



Denis O'Connor
Fragment of Venus
 1993
 kiln cast glass, copper, sandstone
 58 x 28 x 12 cm



Denis O'Connor
Life to Line drawing III (Adrift series)
 2010
 charcoal on paper
 200 x 150 cm

I've moved away from glass over the years and I have changed my studio over. I haven't really made any glass since the early nineties.

But you feature as an Australian studio glass artist before then.

Yes, very early. I went to National Art School. In '72 I left school to study painting and drawing. While I was at the National Art School I won a scholarship to go to Leonora Glass (Philips, Newcastle) to work in the design room. That's where my glass contact actually started. I had not been to a glass school in that respect. I just grew into it through the industry. I started through the factory and continued with my art course. 1974 was the start of those big years when Sam Herman came out to the JamFactory. I worked with Bill Boysen who came out to the eastern states and built a mobile glass blowing trailer under the funding of Crown Corning and the Ministry. I was a second or third year student then and because I was working at the glass factory Kate Morrisey gave me a call from the Ministry and asked if I would like to assist this glassblower from America. I said probably not. I'm busy enough (laughs). As a nineteen year old I was pretty ignorant of all this stuff happening within the contemporary craft revival of the time.

I was just working at the factory, but I met Julio Santos and a few other people through the factory – including Göran Wärf who was out in Australia at that time. Then it started to snowball. I was sponsored by the Craft Board to help Bill for six months. That's when people started to build small furnaces – Peter Minson and Peter Skillitzi – '74 or '75. Later Nick Mount worked with Dick Marquis in the same way. The Crafts Board had a three-prong initiative – Sam Herman, Dick Marquis and Bill Boysen and they spread themselves over different states to introduce the glassblowing phenomenon across Australia.

We had our first Ausglass conference in 1978 at Sydney College with Maureen Cahill. There was Maureen and Warren Langley. About twenty-nine of us ended up at Sydney.

And getting excited?

(laughs) You are so right, yes.

You take opportunities when they are available.

That's what my PhD was all about. I finished that project a couple of years ago. I built a furnace out here [20 kilometres out of Wagga Wagga]. I went down to Caulfield Institute when they wanted to start the glass in 1977 and I built a furnace down there. I went overseas in 1980 and worked in Copenhagen as a guest student under Finn Lynggaard and at the Isle of Wight Glass Studios for a year. I needed to go away because we had nothing here to teach me, and I didn't want to go to America or Pilchuck. That didn't excite me at all in those days.

I really like the relationship between designer and glassblower. I guess that is my background. Even though I came back and built my own studio and got into all that 'making stuff' – it was the craft ethos of the time – being the sole owner doing everything from sweeping the floors to building a furnace. But that didn't last too long with me, because I wasn't that sort of character. You learn those things about yourself.

What sort of character?

Being in charge of everything. I ended up building the first furnace at Canberra with Klaus Moje. When I built one here in Wagga, Klaus came across and said he heard I was building a furnace here and could I come over and build one at Canberra. I told him there were better glass furnace builders than me. He said maybe, but he could not get them to agree and nothing was getting done. He had big glass pots that were sent over from Amsterdam, and Nick Mount had his input. Richard Morrell brought some big tank blocks. I said I would go over and put something together. We built that around 1984. Klaus started the glass off in Canberra and we were running.

On building the furnace here – John Elsegood was the lecturer of ceramics at Wagga. He was running a furnace in the ceramics section. It was he and Judy Le Lievre who started the idea of the glass collection at Wagga Gallery in the late seventies. John took off to do glass full time and I started teaching in the sculpture department here at Wagga with glass. To keep it alive we taught glass under sculpture.

That was the time in education we went through the 'Advanced Colleges' change. I did a diploma of Education and taught as well. At that time they were encompassing everything under universities and pulling in advanced colleges. The fine art department which I was part of underwent massive change. It was wound down. I was teaching drawing as well. It was a lovely lifestyle running a studio and teaching. Those things don't last.

I got out of the glass because I wasn't making what I wanted to make. I found I was compromising all the time with glass. I wasn't technical and all that didn't come easy to me. The glass was forcing me to compromise my own expression. I was making objects that I wasn't really connected to. So I slowly drifted back into just drawing. I was teaching large scale drawing in the eighties and working on that.

Then we travelled on and off all the time. Rhonda did a year teaching in Canada so I went across as a househusband and did my masters. I already had my masters in education from

a couple of years previous (thinking I might have a future in art education). We came back and I got some night work at Wagga TAFE. You could use your own initiative so I started drawing classes and built that up so now we have a fine art degree that is integrated with CSU (Charles Stuart University) – one of the few in the country. I'm now back teaching drawing and painting full time. I signed up for a PhD in 2004/2005 with pretty much an autobiographical approach looking at why I took a chance with glass in the first place, and why I changed. It was getting my life in order, assessing all the art/craft writing.

I've been doing universal portraits on canvas and paper, which I had attached onto my masters years ago and that has been fantastic. While saying that, I've kept up my interest in glass. I'm on the advisory committee at the gallery (National Glass Collection, Wagga). Michael (Scarrone) and I get along pretty well. We just had the student prize here last week and he got me involved in the judging, because he said it was good to have someone involved in the judging who is removed from those students and who has no agenda, but who knows all about the glass. I spent twenty years involved with glass and I had travelled. Mathew Curtis was the other judge and I said to him that at times I was not quite sure what role glass was playing in the work.

Do you remember Neil Roberts from Canberra? He passed away a while back. He got into glass like myself – he worked with Sam Herman at the JamFactory in Adelaide as a young guy and we both rode that wave of glass momentum at that point. Everyone was being supportive of glass, every gallery wanted a piece of glass. Neil and I spoke when he used to bring students across to work in my studio when he taught at ANU. He spoke of that trap of glass. When judging the show the other night I can see it in some of the concepts that the students are coming up with. I know there is a lot of freedom within the limitations of glass, but if they had not been working with glass I think some of their ideas would have been better formulated and expressed. They won't work with other materials because they can grow quite quickly within the association of glass artists. Once you get outside it is a tough. Painting and drawing are at a higher level at the equivalent stage. I am not being critical. I am expressing the frustrations I had with the fascination of blowing. Glass was undeniably seductive, but that's where it could stop.

There are qualities inherent in the medium. It is very medium driven. My thesis got to the point where I said all art has its craft. It is just that some has more craft than others. Although there was some lovely work in that student show, and some lovely statements using glass methods and technology very well, there were other works just relying on the material itself. When I worked in glass I would sandblast anything very heavily. I fractured everything, took it to its limits. That is some of my work the gallery has in the collection and I regard them as some of the most resolved pieces I worked on during that period. They were a form within a form eroded by sandblasting. They were contradictory too considering the survival of buried Roman glass.

At that early point in my work, as with every glassworker in Australia, I was at the crossroads. We regularly made some pretty bad stuff. In my search through glass I was developing my interest in the human figure. I started slumping and casting and engraving – drawing on glass. I had a small, quite adventurous exhibition of engraved and sandblasted glass panels, each of four or five layers, which were mounted over paper to cast shadows. But I got to the point where I thought I was misleading myself. The first exhibition with my large figurative drawings was a Charles Stuart University staff show. I unrolled these two metre charcoal drawings on paper. It was the first time I had really seen them. I was conscious of them in my own practice. I was still getting invitations from galleries all around saying they wanted my glass, where was it? That was the mid to late eighties.

Even though I saw it with clarity, it was a hard transition for me in the sense of trust in myself. But when I found that my arm and a piece of charcoal could do twice as much as furnace heat and tools I said this is where my direct expression lies. In '98 at the opening night of the exhibition of the drawings I did in Canada, Judy (Le Lievre) had a classical acoustic guitar player. He was a guy from the conservatorium. Judy and I talked later about the parallels between the fingers on the string with no amplification and the fingers on the charcoal and paper with no other aesthetic beyond your expression and mind. That was a great enlightenment for me. It was then I thought I have made the move. The furnace sat in my studio for five or six years. Rhonda kept saying I had to do something about the studio because it was a mess. It reflected my transformation, yet I thought you never know I might light it up again. I wouldn't let it go. I took some stuff to Canberra and gave it to students, but I kept all my blowpipes and tools, which I'd bought in Germany and Sweden. Then I said to Michael, "Do you want the furnace for the council?" It had a couple of years of life left in it and they were always interested in doing glassblowing demonstrations at the gallery. They came out and took it away on a truck and I had the studio renovated back to a clean space.

Bit by bit I gained more confidence in my own artistic expression. All that time I was teaching and studying. Michael often talks to me about going over to Canberra Glassworks where there is an excellent glassblower called Brian Corr. Michael had me interested because I like the fact that I might be able to work with a glassblower. I realised I wasn't willing to commit to thirty years to develop my glassblowing skill.

Nick Mount is someone I really admire. Nick has taken glassblowing on as an Australian craftsman. He has reached the heights of expertise and his forms are just exquisite and refined. I knew I was never going to put that time into glass, but I would with my drawings.

I trained in Sydney in the seventies. I can ask where a student has trained and I know they will say East Sydney Tech in the seventies. I know that because they know about structure and form. I can pick them. (laughs)

In the early days people involved in glass came from different pockets of interest. Gerry King and John Elsegood came out of education, but in ceramics. I used to take students from Caulfield over to Stephen Skillitzi when he had his studio running in South Australia. [points to pot] That pot is one of Stephen's. At that time we had some people more interested in building the doors on a furnace. A lot of people got into glass because of its mechanics. I came from a fine arts school with a background in drawing and design. I feel it is smart to use someone else's life long skills. Julio and I talked a lot. We swapped designs etc. That was a sensible way for me to work. I would love to go over to the Glassworks in Canberra and work with Brian [Corr]. I would have his skill to carry off my ideas. It is like Damien Hirst and his Dot paintings when he says he can't paint dots as well as the guy he has doing his painting. [laughs] It's a joke.

I think you lose something having someone else doing your work.

You can negotiate that especially when it is so heavily laden with material. I wouldn't employ someone else to do my charcoal drawings for me, but when you are working with the mechanics of glass it is like a master printmaker working with the artist. The artist needs to know what the processes can do aesthetically to carry your concept, but we just don't have enough years in our lives to accomplish everything. I remember trying to make goblets like the ones Julio used to give Rhonda, but I never could. Of the dozens of glass goblets I own, none are made by me. [laughs] I appreciate them, but I don't need to do that. I thought I

might be letting the glass fraternity down, but watching Stephen [Skillitzi] I realised he didn't care. He was inventive. Stephen has been in contact with me concerning the history of Australian studio glass. He and Peter Minson fight like cats and dogs over who built the first furnace. It doesn't really matter to me, but it does to them. [laughs]

What was it like when you came into glass?

You mentioned earlier about taking up opportunities. That is what happened. I was financially poor in my first year at art school. I had grown up in Wagga so when I came back home I thought I would not go back to art school. A friend rang up a few months into the year to ask where I was and I said I was going to earn some money. I decided to go back for some reason. At the end of my first year I had put my name down for a scholarship, and I submitted some drawings for an award. Three things happened within a month. John Coburn, the Head of National Art School awarded me a second year scholarship and that \$150 paid my fees. Then I won the drawing award. Then I was rung up and asked to come out to the glass factory.

Within a month the tertiary education scheme came in. Everything changed around.

I was one or two days a week working at the glass factory with this American designer, Cliff Boyle who was fantastic in the design room. At lunchtime I would go down to watch people blow glass in the factory and I thought it was amazing. I was eighteen or nineteen and I had never seen this before. Julio [Santos] was one of these great glassblowers and he would call me up onto the glass platform and show me things. That's how I started in glass.

I was just fascinated with the material. I had never seen liquid glass. It was a lighting factory and there were five to twenty glassblowers who were blowing into moulds. They started me designing one of platters for the shop. I had a drawing board and I worked with another elderly glassblower who couldn't speak English, but who could follow my forms on the blackboard. I learnt a lot by watching the glassblower. I got along with the factory management and they had annealing and sandblasting facilities. I learnt where the glass was batched, so when the craft movement came along a year later with Bill Boysen and Sam Herman with the big injection of Crafts Board support, I was already involved.

People were calling up and saying I should go and meet Sam Herman, but I didn't see a need to. I had five furnaces – clear, opal. I didn't need a little furnace when I had those to work with. After a while I did understand that that craft movement took us back to being cottage craftsmen. Jenny Zimmer wrote about it a number of years ago. That movement made us the floor cleaner, the furnace builder, the designer, the maker, the seller. For some reason we felt that was special. Thinking back now I think that it's dumb.

After I had my Diploma of Education and I was teaching in a high school, I went down to work at Caulfield Institute. Lindsey Anderson the Head of Ceramics rang to say they wanted to start glass. I said you have the wrong person. I haven't built a furnace. He said he had heard I could do it and he would get me help. They wanted someone trained in visual arts. When I arrived there were fifteen to sixteen people on staff just in ceramics. Willie Moulder was the technician and he helped with the gas. I learn there was a ritual potters go through. They would fire their kilns over three days sitting down and watching. Then it was stripped down and opened. Every day was like giving birth. Their passion and their pulse would go up and down with this. Watching a potter I could understand the passion over making glass from sand. Con Rea was like that at our first conference. He made glass from this sand out of Tasmania. I saw this with ceramics in the seventies.

Before you know it you are in knee deep, because you can be. Everyone in those early days knew each other and supported each other. Adelaide kicked off about the same time as Caulfield. Nick was working down a Gippsland so we would go down there. The factory was the only industry we had, but then it was bought out and closed up. Everyone had to struggle and support each other. It was pure pioneerism.

In my studies and my reflection over that time brings me to think what we made during the invention of the studio glass movement took us backwards. We were making what the Romans had made. The Scandinavians had a unique relationship with designers in glass. Göran Wärf and Bertel Vallien made beautiful stuff, but they never touched it. Here we were in the nineteen-seventies melting some bubbly crap, blowing some funny forms and putting them up for exhibition.

We did the first glass show here at Wagga. Judy put it together to represent who was making what in Australian glass and I look at that now and wonder what did we achieve apart from silicosis, asbestosis and burns. I'm being critical, but I think we need to be. Now when you look at the collection Wagga has, and what we make in Australia (talking to Maureen Cahill and Richard Whiteley the other night and watching it over years) thanks to Klaus Moje making glass in Australia is absolutely at the top level.

At the start it wasn't driven by the skills base. It wasn't built by following a tradition.

Raw emotion is a good way of looking at it. We didn't stop to look at what we were making, if we had probably nothing would have happened. When I look at a molten lump of glass by Sam Herman I know the history and that lump takes on a whole new story. In 1987 we had Stephen out here as artist in residence because he could fill two bills – with the clay and the glass studies. He is good value for money. Watching Stephen working with glass is like watching Steve Irwin wrestle a crocodile. (laughs) We got tired just watching him. It was just beautiful. You watch Julio or Nick and there is no breath. When those guys from Corning came out with their trailer a couple of years ago we had a glassblowing demonstration. Stephen was there and they even talked me into doing a piece (that's where I first met Brian Corr). Stephen was doing a demo and people were amazed. That's what the early movement did do. Build your own furnace and do what you want.

People have different expectations in whatever they do. Glass was an interesting journey. A big part of my thesis was about those early days of studio glass in Australia and the Wagga collection. I was part of that from its beginnings. I saw what Judy was trying to do in relationship with the regional galleries' association. Judy got interested in glass through John Elsegood. There is a great little history there. I wrote extensively about it, but more in terms of my own ebbs and flows and artistic practice.

Was it an emotional reaction to a material?

Definitely, and in different personalities there were different passions. I remember sitting at the Canberra art school and Wassa (Warren Langley) turned up. Warren was always a good supporter. (He and Nick, and Tony Hanning at a later stage.) We had coffee together. Warren had just come back from the States or where ever, and he said, "You know we can jump all this education stuff. We can be as good as anybody like that" [clicks fingers]. I know what he means because I chose to come from a different direction with my individual students. There is a value in letting exploration grow from its own innocence. Whereas Warren was keen to very quickly implant what was happening overseas. I see it differently,

that is if we are to develop our own language in glass. It does grow in passion and in unsupported environments. Something comes out of artists and floats to the surface and it is quite individual.