

Abridged interview with Wayne Pearson: 28/03/06

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 Brian Parkes was Associate Director of Object, The Australian Centre for Craft and Design.*

*How did you become involved in exhibiting glass?*

It's twofold. For *Object* as an organisation, it is quite literally the core of the organisation's mandate. It was set up as the *Crafts Council* forty odd years ago. One of the material practices, along with ceramics, jewellery, textiles, was obviously glass. So the organisation has a very long history, not only of supporting exhibitions, but nurturing practitioners in all sorts of other ways, from retail based income to sponsoring people to come out from other countries to host workshops and so on.

With my own particular interest as a curator, it really started with moving into this organisation. Glass was something I had been aware of. I was certainly aware of the Canberra School of Arts glass program. I worked at the National Gallery in Canberra for three years and had met a number of graduates from the program, but also with Steven Procter, who was Head of Workshop over that time. I became friendly with him. So I had a soft spot for the genre.

My own background was in contemporary visual arts, so I had not fully understood at the time the aura of the glass genre within the decorative arts. There is a hierarchy of sorts within the decorative arts, and glass either assumes, or has earned its place in that. I guess that is driven a little bit by the commercial market.

That was a sort of introduction and then going to *Object*, I got a first hand opportunity to meet a lot more makers and learn a lot more about that hierarchy, but I also became fascinated with it as a medium in terms of its potential for exhibition and what seemed to me to be a dearth of quality exhibitions of glass. There was no shortage of great work, but terrible shortage, in my view, of good exhibitions.

*When you talk about hierarchies are you implying that glass is at 'the top'?*

Sort of – it is almost like a separate hierarchy. I felt it when moving across from visual arts where the self obsessed ego maniac stuff is at its most extreme. To come from that environment to the decorative arts that are seen from that other environment to somehow be inferior (which it is not of course).

That is the sort of stuff one encounters, but then within the decorative arts arena, the crafts/studio movement, you get to see the kind of compartmentalised hierarchy. Glass, because of the commercial infrastructure, seems a much more desirable product. Glass artists, regularly (it seems to me) take this view. Take their relationship to ceramics (or to "mud-chuckers" is the derogatory term). It was interesting to encounter. This was an interesting idiosyncrasy.

*You mentioned the importance of political figures, mentoring figures, teaching figures – Steven Procter? What was the importance of particular individuals?*

In the materials and process-based medium I think it is critical. In the history of the artists and craftsperson, mentoring, apprenticeship, the legacy of that history continues through media like glass, ceramics and metal work. Certainly in Australia

with continual influences of people like Klaus Moje and Nick Mount. I think that is because we have created a kind of university-led training program for glass in particular – a handful of key schools and their heads of workshops have had very influential roles, not only in the way that one artist will influence another, but in development and infrastructure.

*In a very short time?*

Yes, it is a very youthful medium.

*Was it more than that interesting political dynamic of 'being top of its class' that attracted you to the material?*

Yes, in fact that stuff doesn't interest me from a critical point of view. It only interested me because it seemed peculiar.

But I was drawn to the objects and the role they played. Answering your question, as a material glass is this alchemical, mysterious, wonderful thing. It has all these amazing properties in the way it refracts light and can be coloured in so many ways, the sorts of permutations, variations because it is a liquid. It's quite extraordinary in the things people are able to do with it as a molten liquid.

*'Mystery' is an interesting word to use?*

Yes. From an exhibitions point of view I am always very keen to hint at (through text, moving image and other things) the aspects of process. As people get a sense of processes involved in working glass they become more aware of that alchemical nature of it. It is a kind of 'performative' thing – particularly hot-working and blowing. I think it taps into something primal.

I am always interested in really broad audience response to this stuff. People like us live and breathe it all the time. We are looking at things quite differently to most people, and I am always intrigued at more general perceptions of this stuff. There is a straight down the line awe and wonder in how pretty the material is, an awe of someone's technical ability that the viewer has because the material looks (and is) difficult to work with. It is not something you can do in your back-shed.

*There are two things implied there. The process is difficult and demanding, and the material has special qualities. Is there is a balance between an aesthetic and technical competence.*

Completely.

I think one of the problems for a lot of glass artists is their reliance upon that alone.

*The prettiness?*

It's really just sitting behind how good the material is, and I reckon there is a lot of bad glass art – I really do – just as there is a lot of bad painting. It is not specific to glass, and I think there is certainly is no shortage of demand for ugly glass things as well. These are supported until criticality and discernment kick in.

*What criteria do you use?*

Most curators shy away from that, but it is quite simple in the end. It is about connection.

As a viewer looking at an object, is it connecting with me in some way? I am a pretty curious chap. I am looking for lots of stuff. I find I am connecting with a lot more things than most people and the way in which it is connecting with me can be enormously varied. Every artist will have a different purpose, sensibility and intent.

*Personality?*

Sometimes. I think it depends entirely upon the object.

To take cases that you are particularly interested in. With one of Richard Whiteley's works, I engage with a kind of visual poetry – a distillation of abstracted form and space that resonates in some way. There is a kind of volume relationship to surface and light. I am thinking about his semi-circular, 'half full, half empty' things in particular when I say this. These are some how moving, and it is a purely atmospheric, psychological connection.

If I look at Deb Cocks, (work I'm least interested in, but which I find none the less intriguing) it is in the narratives and figurative imagery that I find a kind of high level of connection.

So that is a good example (within two different types of work) of what I am looking for. It is the questions I am asking. When I look at the object what questions does that object make me ask?

*You talked about two elements there, a formal element (the quality of shape) and the narrative story-telling connection. What conversations begin?*

They are two useful extremes to talk about. There are many blends of the two and there are things that are hard to define beyond those – but figuration is a powerful tool. So too is abstraction. These are elements on the artist's pallet in the same way that the material glass is. Works that are good (the 'criteria thing' again) are those where very deliberate choices are being made from these elements.

*A balance between material and artist's vocabulary?*

It is good to think critically and self-reflectively about this stuff. Most artists don't need to (outside the academic environment) and that is sometimes good. Some artists are obsessed with it. A lot of work that is interesting conceptually sometimes falls flat visually or formally, and vice versa.

With Richard's work (I have spoken to him in the past about it) one might say there are intellectual concerns in the work, but I am not that interested in them really. I think his work is phenomenally beautiful. I find it profound on a very 'modernist' formal level. I am interested in other things as a result of that, but the thing that attracts me, holds my gaze, is the kind of quiet poetry of the forms that are ultimately the result of all that thinking and distillation. It is about that wrestling with the material, but with some other intent I guess.

*Is there a recognisable element surfacing in Australian glass?*

Yes and I'm much more comfortable talking about Australian glass than glass elsewhere. It is informed by a whole bunch of things – the Italian traditions tend to drive a bunch of certain types of practises in people like Ben Edols and Kathy Elliott, or Nick Mount and others that really are interested in that Venetian factory history.

Then there is the extraordinary influence of Klaus [Moje]. I mentioned that before in terms of the cold working.

I think because it is such a youthful thing. There is not a long history here. It means people can snatch and grab from things that suit them.

*Eclectic?*

Completely, I think that is a reflection of things generally in Australia, not just glass. As a younger culture (obviously not in relation to indigenous culture) that is informed by a lot of older cultures through migration and trade and various things, this is a real grab-bag of options. People feel quite comfortable grabbing a bit of Scandinavian design and a little bit of Murini tile influence stuff and we roll that up and blow a form into it. It is a 'backyard shed' mentality. You make do with the things you have around you. That informs and is one thing that makes Australian glass interesting to collectors elsewhere. It is a staggering kind of inventiveness. If you are a Czech glass artist you have got this baggage of cast glass to deal with, so you are reacting against it, or you are conforming and carrying on the tradition.

Whatever it is, it is still there as a foundation. Similarly in Italy you have got other things. In Scandinavia you have got the long factory tradition that comes from design format industrial manufacture.

In Australia you have people taking the bits of all those histories that suit their own expression. I think that is pretty exciting.

I think there is no particular style that permeates Australian glass. You only need to look at the four artists to see how incredibly different to one another they are. What is similar about all of them is their preparedness to be inventive, to experiment, to champion new technologies, to try things that shouldn't work, in an exploratory way. That is different to the technical prowess, or trickery that can happen when there are long traditions. It is easy to fall into the trap of just trying to refine, and refine and refine particular techniques. In Australia people tend, all in all, to develop high-level skills but they are still interested in breaking out of the mould.

*Does signature style exist?*

It definitely does, and it does across all genres of visual arts, at times to its detriment and at times to great advantage.

I think that one of the pitfalls for Australian glass artists specifically, is the eagerness to jump quickly into a signature style. I think that we have a lot of young graduates, people just coming out of under-graduate programs who have been fortunate to develop an interesting body of work in their final year and be picked up by a commercial gallery and continuing to produce work like that for a decade without much innovation.

*Is that a commercial imperative?*

It is and it is not. It is commercial pressure. I think that the smarter ones and the ones whose practise appears more sustaining, who seem to be commercially more developed, are the ones that stay slightly ahead of that.

There is a trap for a lot of artists, not just glass artists, that does seem to be amplified in this industry. That is to have this one 'trick' and just keep doing it. It is important,

once you have got that trick, to leverage it as much as you can. I don't begrudge anyone a commercial return on what they have developed. But at the same time as you are producing this one-trick work, you should be doing a lot of experimentation with another trick, or another idea.

*You could take the one trick and go deeper?*

Yes. Let's talk about the work of Giles Bettison. This is a difficult thing for me, because I like a lot of Giles' work, but I have found over time I am bored by it.

I think that the demand for that work, which is essentially his graduate work from 1996, lasted the best part of eight or nine years and people would still prefer to get some of that sort of work out of him. That is a lot of pressure and I don't begrudge him producing that work for that market because I probably would too. His newer developments are interesting, but they have taken so long and they are not as exciting as one wants. They don't reach their potential.

Whereas if you take someone like Ben Edols and Kathy Elliott, consistently, every couple of years, they make quite robustly different things that still feel very much like Edols and Elliott work. So their signature style is not about the one trick, but constant evolution.

With them it is a collaborative process that is their strength. That means that their work will always have an element of both of those things, which connects it through the history of their practice and there is more than that there. I think there is a sensibility partly informed by an interest in the Venetian history, but I find in their work in particular, a co-relationship to the Australian landscape, environment geographies. There is a subtle formal reference.

*When you are talking about the work of Giles, Kathy or others, how important do you think it is to be able to recognise it as ongoing work?*

It is a good trick and there is a commercial advantage in it. There is nothing wrong with the commercial scene. In fact, that is what we are all doing. With all the 'worthiness of the idea' and stuff, at the end of the day, if it is a profession, it has to pay its way. It can do that in all sorts of ways. Ideally you want to be making works that inspire people and add value to their lives, but you know a lot of people can't quite get there and end up making other sorts of things that find a market.

*Is it the market that wants to recognize the work, or are we talking about the importance of ongoing work?*

There is a bit of both. When we studied the history of art, we identify the providence of work. Authenticity through the signature of the author is important in our understanding of history. It is there whether we like it or not. Michelangelo sketches are going to be more valuable, both conceptually and commercially, than a sketch by one of his lesser followers, although there might be very little difference between them. Signature style is sometimes action related to authenticity.

*For curators, or collectors, or as other artists?*

A signature style is a means through which the viewer – collector, curator, whoever, can connect with the maker. My seeing an object somewhere and saying, "Jessica Loughlin made that, I know", is its connection through the object from me to her. It's me knowing of things that she is interested in, either through knowing her, or through

reading that in the work, or possibly reading about that somewhere – that tells me about the work. It is making a connection to the artist actually - not making a connection to the work. The work is there. It is a beautiful thing. I have a connection with it, but it's finite, singular. The signature style represents an actual connection between me and her. The object is the vehicle for that in a sense an object, by somebody unknown, encountered once only, has a very different impact on one to something you can place within a linear connection.

This glass object is red and it is clear and is this high and maybe it was useful, or maybe it wasn't, blah, blah, blah. I can describe it. I can guess at what the person who designed it and made it is getting at, but without context. I might relate it. I might say it is a lot like a 'Richard Whiteley'. Maybe it was somebody who studied with him, but I am trying to do that, trying to place it somewhere. When I recognise the signature style that recognition places it for me

*That opens a relationship?*

Yes. It is like when you see a new painting by David Hockney; you go, "Wow, he's done that". Maybe I like his old stuff better than his new stuff, or vice versa. It's the same in all works.

*What would enable you to recognise the work of Warren Langley?*

There are basic characteristics. One knows the style or process of many of these artists.

If it has been cast with multiple elements, often sand-casts – textures and so on. If there has been colour applied in uncharacteristic ways. I generally find compositionally a bit of a 'clunkiness' with a lot of Warren's work, but there have been times when he has truly, truly moved me. I haven't followed his work that closely.

*Does the way he approaches material reflect a personality?*

It is pretty robust work, pretty 'blokey' sort of work. It is loaded with weighty symbolism generally. There is often a pallet of symbols, often borrowing on indigenous cultures, particularly Australian indigenous cultures and others, often quite a profound and sensitive way, but compositionally often a clunky, 'blokey' aesthetic.

One of the characteristics I would always put with Warren Langley's work was that it weighs a lot. For someone in a gallery museum environment that is always interesting. You make sure you have a strong plinth.

*You could say the same about Richard.*

Oh God, yes, but there are areas in his aesthetic that almost belies the cylindrical weight.

*I see Warren as working from the shoulder in a quick gesture.*

With those neon works he is playing with light in the landscape. That is pretty interesting stuff. I would have to say if I had not been aware that was work that Warren was doing I would not have identified it as his.

*By gesture?*

That's what got me. When you talk about it from the shoulder – that is quite interesting.

*Richard works in the head.*

Completely.

*Deb Cocks?*

She works probably in the hand actually. Just thinking it through, and I am thinking of all four artists now, they are the four compass points chosen I suspect quite deliberately

*Works from the wrist?*

I think so, but again it is the figurative and narrative aspect. The forms borrow historically. They are essentially platters, but not exclusively and the platter is the vehicle, the blank canvas.

There is a great tradition in decorative arts of image making in these materials. There is a quality to the image when it is on a ceramic surface, or a glass surface, or a textile surface. Whatever the imagery is, it is layered with history because of that surface. It is also in the case of paint, although it is probably more complex and diverse, but it carries with it a kind of certain extra. Whatever the image that you are looking at, you are always looking at an image on glass.

With Deb there is the use of what are ostensibly personal iconography subjects that obviously work in Australia. I like the ones with a specific 'Australian-ness' to the motifs.

*There is strength in her personal narrative.*

Yes. For me that is interesting. It is easy to recognise Deb's work.

*You pick it on content and stylistic reference?*

When we are identifying people's work in this way (the equivalent of a slide test) it is the confusion with somebody else's work that it hangs on – is that a Kandinsky or is it a Klee? It is when it is close that the nuances are important. There is not a lot of work being produced that is close to Deb's. In fact the work that is, is historical, and because her imagery is contemporary in nature there is very little confusion.

*I have seen some of Deb's early works in Wagga. Even though they are casts, they have that 'idiosyncratic story'.*

Yes. I think it is nice to look at all these people in terms of the full trajectory. What I was saying about Giles before is that I think he is one of the good glass artists. That makes me more critical

People evolve their work in various ways. Sometimes it is through subtle shifts. It is not always about schizophrenic experimentation. There are a number of people who evolve their work over long periods.

*Jessica Loughlin?*

I have to confess Jessica is my favourite artist in glass, and one of my favourite artists full-stop. And that is all about me really – it is a personal, subjective thing. I have an interest in that reductive, contemplative, meditative, sublime thing that her work seems to reference.

I think it's wonderful. There is the association between light, horizon, distance, depth, and the way the glass can capture some of those elemental things. She does not always do it perfectly, but she does get close a lot of the time.

*Are we talking about some spiritual quality?*

Very much.

*Is 'spiritual' a bad word to choose?*

It is not a word I would use often.

*What gives it that 'Zen' quality?*

It is about the image play in a sense. It is standing in front of one of Mark Rothko's great colour field paintings and having the void open up before you. It is quite a special experience. You ask, "How can of paint on this bit of canvas have this impact on my life?" and there is a sense of wonder. It is ultimately a fairly spiritual, existential experience.

I think that at her best Jess's work does that (all be it on a smaller scale) and I think that is one of the limitations of the medium. One I would like to see someone like Jess bust out like some of the large-scale work like Klaus. Some multi-panel wall pieces, or the Czechs' massive scale – cast, composite works.

We are used to seeing glass things quite small in scale because you have to pick the bloody thing up and so on, but the difference between a surface of one of Jess's flat panel wall-mounted works, or her recent stuff which are the grandchildren of some of the elliptical platters. The way that your gaze is drawn into this relatively small picture plane and lost, is really quite amazing. That is because of the material and her deft hand working of it. Paint can never have a surface that has that depth and luminosity. Only glass can do that.

*Something ambiguous that leads you in and interrogates you?*

I think all of that is true. What I like about the work ultimately is the way it hovers between a bunch of genres and does that quite belligerently. It does not care what you make of it, or whether it is viewed in the history of glass art, or viewed in the history of decorative art, or viewed in the history of minimalist painting, because it echoes all of those things and does that differently for different people.

I am talking about a very personal sensibility here, but most people who like her work are drawn to her for the same reason.

I think it is work that is ostensibly dealing with landscape and minimalism much more than it is dealing with the 'glass-ness' of glass, but it is using the 'glass-ness' of glass to talk about this rich history of landscape and minimalism. That's fundamentally why it's great.

*Can you sense a personality?*

I do. I have followed her work since she graduated. I have been fortunate to spend time with her and get to know her and her interest in the work. But even if I hadn't done that, I have followed the work over time watching the confidence with the material increase.

Ostensibly the subject has changed little. In her early work the use of text was important, but not as important as the sense of retracted space and horizon. Even in those earliest works the text was often reference to the landscape. With all those things, over a period eight to ten years, I have seen the distillation. The work has actually jumped around at various points. Those wonderful things that came out from the wall were an interesting kind of formal departure from the oval platters that become her main stay, the graduate work that did not go away.

Talking about glass, and a particular kind of making, using such restrained and precisely restrained pallets (opposed to the pallet of colours that is possible) in those processes, is going against the grain in some respects.

I am actually talking about a perception of her personality based on the work. It is obsessive. It is contemplative. There is a sense of journey through the work. That might be signature style in a sense that there is a movement from one point to another.

*A journey, or search?*

Yes, very much. One gets a sense from the work of the real determination about that journey. If you think about a relationship to other types of practises, different things take over at different times. Look at people for whom technique is no longer debilitating.

*They have a vocabulary.*

Yes. Completely second nature in the way that we sign our name – it is an automatic thing.

It is ostensibly hard-wired into you at some point. You almost have to do it that way. That gives you an extraordinary power for expression. Those very subtle nuances between forms that without that kind of second nature mastery, would have you grappling with the technical considerations all of the time.

It is like hearing a really good singer, but not hearing them breathe. You know that their diaphragm is doing all this amazing stuff. You know that they are getting air through their nostrils, but all you hear are those right notes. It is seamless.

*Do these four artists reflect a culture – a school, an area, the personality of a particular teacher?*

I suspect that people often over simplify things by suggesting this. I know for example, it has always frustrated Klaus Moje that the people said there are all these kiln workers copying Klaus who was their teacher. That is clearly not the case. In fact most of the people kiln working with Bullseye for example, studied after he had left anyway.

There is an influence, but it is not an influence as a result of his teaching them. If you look at them they are so diverse. Scott Chaseling, Kirsty Rea, Richard Whiteley and so many others – all so different to one another.

*Does a landscape resonate in these people?*

They are all very different and the landscape plays a role, certainly in Jess's work. It plays a roll to a lesser extent in Deb's work – that is more a landscape of the narrative. Obviously in Warren's work landscape has at times been a very strong and dominant influence.

I don't think landscape is something inherently specific to Australian glass. It is a strong influence on most Australians in various ways and because this is a country with a number of extreme geographies and inspiring landscapes. That is going to come through in various ways, but for some people it is actually conscious choice not to.

There is a big difference between landscape and nature. Landscape is very much about the frame. I think the nature of Australia is of extremes and that permeates all sorts of stuff, but I don't think it lends itself to defining anything particularly. It is one of a pallet of things.