

*At the time of this interview Brian Parkes was Associate Director of Object, The Australian Centre for Craft and Design.*

*How do you see yourself as a curator?*

I have my own idiosyncrasies in curatorial practice. In my own world-view it is important for the curator to look and learn and retell. There are curators who have a much more assertive view of things. There is an idea they have that they want to illustrate through people's work as a kind of curatorial thesis – "I'm going to line up all these things like ducks to illustrate my theme". I've done shows like that and I don't find them particularly satisfying in the end, or at least I find the dialogue between curator and exhibitor unbalanced.

I am much more interested in engagement with the subject where you are learning about it and you are finding ways to contextualise positions and tell. So if I were going to organise an exhibition of Canberra School of Art graduates in glass, the first thing I would want to do is talk to a bunch of people teaching that program and talk to a bunch of people who have come out of that program to get the lie of the land. To get a sense of what people perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of the work that is produced, to get a sense of any threads of continuity that exist. I would be looking for the existing storylines. This would be an attempt to draw something out to hang the show on. (Although they're useful and important, I'm not really a fan of group shows.)

*You are looking for a genealogy.*

Yes, and in this case it may be that there isn't one, but that doesn't diminish the need – politically or otherwise – to do a show. The approach then would be these things are all different, why is that so, or how many of those different things can one address?

As a curator there is a real responsibility to get a handle on the thing. Say if it was an individual's practice, like Klaus [Moje], it is familiarising oneself with the work, both the work that has been done and current preoccupations, because sometimes those things are vastly different – "I dealt with stuff in the 1980's, but that's not what I'm interested in now" – that's important to know. For the same kinds of reasons you are really looking for the sense of key concerns, stories that exist here and which of them are interesting.

That is what I should have mentioned earlier about the group thing. When I'm doing that, I am doing it with radar for what will be interesting for an audience and the audience I have in mind is usually a fairly broad one, not an industry specific one. You might find this series of different threads, whether it's something like the phenomena of the art school and a set of different narratives that emerge from that, or whether it's an individual artist's practice with a set of key concerns – technical preoccupations or whatever they are. Whatever of them that I believe will resonate with and strike a cord with audiences are the ones that I will choose to play with.

*You're looking for the narratives?*

Narratives in the broadest sense, and I like the word narrative because it covers a whole range of possibilities. I like that much better than 'context'. For me it is the furthest end of that equation – the audience stuff I was talking about. In order for an

audience to understand any context they need a gateway in, and that is usually through the narrative.

Context can limit, whereas narrative tends to be more inclusive and interpretive.

*Other curators have talked about positioning within a historical story.*

This is where I start to differ from the orthodoxy. It is because I am not a collection-based curator. It is also because I am not a historian. Not that I disregard history (one does that at one's own peril), but labouring on the history isn't always important for the audience. It is important for curators who like to get their facts right and it is a preoccupation in the museological, collection-based, curatorial fraternity. I don't think it is unimportant and I am glad that someone is getting that story right, but in terms of how to best engage with audience, to excite them about things, to engage them in the person, it is the material and the process. Too much preoccupation with where things sit historically will bore people.

I am not averse to talking up the fact that someone like Madonna sat her bum on Marc Newson's chez lounge at the Lockheed lounge. That as opposed to telling the story about it as the evolution of a form that he worked on (that relates to a whole bunch of historical design terms). If I can engage people through titillation, that's no bad thing.

*You come back to engaging people with the work.*

Yes completely, in fact if I were going to give a sound-bite to the opening question about the role of the curator it is in fact a role of connectivity between maker and audience, but with that comes a great deal of responsibility. It can be seen as a heavy burden and laboured over, or it can be acknowledged as an important problem to deal with responsibly. It can be fun, but you don't do anything counter to the artist's intent.

It becomes problematic when curators get too much involved in being the subject. Curators are intermediaries. The decisions that these people make can have a big impact on careers, on the market, on all sorts of things. It is easy to fall into the trap of feeling over-important. The curator is not the main character in the play. (laughs)

*It can make or break careers.*

It can do. It holds a disproportionate level of interest more often than not.

*When you see a grouping of work, do you find yourself placing it in categories?*

That is an interesting question and I challenged myself to be as honest as I could be in answering it and I don't know that I do. Again not being a specialist, I am someone with a background in contemporary visual arts, interested in a broad range of stuff. I work across contemporary indigenous arts, and a whole range of craft media and design. Each of those has their own infrastructures, communities, associations, publications and worldviews. As opposed to someone who might be a specialist, I tend to look at things with a much more a curious frame of mind than a categorising frame of mind.

You are never entirely removed. What I said then is true, but if the object is a glass one, these days, because of the history that I have working with various craft sectors I

already know a lot about glass. I can't look at it completely without reference to that, but I don't look at it entirely within that reference.

At first one always encounters the formal qualities of the object. Sometimes they will instantly suggest other things the work is dealing with (sometimes they won't). I am interested in beauty and ugliness. In a sense I am more inclined to feel positive about things I see as being beautiful than to those things I see as being ugly, although my curiosity is aroused equally by both. It's just that when something is ugly it needs to have a good reason for its ugliness. If something is beautiful I'm happy if there is no reason for that whatsoever. The degree to which something is beautiful or ugly doesn't necessarily relate to whether it is good or bad and that's irrespective of the material. Ugliness can be very important. It can be political and provocative, it can be an important way of questioning the status quo, but if it is ugly just because it is not very well made, or it is ugly because the aesthetic sensibility is so far removed from my own, then I am more inclined to see it as being bad.

*When you see a glass object do you read it within the context of glass, rather than any broader context?*

I really do both. It would be naïve of me to suggest I am so objective that I can look at each thing on face value. You look at the work of an artist and you see hints of other things that you have seen before, but I say that it is something that runs against my personal philosophy. That is to try to look at things much more objectively.

*Is it valid to say that people reference a glasswork within the body of glass making, rather than the broader area of creating?*

It is really. The glass community is interesting in that it's aligned more closely with the crafts in the art/craft/design genres (which are malleable and meaningless to a certain extent). Within that crafts area it is the one that has had the dominant cache in terms commercial and critical, yet it hasn't managed to successfully integrate (with a handful of very significant exceptions) into the broader contemporary visual arts milieu. I've often been interested about that. Coming from contemporary visual arts into the crafts and discovering this whole glass phenomenon, not knowing anything about it before and seeing there were these superhero mavericks of glass that were the untouchable cool guys with big prices. The 'mudslingers' and 'metal hammers' were the lonely cousins. I saw that with fresh critical eyes and thought it was peculiar.

*You're implying an insular community?*

Yes completely, and it can afford to be because it is a buoyant market with its own infrastructure. So it does allow for things to grow without the checks and balances of relativity that other things often have to contend with. I suspect that has to do with the absolutely seductive qualities inherent in the material. People have an irrational, visceral response to glass and I guess that people will keep making it and people will keep falling in love with it, and no matter what the price-point there will always be the Ying to that Yang. That's partly why glass, more than the other craft media has succeeded commercially and failed critically. There really is an absolute gapping black hole of good criticism around glass.

I think there is way too much criticism across the board frankly we should just get on with doing the stuff, but what it does is in relation to a debate around 'the thing'. The

people who make this stuff don't actually care too much. As they start to get older and they start to think more about legacy and they pay people to publish books on them (laughs) – one tries to write one's history and that happens in the absence of it having been done properly in the first place. But because of the appeal of this material it doesn't need an enormous amount of theory and critical dialogue to sustain it.

The down side of that is that as we are seeing more and more interest in participating in the medium (we want more people getting involved in making glass) we are seeing more and more bad work being produced. Look at ceramics, which through the arts and crafts movement of the late sixties and early seventies enjoyed an explosion of renewed interest as a means of creative expression or alternate lifestyle and sustainability. Ceramics was suddenly taught in every school and every school had a kiln. It was so accessible. Excellence was still excellence, but there was so much stuff in between. I think glass is potentially going down that road.

Painting has been doing that for eons as well, but somehow the difference between hobby and professional is much more clearly defined. I think the tools for that definition are to do with this critical stuff. That's what lacked in ceramics and it is what is lacking in glass. It is leading to a possibility of glass going down the same road as ceramics.

*There is the implication that the primary interest of glass is glass.*

The 'glassness' of glass is all glass artists are interested in.

*and sits at the centre of the practice...*

Yes and that is modernism's fault.

*The difference with contemporary practice is that in contemporary practice the material is irrelevant?*

To an extent. One of the big differences, that perhaps is not so well articulated, is the contemporary visual arts are comfortable with pluralistic viewpoints. What you just described is one relatively important paradigm within that genre, but for each person that is critically or conceptually driven there are as many formalists who are interested in the 'painterly-ness' of paint, or the 'canvas-ness' of canvas. That is not seen as any less of a critical framework. But when we start to talk about the material-ness of craft media it does start to unravel in a different way.

*The way the craft people view it, or the way the contemporary practitioners view the craft?*

A bit of both, I think one is self-fulfilling and the other is an inhibitive label. We both know there are many artists who happen to work in glass dealing with all sorts of interesting issues. Look at artists who cross over, someone like Janet Laurence for whom glass is a fundamental material component of her work, she places glass within her work as a component, not as the *raison d'être*. She does that because she is not technically the person who does the glass (it's a long time since Dale Chihuly made any of his own work). There's an artist who has kept glass central to her practice and she is perceived as a major figure in contemporary visual arts. She uses a lot of glass, and she uses a lot of other things as well.

I look at someone like Jess Loughlin; whose work I love for its formal qualities, and the reason is that its formal qualities make it transcendent in some way. Where I think the opportunity to work in a material-specific practice (like glass) is richest is when the material is doing your bidding to the point where your concerns are central and the material is at your command for dealing with those concerns. Those concerns may be poetic. They may be political. They might be formal, like Richard Whiteley.

That work is about glass. Richard may be talking about glassmakers doing something else these days, but wholly and fundamentally in my view, it is about what this stuff can do when you thicken it up, or thin it down and how the light moves through it as different shapes and how 'drop-dead' amazing that is from a phenomenological point and the capacity with which one, in mastering that material, can manipulate that phenomenon. That is a perfectly good subject to play with. It is what Rothko did with colour.

*With Jess you're moving into the sublime.*

Landscape is an interesting area. That's what Jess's works fundamentally are. A landscape painter like Philip Wolfhagen whose work deals with the same reductive sublime, the disappearing horizon, is an absolutely obsessive technical painter. It is the luminosity and translucency of paint pigments and varnishes that allow him to achieve the emotional response to states of landscape. That is exactly what Jess is doing as well. In both their cases, in a sense the material is doing their bidding. They are not being dictated to by the material.

*There is an 'ideal' that is in the artist's head and the material is facilitating the expression of that ideal.*

One could argue that that's the case. I rather liked your 'collaboration between the material and the artist' idea more, because it is not necessarily one's mastery over the material. It might be more one's empathy for the material knowing when to let the material do its own bit in the equation. That's the alchemy of great art, which is expressionistic.

*The material will take you places you don't expect.*

That's right, and that is as true of paint as it is of glass, but we have two different preoccupations within those two mediums. The debates around the medium in each case are different. It is more comfortable for me to take the audience position on this. People think they understand paint. Technical mastery, or technical empathy of medium over time is also respected. I can do that, but it can go so much further. Glass is seen as something a bit foreign, a bit alien, in the hands of people who know the special alchemy. "I wouldn't know how to make that, but I do know how to paint a red mark on a piece of paper."

At that perception level and there is a sense that glass is somehow for the informed insider. That adds to its reverence, but it is also what contributes to the perception and the reality of its insularity. I use that example rather than the critical dialogue of differences in art history.

I don't have a solid handle on it, but I am fascinated by how different the dialogue is; about how different is the way glass is referred to (whether it is within the glass fraternity, or within art discourse, or the layperson's view).

*The technical aspect then is an advantage and a disadvantage in that it provides a fence around our practice?*

Maybe. There are plenty of artists who chose to work in glass and continue in ways that push boundaries beyond just the technical ones. The 'glass ceiling' that's there doubly so, is created both by the insularity of the glass art community, but also by the reinforced perceptions of those who see it from the outside.

*What then of the painter in contemporary arts?*

Let's take Rothko for instance. There is a reverence around his preoccupation with the formal qualities of colour. There is also a whole bunch of people who would look at Rothko's work and go, "Piff!" But we are focusing our conversation on those people who would find it almost a religious experience. If a glass artist is compelled by the same kind of passion to explore their material in that same formal way, it doesn't somehow seem as obsessive, or as counter to some kind of dominant paradigm. There is almost an expectation that glass artists are doing that because of the nature of the material.

*We are a young practice.*

Yes and no. The contemporary phenomena of art glass is a new thing, but glass as a medium for expression has such a longer, deeper history and for someone interested in image making on glass, the history of engraving and stained glass is worthy of reflection. It is that context issue.

*Something that has become obvious to me is the chronological alignment in the progress of contemporary glass and conceptual art.*

That's interesting. What I was about to say is that you don't have those schools and museums for conceptual art popping up, but of course you do. They are embedded. They are departments, and with many of the contemporary art museums part of their mandate was driven by the conceptual art movement. The other thing about it is that there is the similar closed loop insularity. Instead of that phenomenon you have with glass where people are seduced by the material with some people making it, some people collecting it. The infrastructure is quite simple and the patron model was the same with conceptual art, but with a number of benefactors seduced by conceptual play, the provocation of the idea was as seductive to them as the luminosity of glass was to people who liked to collect that. It is a closed-loop infrastructure in the same way. It doesn't need many individuals making stuff and collecting stuff.

*Is there a difference in mainstream acceptance as valid contemporary practice?*

One could only offer anecdotal opinion on it. The 'mainstream' is a difficult thing to consider in this step. What I'm interested in is the dichotomy between 'mainstream' institutional endorsement and 'mainstream' popular appeal. They are often not the same thing. You might have a lot more people love Richard Whiteley's glass than like

Imants Tiller's painting, and yet the commercial value of Tiller's work and the institutional regard is significantly greater.

The things that give art objects their value are ephemeral. They are often created by a range of sophisticated elements over time. It is not just about the material value and the expertise of individuals. It is to do with track record. It's to do with popularity, with demand and supply. At times it is to do with audacity. There is a ceiling for works made from glass that is much lower down than works made by video artists for instance. There are some crazy prices out there for some pretty ephemeral things. That's the fabulous phenomena of the art market. In this country Klaus [Moje] does challenge that (significantly with some of his big panel works). There isn't anybody else who comes close.

*How powerful is the narrative around the work?*

It is the work. That's not to say the work can't be removed from that. That is why the art market does what it does. Why it has these high prices for things that don't have any material value. What you are buying is not the material thing. You are buying the whole thing, which includes its value as an idea. That is why you get these things turning up in people's basements and cellars that have been kicking around for a couple of generations then turn out to be a famous work of art. It has been kicking around in this cellar and probably being played with by the kids at the value of its melt down components, but when reattached to its narrative, in fact re-engaged with its whole self, it no longer gets played with by the kids in the basement.

*It's interesting that object is more than the object.*

In a post-structural universe every object is, not just art objects, but with art objects it is especially so because it is evidence of a process. That process is both technical as well as conceptual.

*Is it possible to build an undeserved narrative around the piece?*

There are onion-like layers to this (to use the *Shriek* analogy). Artworks are like onions (as are ogres). There is the physical thing and then there is the artist's intent, which might be all manner of things. It might well be a narrative. It might well be that the thing is a signifier of some preoccupation, or journey, or whatever. At the studio it still has this. Then it is taken to the dealer, or curator. Then there is artist's statement, which holds on like a bubble.

But then there is all that other stuff that happens with marketing and publicity – whether the thing is in an exhibition or not, where that exhibition was. I guess one might call that providence. This work may have been produced in the artist's studio at the same time as the one next to it. They may have both been dealing with the same narrative layer, but for whatever reason one of them may have been 'better' for some reason or another and it became the work that was elevated in providence. As a thing it is now always attached to that providence. This is the secondary market works. It is also how the critical reference works as well. Person 'X' thought this work was 'better', why is that so? Even if the reason isn't clear, the fact that happened becomes part of the providence of the work.

That's where the role of the curator comes in. We are arbiters of providence.

*Adding validation to the work.*

Whether we mean to or not. You can take the work away from this stuff. Then it is instantly a much poorer thing for that removal, but the work will carry some of it anyway.

*It is as if there is a loss of 'identity'.*

If you take the three layers scheme that I was talking about and you think about a well know work, Van Gough's *Starry Night*. The providence of that work is much, much greater than those other two layers. It is known as 'gift wrapping'. That work is an image that rock-clips have featured. Its place in the consciousness of contemporary society is driven to a much greater extent by its providence than either its physicality, or indeed the narrative associations that Van Gough might have had for that work. Now those are important and they have been very extensively written about as much as any object in art history, yet that third layer is something that can't be separated from it.

Now, even if the object is lost, the echo of its providence is a big thing. That is how things become iconic.

*'Words' as integral to the 'object'.*

They absolutely are and you can resist that all you like and of course most artists would be resentful. I don't blame them. I don't think that it happens is something anybody has any control over, but what actually happens in that process is something people have all sorts of control over. What words, what exhibitions, and what things I let my work be published in.

*Certain collectors pay great attention to what works have been published in what magazines.*

Absolutely. Even those artists who refuse to say anything about their work (bless their socks) their persistence in not saying anything about their work is a set of words around the work (laughs). It is not a bad thing and that's why as a curator it is important to get a handle on the thing, the artist and the group. To understand as much of that as is possible and tell stories which are appropriate to it and of interest to an audience. The wide arch of a conversation is about that very thing.

*By implication you are helping 'build' the artwork.*

Yes, you are helping make sense of the artwork for others and in doing that you are affecting it in some way. If you are aware that is the case then you want that effect to be as legitimate as possible. If you are working with a single artist, with their life's work in a retrospective show let's say, you need to consult with them, if they are alive, consult about what each decision you're making does in terms of impact on the perception of their work.

*[Refers to an image in Osborne's book]*

Tom Moore is an interesting person to think about in these debates, because he's so off the show. None of this work is possible without glass. What makes this work fascinating (at some point it can be facile) is that it requires this playful attitude to something that is quite difficult. The tension between those two things is what becomes possible when a badly behaved teenage schoolboy has mastery, technical proficiency. (I'm not saying Tom's a badly behaved schoolboy.)

*It's performance. The nature of the material and the technical competency required validates the work.*

And it is very difficult to remove Tom from his work, the 'performance' of his practice, which equals his life, is so much part and parcel of the work.

*This is contemporary practice.*

And there are those other things, but I would hope that in order for an artist choosing to work in glass to be involved in these broader contemporary art dialogues, emulating what other contemporary artists do wasn't the only method open to them. I do hope, with some optimism that good work becomes transcendent. Gwynne Hansen-Piggott's ceramics and the way they were presented and perceived in the Biennale in Sydney back in 2000 is a great example of that. With perhaps the notable the exception of grouping them together to make still-lives – she was merely throwing pots at the wheel. For her it wasn't about doing anything different in terms of emulating contemporary art practice, but there was something in the work that is compelling. Partly that was its own insistent reference. In a sense that was the 'Rothko' affect. The obsessive continuation over a long, long time of making functional, domestic ceramic wares in a way that was somehow (or rather in pursuit of) transcendent beauty.

*It was not the domestic narrative?*

No not at all, although it taps into that through archetype and so on as it taps into art history though the grouping of these things as still-lives.

I love what Tom does. I think he's extraordinary and one of the more interesting artists in the contemporary Australian arts at this point in time. I love that curators across the board from the craft as well as the visual arts have picked up on that, but I don't think that every Australian glass artist should feel that in order to crack that paradigm they need to copy what artists in that paradigm are doing.

In the end good art is good art. The artificial barriers built between genres, partly built from within and partly built from outside have changed. In some ways it's defacto that we have these categories that create the problems. It's a tricky situation that glass is this wonderfully seductive material and if you are going to do anything with it you actually have to dedicate time to it, and if you are going to do that then you are probably going to be less interested in other materials.