

*Edited interview with Greg Piper, a respected professional photographer sought out by glassmakers as a creator of artwork folio images.*

*After leading in through general conversation...*

I have two sides to my life. One is advertising. That is 'dust collectables' that end up in letterboxes (sometimes the budget allows you to strive for some visual aesthetic), then the other, and that is the artist's world, where you are the conveyor of their work.

You are given the privilege of taking the artist's piece (or body of work) to convert into a two dimensional image (usually the original works are three dimensional and a viewer can walk around it). You may be allocated 50 mm by 70 mm in a publication and your problem is how can I help this person communicate the work to a viewer. The artist's work has a narrative. There is a large story around that visual, an underlying narrative that is part of a sequence of work, and my image has to entice someone to want to see the artist's exhibition.

Sometimes you are faced with taking direction. They want to go in one direction (and you see that), but your initial reaction may be, "but we can go this way" and that may be the opposite direction. For example you may know from paths you trod before that a little can be more – showing a little of the object can entice people to want to see more.

That's part of the process. Confronted with an object, the question becomes, what can I do?

*Do you have a way of 'categorising' the work when it comes in?*

I try not to categorise because one of the challenges of working closely with glass artists (or ceramic artists, or woodworkers – with painters it's a bit more removed) is that this group is intimate with each other and a lot of them are coming to me for images of their work. I am pressed create a look that becomes significant for them. There must be a sense of 'identity', otherwise I could do a commercial run by dropping their piece into a formatted template that has worked for me before.

*The artist has an intimate view of their work?*

Of course, it's their path, their journey – what they have been through. That is what the work represents. That object (or that series of objects) is a time-line in their life. It was devoted to a particular line of thought, passion and technical execution. It says this is my opinion. Whether it is a 'craving' or not, they have gone to trouble to communicate something.

They are hanging on my initial response and some are pressing me for what I really think, especially the younger ones. They are in a situation (as we all are at times) of looking at where they fit within this group. They are asking, "Am I beginner?", "Am I moving in to that middle area?", or "Am I moving into the more notable?".

I had a discussion with my wife recently about whether being an artist is actually about gaining recognition. I did this project on a chef (a young apprentice) and why people train to be chefs when they know it's such a long, arduous, grinding road that gains

them very little in positive response. The same question applies through life. We are confronted with that quest to pursuing our inner passion, but we sometimes still want a bit of positive feedback to justify our doing this.

Initially I am diplomatic, but often I say, "I hope you don't mind me saying this, but if you did this to the work it would grab me more". Sometime they take that on board, because in my case (with the years I have been involved) they see my response as credible.

You asked me whether I compartmentalise. There is one thing. I look at a work and say that's a 'feminine' piece, or that's a 'masculine' piece. I've come to read a male's interpretation of glass and a female's interpretation of glass. Whether it's to do with weight and the like, there are interesting combinations. Some situations where a person is travelling as a single identity, and others operating as a partner (there are a number of glass artists working in partnerships). Some of those are interesting with pieces that are a solid masculine form, but feminine in detail. You will have a female individual who has soft and elegant forms, or there are solid forms. Sometimes the feelings come through as contradictions.

*You see weight and mass as masculine?*

To a degree, but then there is an 'Emma Varga' that contradicts that. If you look there is Charles Butcher and Richard Whiteley with very solid forms. There is also Mathew Curtis in Canberra with almost human scale forms that are very sculptural and solid.

You ask me how I respond when confronted with a piece. Initially I see it is a solid form, or light form. I find some males or females will cross over. There is cast glass, then spindly glass and all that Venetian glass as well. You have people like Ben Edols who will create these solid objects, then in the next breath he will create a light and intricate 'feminine' structure.

We are moving into principles of form and this comes back to my role in 'applying the light' to the piece. My role is just not pointing a camera – I am commissioned to apply the light to an object. Glass is a dual personality. It has a translucent character and an opaque character. At times an artist will combine two very different techniques and that makes it quite difficult, because I face this opacity, as well as reflectance, as well as translucency. That becomes a technical challenge.

When I first see these objects, I am looking at how the light will affect the shape, the form. Whether the form has a metallised surface – Rob Wynne was strong on iridescence. Then there is Brian Hirst using his gold or platinum-leaf. All this has a bearing. There is an opaque shape and there is translucency, sometimes it can look like ceramic and I need to ask, "How is this glass?"

*Is that a problem?*

It is for the viewer. There are techniques in ceramics that when brushed look metallic – like burnished steel. The same with glass if it moves too far to the edge of what the material is. Primarily at some point glass has to show translucence. There must be a 'see through' aspect, because that is its character. It is not a 'Jekyll and Hyde', or dual personality thing, I need to show those dimensions of glass.

*It is important that it is read as being glass? Brian Hirst's work may be read as another material.*

Yes and no – again this is a photograph. A normal person will take a photograph based on their ability to use the technology. Someone who is trained in lighting can bring out the attributes of a piece. Work becomes more sculptural and it is a little less obvious that it is glass, but if displayed properly Brian's work takes on a more intriguing aspect. Where pieces are eventually displayed has a bearing on whether an artist's work is being 'fully told'. Lisa Cahill's wall panels are incredibly detailed and there is a subtle degree of translucency. I look at them and think, "If there was only a way of bringing out that translucency". Then she will pick out another aspect for the viewer to catch. Her preference is that they sit in a particular way. There are artists like Jessica Loughlin doing similar things, and Cobi Cockburn makes wall panels as well. You are seeing more sculptural, architectural pieces being developed by these people. They are working in glass and they are setting their works up as being more opaque than translucent. From a distance the viewer may be lost as to what they are looking at. In some cases, put crudely, it could be a corrugated panel. It's becomes glass only when you go up close and touch it. I'm surrounded by all sorts of objects and artworks, and at times I am confronted with this crossover – "Is it this, or Is it that?" That's when it becomes a little confusing.

*You're arguing the danger of losing the 'quality of glass'?*

That's true. I think the quality of the glass object lies in its translucency. Intrinsically glass is dealing with light more than any other material. Ceramics and metal sculptural pieces may deal with light falling on and cascading around their outer surface. With glass the light pierces through one surface and emerges from the other. We end up with wonderful results, because light radiates in separated colours, while in other pieces it creates sparkle.

That's another challenge I find in representing people's work – somewhere in the work there must be 'sparkle'. Like in portraiture, there must be an 'eye-catch'. If you don't have a little 'white-of-the-eye', the viewer tends to be lost within the space. They are not drawn into that point of contact. It's the same within a glass piece. When you take a photograph, or capture an image of that object, you are narrowing it down and saying, at this point, at this time, the object looked like this. As much as a Cartier Bresson in the street captured someone jumping a puddle, the piece has its moment of conversation with the viewer. It is not just me, but any person that walks past those pieces should be affected by them in some way. That's where glass (if its translucency is evident) will draw people in. It has depth – like a book, you have the cover, but you want the story.

*The luminosity of the glass is critical?*

Very much so, and that's the challenge for the photographer. Some photographers grasp that straight away, others fiddle around for ages, giving an impression they know what they are doing. In reality they don't know what is required to hit the nail on the head quickly.

It's important to be able to understand your subject matter. To this day I ask questions of the artist to get inside their head so then I can add my contribution. That is why I enjoy this process.

There are always outside influences on artists and there are trends. At the moment glass is moving of the pedestal to the outdoor and to the architectural. You have large sculptural pieces you primarily see hung. We are now seeing a few artists doing three-dimensional installation pieces in glass. Some are tending to get larger. When you see Charles's [Butcher] work using glass and other media together, it is certainly moving out of the house environment. So the collector is looking at larger space for that work. I know that in the States some of Charles's work has ended up as landscape sculpture.

Another interesting aspect is the training ground of various artists. There are those that have come from Canberra, or those that have come from Sydney – there tends to be pathways and connections. Artists are being influenced by other artists. Initially students go with numerous ideas and the process is narrowing those down to something they can convey technically. Those colleges teach them various techniques and at some stage students will connect idea and technique and pursue. Hopefully they will refine the idea within the technical approach.

It has to do with where the artist starts their journey. There are schools of thought, whether Canberra, Melbourne or Sydney, but glass is relatively young in Australia. It was only the late seventies, early eighties that glass kicked off. (Luckily through association with the PowerHouse Museum I was introduced to Keith Rowe, Brian Hirst and Rob Wynne in Glebe.) Glass is relatively new and fresh in that you are seeing categories develop and you are seeing certain artists creating those categories. Then the students are continuing in those categories to some degree. They may not actually be creating new categories, but they carry-on from what they are taught. Established stars may pick up little bits off their students. You start to think this is going around in a small circle here.

Back in the late eighties, early nineties Rob Wynne was bringing sandstone and glass, and glass and metal together. He would be the one to ask whether that was a successful, or not.

*Do you photograph many 'contemporary art' works?*

As in installations – not a great deal, but recently there was a *Tin Sheds* exhibition I photographed with Tony Warburton. There was a video installation – walking along a beach seen from inside a beach house.

With glass it is 'object', but not often as a statement (unless it is figurative – a human form, or an animal form or such). There is abstract sculptural form. Then there is the functional object, but here there is the problem of 'using' an exquisite decorative piece. I dealt with an artist who was very much an entrepreneur, but who has sadly past on. His name was Anders Ousbeck. He promoted food and he also had a love of ceramics. At a dinner party he would bring out for use the precious 'one of' objects he collected. I asked whether he was afraid those pieces would be broken and lost forever and he said, "What the heck, it was used. We enjoyed it like a good wine, or any of those things in life that are short and sweet and gone. We still have the memory of them. There was (at least) that moment when we experienced it".

That brings us back to object. With glass, depending on the time of day, the week or the year, when the light hits the work has a different story to tell. Can you ever get bored with that? As an object what I find intriguing is that the artist presses me as a

photographer to imagine it over a time span. In an exhibition it is up for a week, but then it's gone. If I acquire that piece I would look at it day in and day out as I walk past a window, or up a hallway. My photograph should position the object in a way that shows those attributes.

*As a photographer you're trying to capture that in a frozen moment.*

That's my expertise. I suppose I could run a video camera and with hindsight select frames, but the pressure is on me is to evaluate the work and say, "This is the point that shows the work's best attributes". Overtime this has become intuitive. Intellectually you can be told, you can be taught and you can acquire, but in the end there is a gut feel – knowing this is the right choice. Working on other projects I use to have art directors who would ask me for half a dozen different viewpoints so they could choose. I would say, "No. This viewpoint is it". When they got the image back they would say I was right. It was right because I had an intuitive understanding that the viewer would want to see 'it' from there.

This is often a case of explaining my expertise. It is technical, and technical means more than 'point and shoot', because with glass there are transition zones where the opaque meets the light travelling from the translucent side. They meet at a point where both pieces of information are readable by the viewer. If one dominates the other, the photograph will 'blow out' and detail will be lost.

*You have embodied this skill?*

Probably. Intellectually I had the privilege of being schooled through Sydney University and the Power Institute and then through the PowerHouse Museum and so on. There I dealt with a lot of artists and intellectuals who conveyed their thoughts on what was appropriate to collect. Discussion with various artists added to my visual awareness. Each time I come into contact with someone they fed me more on the medium they work with. I now have this response (as I may have said before) where I react quickly. I see in an emotive sense. Translucent light, watery colours, or the bubbles of air captured in the glass, take me on a journey very quickly. That came through years of exposure to different people's commentaries.

For me that is part of the journey I enjoy immensely – more recently with Chick [Charles Butcher] and the discussions we had. He was commenting on the effect Rothko had on him. I then found a book on Rothko in a bookshop and I bought it, because it was all very interesting. You see this interplay. I now have that book as a reference.

*Would you place glass object in the 'modernist' realm?*

I think that is simplistic. I like to be challenged intellectually by the piece being incongruous to a 'norm'. That challenge is more tantalising. I want a catalyst in the piece. You need to have 'spark', and that is not just in the lighting, but it should be in the conceptual side of the piece. You should be confronted.

*But is it always about the glass?*

Yes, glass is always the 'hero' when it is use as the medium. Glass has more to offer because of its split personality. It talks to you differently on a day-to-day basis.

*There is also the 'performance' of making.*

That is a stereotype of the glassblower making doggies and seahorses. That's a little like the stereotype of a wedding photographer. We all get confronted with that sort of categorisation, but at the art end is a narrative submerged in the object. Is an art object 'modernist', or "post-modernist"? I think there are two distinct categories in glass and one is the block sculptural form and the other side is utilitarian – they are the divisions. If you say 'contemporary glass' most think in terms of Richard Whiteley, Mathew Curtis and Chick [Charles Butcher] and that sort of work. That's contemporary glass. Traditional glass is platter, vessel and vase.

*It's not 'art/craft'?*

This is where we face an interpretation of 'craft'. We can go to a dictionary to find out, but for me you acquire a technical ability to apply a 'craft' of glass making. I place myself under the umbrella of 'artist', because I use my craft to make commentary.

*Do you see the separation between a work and the words that surround it?*

Sometimes they don't 'marry'. An artist will be telling me the story of their work, a narrative. I look at the work and I don't see it. Is that me? Am I able to pass judgement here, or is it beyond my ability to comprehend what they are on about? Am I learning something here? I try to find out more so I can see their point of view.

*You look at the object to see if you can create an image that marries comment and object?*

The simple answer is yes, because I'm being asked to interpret their concept. I narrow down to certain attributes of the piece (sometimes it can't be the whole story. It will be detail). Sometimes people comment the image is a work in itself, and then go away with an idea to develop.

At times I see things within their work, record that and give them an image that helps spur them on further. Then it becomes collaborative. This body of work, or this object has come so far - where can it go next?

*Can you create an image that is more than the work?*

I certainly can. I can take that object, cut it out and relocate it in another environment. I can multiply it. I can have floating glass vessels emanating out of a doorway. If the client agrees, then we can go there. If they want a viewer to see the piece that marries the artist's statement with the object, I can turn my image into a visual statement.

*Its possible to make a work appear more than it is?*

Of course, it's often a constraint not to tamper with an artist's goal. I don't want to be doing the same process day in day out, so I'll just steer this person's work a little bit more into that tone of grey, rather than this grey, so they're all subtly different.

I tend to keep to shades of white, grey and black. I don't introduce colour because the colour is from the object.

*You accentuate an artist's style?*

I try to, yes. In the beginning I ask them to bring me examples of their influences. They may see a Grant Hancock photograph. Grant Hancock is a photographer in Adelaide. There is another chap in Melbourne. There tends to be a group of us that see the same way. We tend to move within black to white with shades of grey. 'Shades of grey' is a metaphor, but technically we're working so that the object is sitting in a surround of neutrality. I often refer to it as the curatorial look. It is the gradation from black to grey or white in the foreground.

It isolates the work and adds shadow, so it grounds and gives the object substance. In essence what we're then doing is applying light to extract opacity and translucency within a neutral environment that doesn't impact. For something more architectural that promotes work in situ go to the Sabbia website and see how Anna presents some of her artists' work in boardroom environments, or within house environments.

There is an aspect of me as devil's advocate. Who is going to buy this work and where is it going to go? The other day I did something with an artist where I took their sculptural piece and I put it in situ into a grey illustration of known landmark. It took the work from the artist's environment into an architectural environment. It was in scale with a human figure placed in a parkland environment in front of a shopping centre.

That was beyond the norm, but it helped to promote his work in that context. In a photograph there can be a loss of scale on occasions.

*Can you let go?*

To a degree you have to. There are times where letting go has worked really well and there are times when it has been a disaster. That is horrific. My name is attached to that image and a publisher has done a lousy print job. If I create an image, it will be for reproduction, because my images are for reproduction. If they don't look good then the artist is compromised as well as me.