

*At the time of this interview Stephen Payne was a Curator of Exhibitions and Collections at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery*

*Your role is to supervise the two galleries in this complex?*

Yes. Michael Scarrone is technically the curatorial assistant, or assistant curator for glass. He is primarily responsible for developing the exhibition that is here in the glass gallery and also for managing the glass collection. As curator for exhibitions and collections my hands-on responsibility is not so much for the glass exhibitions and the glass collection, but with the main gallery exhibitions, the print and general collections (painting, ceramics and textiles). I work with Michael on the glass, but he is primarily the one who puts it [the glass] all together.

*How does your knowledge base differ from Michael's?*

Michael is a glass artist and he has been working here in this position in Wagga for the past ten years. He has the background, the knowledge and the experience. I come from a very different background. I've been here for a year and my main area of expertise is with prints and works on paper, which is the other main collection that we have. So working here with Michael and the collection, I have learnt a tremendous amount, because I came here knowing virtually nothing about glass.

*How do you perceive your role?*

At the most basic level it's putting the objects on display in a way that is easiest for the general public – those without background knowledge, be it glass, or prints, or video art, or whatever it may be – to get the most out of those objects. That's the main responsibility.

*You're structuring the entry into that understanding?*

– to make it as easy as possible. I think it would be safe to say, most of the people who come into the glass gallery would know nothing about glass as a medium, as an art form – technicalities like kiln-formed or cold-worked. The role of the curator is still to ensure, that regardless of the level of knowledge, they can still appreciate how beautiful it is and whatever else it might have to say.

*Was your area of study contemporary practice?*

Primarily yes, works on paper, prints and also contemporary art in the broader sense of installation art and some performance art.

*I am interested in the contrast between how you might read a contemporary piece and how you might read pieces in the glass gallery?*

Looking at contemporary art I would certainly be making connections with other contemporary artists, movements, theories – things that I have studied and others that I have seen. Looking at the glass I find it harder to relate one glass artist to another glass artist. Not having the background knowledge, I don't know where they're coming from.

I can relate it to broader art movements. I can relate it to Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Modernism or Primitivism. I can relate it to other art movements or theories, but I might be missing the point, because the artist creating a particular work might be influenced much more by a glass specific movement I know nothing about.

*At the beginning of this chat you mentioned techniques when you talked of introducing people to the glass in this gallery. What is your entry point when you are reading the glass?*

For me, when I am looking at a work of art I'm always very interested in how it has been made. That's my personal interest. With printmaking for example, with works on paper, I have enough knowledge that when I look at a work without looking at a label, I can tell what kind of print it is, a lithograph or an etching. I am not saying I am infallible, but I have enough experience that I can make a fairly educated guess.

What's important to me with any work of art is how it was made and where it's come from physically and mentally. The ideas that have influenced it and the techniques that have been used to create it and how the mental and the physical fuse together to create the art work.

*If you had two survey exhibitions covering thirty years of practice – one for contemporary practice and another for glass? How do you think you might read them differently?*

I think glass is easier to read quickly. You can look at glass and immediately say that is beautiful, or that's not. There will be an immediate aesthetic response as an object, whereas with something like video art you need more time to sit through the whole video to be sure that you have got it, or not got it. Without saying anything about glass, or our audience, most would enjoy an exhibition of glass more than they would enjoy an exhibition of thirty years of video work. That is partly because glass is more immediately attractive than contemporary artwork and also easier to understand.

A lot of the glass in this exhibition [Kerfoot Collection, Wagga Regional Gallery] and in the exhibitions that I have seen here, is easily recognisable as forms and shapes and uses. You can look at this one here [Ann Robinson lead glass cast] and it's a vase. Everyone knows what you do with a vase. They wouldn't feel they need to work out first, "What is it?" before assessing whether they like it. It's, "That's a vase and yes I like it, or no I don't". Whereas with a lot of contemporary art you have to spend a lot more time with it before you work out what it actually is and what it's doing. Then you work out your response.

*To get to the core of this, they come in here and see a function and they like the form*

And colour. And I would like to say texture, but they are not allowed to touch the work. There is a visual texture.

An immediate aesthetic response would be the most important thing if I were putting together a glass show. Do I like it? It would be very much my own personal response, whereas if it were a thirty-year survey of contemporary art in various media I would want to tell more of a story centred around ideas. Because I'm not familiar with the ideas that have driven glass in the last thirty years, I would not do a show based on ideas. It would be what I like, pure and simple.

*The core things that tie these glass works together are material and technique. It is a narrative about the glass. Maybe there are mini narratives about the body, or about a cultural aspect, or about discrimination, but when you come down to it, over there [other gallery] it's a conversation about art, in here it's a conversation about a material.*

Yes, I would agree with you. It would still be ideas, but it would be ideas about glass itself and what you can do with it and how materials and techniques interact.

*Thinking a thing is something it is not is a problem for the viewer and for the artist.*

I don't know if it is a 'problem'. It is something you need to work out and a lot of contemporary art is about problems as things to be solved, or not be solved. It is the process of attempting to solve it that is the key to the work. It's the journey not the destination with many works.

*But with the object you've arrived.*

Again I would like to stress that I know little about glass. Given my lack of knowledge I approach it from an aesthetic point of view. Something I find with the glass exhibitions is that the most important context I would want to know is material and technique, but it would require a much larger exhibition space to show techniques and how to differentiate them. That is the aesthetic, function, size, shape, colour, what we would call the visual texture.

*We are almost talking of a visceral response.*

With glass, very much so, I would react to any of these pieces as an instant aesthetic response.

*And because it won't be recorded I'll say your hands are moving around your stomach in a churning action.*

Yes. Guts, visceral. It's only after I have looked at it I would start thinking about where it relates. Generally with glass what I start thinking about relating glass to is design and decorative arts movements such as I mentioned before, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, sixties Minimalism. Those are certainly things that spring to mind first, rather than with painting or sculpture where I might be thinking of Post-Structuralism, or I might be thinking of Cubism. With glass it's more the decorative arts movements and that's the nature of the medium, because so many of those movements were working in glass.

*You're putting it into an historical context?*

I try to, but it's not the first thing I do.

*Do you have a work in here [Kerfoot exhibition] that you strongly respond to?*

When we first were packing these up to bring them here to show, the work that I remember most vividly was the Seahorse [Mark Elliott, flame work]. With that the colours are beautiful, but where I can recognise it, I respond very strongly to evidence of skill, talent and hard work. If it's apparent to me that something has required time, thought and energy (almost all of the works here I can look at and see that). That's

why I respond to Mark's seahorse, and in this instance the fragility of it, the very obvious delicacy – the 'wow' factor of how is that holding together.

*That is a common response to virtuosity.*

Yes, that's exactly it. Where I'm able to recognise that. Looking at something that's cast, my judgement of the skill involved is limited. I will not be immediately hit by it, but it will be apparent in how the object comes together.

*Are you aware of a difference in the way you perceive a work and the way others may perceive it?*

Very much so. Having been educated and having worked around galleries for a few years (I'm still quite new at this game) I've seen more, so I can relate it to things I have seen. I've read more about it, so there are ideas and movements I can relate it historically and to other artists working in the same field or working with the same ideas. That's the difference between most of the people who walk into this gallery and myself. It would be simply that I've seen more art and I've read more about art.

*Talk about how you fit glass into that broader category of art?*

I don't think I have to try very hard. It's definitely art. Ceramics and textiles fit into the category of decorative arts and don't get enough attention, but they are still valid art forms. In fact they might be more valid art forms in the sense that more of the general public will respond to them positively, aesthetically, and you would find more people enjoying an exhibition of contemporary glass than would enjoy an exhibition of contemporary video art just at that 'walk in, do I like it' level. I think more people would do that with glass than with textiles, ceramics, wood and metal. That's important, because people should enjoy it. In that they are almost more valid art forms than video, or performance art that the public find hard work. Does art have to be hard work?

*This is a public gallery and that is 'democracy'. It isn't practical to have a gallery challenge your ideas base when you haven't formed an ideas base.*

Yes, most of the people who walk in this door want to see something beautiful. As I said my expertise is more in works on paper and prints. That's why I can say so readily that glass is an art form, because prints are again in a similar category of a 'valid' art form, but one that gets little mainstream attention. They are more of a specialist interest, and yet when we have a print exhibition here people respond very strongly to it. People enjoy it.

It is an interesting quirk of how the art industry has developed over, effectively, the past four or five hundred years. Certain art forms have been privileged. Painting, sculpture and then the contemporary art forms that developed from those. I think the split between the fine arts and the decorative arts is artificial, but now it's a fact of life.

*Who makes that judgement?*

I don't think anyone now is 'making' a judgement, a conscious decision – yes we are going to talk about painting, or yes we are going to talk about video art, but we are not

going to talk about glass, or we are not going to talk about ceramics. It is simply built in. It happens automatically. It's culturally embedded.

If we are talking about the industry, it starts in first year art history where you look at paintings and sculpture and you look at sculptural installations and performance art and media. It would be extremely unusual for many media – for prints, for glass, for ceramics, for architecture, other those other art forms that are visual, to be mentioned in a first year art survey course.

That carries on. The art magazines will review a painting exhibition, but they won't think of reviewing a glass exhibition.

*It's not a rejection.*

No, it's not. It's an automatic 'this is what we do'.

I was in Venice for the Biennale a couple of weeks ago. This is the biggest exhibition of contemporary art in the world and the most important. It is the stamp of approval and what was extremely refreshing for me to see there was that this time there were two exhibitions of glass art in the Biennale. I was there in 2007 and I don't remember a single exhibition of glass, or any of those other media.

What you have in Venice is the curated section – curated by the director of the Biennale. There are various national pavilions, put together by the Australia Council and the British Council (or the equivalent body) and then there are various collateral events. Various arts organizations, or individuals worldwide put these collateral events together. One of the exhibitions in the Venice Pavilion (Venice has its own pavilion alongside Australia and England and America) was (as seems almost natural given Venice's association with glass) an exhibition of contemporary glass artists from Venice and Northern Italy and outside, in front of that building, they had this enormous installation by Dale Chihuly. That was right in the middle of the Biennale gardens and it was packed. There were a lot more people in that glass exhibition than there were in many of the other national pavilions.

*Was it ideas based, or technical virtuosity?*

In this instance I think it was technical virtuosity. There were some beautiful pieces in many techniques, or as far as I could tell they were different techniques, because there was a flaw to the exhibition in that the labels didn't actually say the technique.

*That was an interesting decision.*

It was just presented as glass. The other glass exhibition was a collateral exhibition. It was called 'Glass Stress'. Off the top of my head, I can't remember who put it together, but this was very much more of an ideas based glass exhibition. I might even call it not an exhibition of 'art glass', but 'glass in art' [half the commissioned work was by artists working in glass for the first time]. There were pieces in there by artists using glass, artists that you wouldn't associate with glass – Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Bourgeois. There were glass pieces by Jean Arp, Josef Albers, Mona Hatoum (she's, I think, Palestinian of origin working in England).

*You said ideas based?*

In a way, because when I looked at this exhibition it wasn't the glass itself – the technique, the medium – that I was thinking of first. It was the ideas behind it and where they were coming from. There were some pieces that were using just plain window glass or mirror glass. That's why I say not art glass, but glass in the art.

*Where these people working in mixed mediums?*

Yes. There were some that were just glass, but in many cases it was glass and other – glass and wax, glass and ceramics, glass and metal, or it was glass as part of an installation. It was fascinating.

*You wouldn't call that 'Studio Glass'?*

No, I wouldn't, because of the reaction I had. I wasn't about the glass itself as a media. It was about the ideas expressed in the glass. As I said, the glass itself was not of a particularly high quality, or virtuosity and that was not an issue.

*You have talked about this already, but what are the most important aspects in presenting work to the public?*

Aesthetic response. There has to be something that will draw people in, a spotlight on a work as they walk through the door that will keep them walking in to see everything else. It does help to have a key work, easily visible, that sucks them in.

*Theatre?*

Yes, but it still has to make sense. There have to be connections. Works by one artist grouped together and next to that artist – someone who worked with them, or their student. I'm thinking of possible ideas for glass – colour, shape, size, not too many discontinuities. People have to be able to flow, not focusing in on something small then having to step back with something large. These are just general ideas. It is difficult to pin down, because often it is just a judgement of, "No, that doesn't look right there".

*Intuitive?*

Yes, very much so. I think the idea of having a set of rules written down to be followed wouldn't work.

*How important are the words that are constructed around a work?*

It's important to give people the option to find out more. I do think that many people coming into the gallery don't necessarily want to learn more. They do just come for the visual experience. It's easy to avoid putting words all over the walls, but there are many other people, myself included, who do want to know more about it. So you would have text, or texts easily available.

It differs from exhibition to exhibition, so you do have to have texts up on the wall to give you an introduction to a certain section. The most important thing is to have a range of different options for people to be able to access.

*Sometimes a narrative can be constructed that makes the work something more than it is.*

That's something I try to avoid because it's not fair to the individual works. Each work has value in and of itself, not just as part of some broader narrative that has been constructed and may, or may not be accurate.

Personally when I go to an exhibition, I usually go around once first, without reading anything and then I go and I read the texts and I look through the catalogue. That's because I am always interested in the aesthetic response. Well, it's never going to be a purely aesthetic response, but just an initial response. I am always informed by the education that I have had. It is easier for me to go around not reading anything, because I still have things to relate it to. In that way I can be constructing my own narrative. That's important for people, so you give them those different levels of information.