anybody to do anything. I don't want anybody to do anything for me. I really hate to hear people saying, "I'm making something you might find interesting". I think, "No, don't make anything for me. I have nothing to do with this".

Signature style is a hook for artists who want to develop a body of work around an idea. And if signature style and the idea are the same thing, mosaic glass for instance with Klaus Moje, that's what he was trained in, steeped in it; his family was in it; that's what he does. He came here with that style intact. In 1982 we knew what Klaus Moje stood for. He has developed that over the last 25 years.

He himself would say that by being in Australia, instead of Germany, he has opened his eyes up to light, landscape and loosened up his style. He is doing work that he may not have ever done if he'd stayed in Germany – colour, and freer shape; maybe responding to a freer sort of life.

*Cultural?*

Yes. If he were living in Germany, he wouldn't be living in the Australian bush like he does now. And yet he has remained true to his way of working; things he is comfortable doing, skilled at. You compare work he has made this year with something he made in 1980 and I think it is clear they are from the same artist. In that sense signature style has kept him in view. But if he had come to Australia in 1982 and wanted to make a complete break, wanted to work with glass in a completely different way, he would have done that and who knows what he would have done. We [National Gallery] would have responded to that.

*You don't think that remaining with those formal elements has limited him?*

No, I don't think so at all, but someone who is twenty-five may experiment with a particular body of work they are comfortable with for ten years and then they may take a year out. Then later make a complete U turn, abandon the field all together, or, having established themselves, want to explore some other of the rich traditions of glass. Great, fine, we don't drop them because they have changed style. The good collectors will stay with people because they are interested in them. The market will respond to that because everyone wants something new and fresh.

Signature style is only valid when it actually serves everybody's needs. I think for those that cling onto it because that's all they can do, it starts to become an impediment. You start to think they are just churning work out.

*You see this?*

Sometimes and if they have gone into production, they've put themselves into another position in the art world. Not as a studio artist who does unique works to show in exhibition in the traditional way, but somebody who has decided to have a business.

They have an idea they would be foolish to throw away. They do a business plan. This is what I'm going to sell to the market. It doesn't mean I wouldn't be interested in them. They are now a 'production artist'. It is a convention to have production work as well as studio work. Ceramicists have 'bread and butter' lines.

*It's not a criticism?*

No. You would look at both. Suppose Klaus thinks his work is worth putting into production. He might not even make it. He might have it produced for him somewhere else as the 'Klaus Moje' line of red vases with a facsimile signature. He is working like Philippe Stark, or Mark Newson, or any number of designers. There are a lot of positions to take. I would not condemn anybody.

*Going specifically to the four selected artists, are there formal elements, elements of personality, or elements of literal, or cultural landscape evident?*

All those things are in all those people you have chosen.

Richard Whitely is at an interesting point because he has chosen an intensive way of working – labour intensive, material intensive. There are high stakes with the way he works. It has been about a bit of a signature. He was one of the first to do large-scale casting and to get that right. Clearly there were influences from Libensky and the Czech artists, which he acknowledges and we can all see how that has provided him with a framework for working. He has experimented with that. He's now moving into different sort of work, which is about sequence I think, less about the monumental single thing, more about a sequential way of working – serial work. These are sequences of objects set out on tables. He is now finding a slightly different direction to work. It's using his interest in casting. He is using one of the great things about casting – that is you can repeat it. There is an interesting thing about casting as there is about blowing. Blowing is a way of working that is quick therefore it can make the work accessible. If you are just casting one monumental thing, you are investing everything in that. If the tiniest thing goes wrong with it you're done, whereas the process of casting does imply that you can do it again, another one and another. I see the way he is working now as somehow investigating the notion that there are sequences of objects and they're interchangeable elements. I'm interested to see where he goes with that.

*There are formal elements.*

Yes. If we said he has a signature maybe that is it an interest in formal geometry, but we will see where he goes with that. He is a very precise person. He has also to organize his life around a different way of working. He is a full-time head of department. He's got a high profile position. He has to involve other people in his practice. He has to plan his work. I think if you have to say anything about Richard it is about his planning. That's what drives his work and he is good at that.

*An imprint of personality?*

Yes there is. I would not expect Richard to be flying off doing something crazy. He might do something like that. He might take himself out of his practice. He might take six months of to do a residency, go trekking, or work in another material.

I kind of expect people to do that – take time out and do something else. You can get into a terrible routine. With someone like Richard, time is precious. He works for high stakes in terms of failure. He could spend months on something and it could smash at the last minute. He may well decide to take time-out to do something else.

*Warren.*

He was one of the first to be working as a kind of sculptor with glass. He can do a number of things – blowing, casting, mould glass.

I think he has always had an agenda in his work, a message of some sort, a narrative. Not an agenda in a negative sense. He has wanted his work to say something. Whether it is saying something about his immediate environment, which has often been about the coast, or whether some political statement like those early things he did with flags and imagery.

He is someone who has been characterized by his willingness to deal with commercial glass – neon, casting, architectural glass; all those sorts of things that in the purist world are outside the realm of the studio artist (making art in studios and showing it in galleries). He was one of the first to start shifting his technique into a commercial world. He started up a company actually making moulded glass for architecture

*He separates those two.*

He does now, but I think at the point there was an excitement for him. I think he liked (and still likes) being a bit of a provocateur, bringing crass commercial ideas into the refined world of glass, using industrial techniques – stacking pieces, sand-blasting and making work that was closely aligned to design trends. Those works in the eighties – those stacked pieces, the colours were right, looking good with architecture, with interior design, a post-modernist pallet.

*An open sourcing of ideas?*

I always thought so, and once he has decided to do these things he has stayed with them. It is interesting – neon, fibre-optics have a tenuous connection with glass through light and transmission of light. He still links himself with the world of glass. I think if he has a signature I think it is his willingness to step out and work in the world of commercial design.

He is a free thinker. He likes to move across things. I think he likes to be something of a provocateur. I'm not sure how this sits with his position of 'not quite an elder statesman'. He has been doing it for a long time. He's got a lot of work behind him. He's got a lot to draw from.

The projects that he is taking now means he does have to plan. He did a project with us while Ausglass [Conference] was on. That involved planning. It involved permissions from all sorts of agencies. He is obviously comfortable with that.

*Deb Cocks?*

Deb certainly has a signature. You recognize her work wherever she is. In a sense she has a signature in the sense that an artist (painter or printmaker) might have a signature. It is a literal signature (handwriting) because she is an illustrator, basically an illustrator working with glass. You don't approach her work because of the quality

of the glass particularly. The forms are pretty straightforward. They are bowls. You are not expecting her to suddenly make some great sculptural glass thing. You are engaged immediately with the narrative and inevitably the personality behind it. Her narrative has come out of her implausible story. She has moved out into the country. Her work is about her life and observations about her life and that's what makes it continually engaging. It's signature and she makes lots of things. She is very productive and she works regularly. It is an identifiable way of working. You walk into the *Glass Artists Gallery* and see Deb Cock's latest work, but you don't dismiss it for that because she's a storyteller, I want to see what her latest story is. I'm not expecting her to do some radical mark making, or drawing, but everything is always interesting. You always want to look at something. What joke is she making now, what story is behind this? That is what makes her interesting for me.

*Jessica's work?*

Jessica started to work in this way at art school here [Canberra]. We saw her work. She has used that as a very strong platform for her independent work. She has a way of working that is recognizable, this minimalist approach, her colour palette, her earlier interest in diaries, in handwriting, the faded narrative if you like. She stated herself she is interested in the landscape elements of where she is – the salt lakes of South Australia, the mirages, the horizon line.

I think if there is anything that is characteristic of her work it is this centring of the horizon. She's done that in very different ways. We have just bought one of her works. It was one of the square panels with a just perceptible carved line in the middle, like a mirage.

I see her work as narrative even though she has removed the literal aspects from the narrative. She has taken away the handwriting; she has taken away the boat form, very minimal and sequential. Instead of writing this long handwritten sentence on a work with the whole narrative residing in that actual piece, each piece now is part of a larger narrative. You don't have to read everything in that single wall panel or that single sheet of glass. You see that as part of a larger story that she is investigating.

*The piece becomes a portal into something bigger?*

I think so. She got to a point where she was really introspective; the work was all about diaries. Her way of working is actually very physical. She is grinding, grinding, her hands are on the work the whole time. I think in the pieces from a few years ago, the hand was very evident in the work – the handwriting,

*Trace of the doing?*

Yes, physically grinding away with dental tools. I see less of that now with a more gestural way of working. She's talking about the bigger issues. She's talking about landscape, and memory, and relationship with landscape and landform without having to spell it all out for us.

*She has gone through the surface to opened into the vastness.*

That's right. I think each of her current works (that I have seen) instead of taking us into this hermetic world, we are now led out. Each one is a little capsule of something bigger and it's believable, it's plausible. You see this little white square up on the wall and its white on white with a little horizon line. You're transported to something bigger through it.

You could say transcending – in the way it takes you away from the frame of the thing and you think about something bigger. I think that's a nice aspect of her work and she's able to do that within this very reductive framework, using very simple means. Where that leads her I don't know. That can be her pathway to who knows where, or maybe to not being able to do anything because it is so reductive.

She's obviously engage with the idea of light; she doesn't use much colour in her work. Light is a very important partnership in her work. She's exploring that very successfully. I guess her signature is the way she uses light to become a partner in the work.

*Minimalist?*

She's taking away one of your frameworks for liking glass. She's not giving the viewer the 'gorgeousness' they expect with glass. So your breath's not taken away because of the fabulous colour, or the jewel-like quality of the glass and all these sorts of things, but it's breathlessness in another way. You think this is so sublime. That is what I mean. She is taking away the traditional framework for people who like glass – the prettiness, the glamour – and replacing it with a different sense of the material and she is doing it very successfully.

*Meditative?*

Yes, that is a good term – 'meditative'. It doesn't insinuate itself onto you immediately, but you know it's there. It's not just 'dumb cool' – cool for the sake of it. She doesn't get those surfaces by cutting up a sheet. Everything is subtle

*High technical competence?*

Yes. You couldn't get away with doing this unless you knew what you were doing.

*We have talked about landscape?*

Landscape is always there for all sorts of artists. Going back to your first question, "What's Australian about this?" and just thinking about those four artists, all of them identifying themselves as Australians. They're all out in the world as Australians.

They are all dealing with space in some way whether it's urbane or country. They all chose a particular pathway and the work is believable. If there is some quality of Australian-ness about them, it's believability. None of them are 'doing' styles. They're not selling themselves as stylists in glass, or designers in glass. You can see the connection with who they are.

*Expression of who they are?*

Yes and people like that in any field. That works for them very well. Whether Jessica showing her work in Düsseldorf, or Portland, or London, it is believable. You don't have to know other things to get it, and maybe that's what puts Australian artists in the ranks of all sorts of artists whose work is believable. You don't think they have made it up, done something for a market.

*Genuine?*

I think so, but they are not cave dwellers. They are aware of the way the world is. They're savvy.

*Marked by sincerity?*

I would think so.