



Cedar Prest
 Araluen Aranda (detail of foyer window)
 1989
 leaded, stained, painted, enamelled and kiln worked glass
 17.3 sq meters as 12 panels

I'll start at the beginning. I did medieval history at university and I was given a lot of glass objects for my twenty-first and I put them on the shelf in my window. I was fascinated by the reflections that came off and through 'non-flat' glass. I wanted to learn stained glass, but was told in Melbourne (where I grew up) that women couldn't do it, because it was 'too heavy'. That meant there was no place to apprentice, to learn.

I didn't think any more about that, but when I finished my degree I ended up in England, then subsequently in London. I found they were teaching stained glass in three London art schools and there was no sex barrier. I applied and got in. I had a job in cancer research and went to school part-time. That's how I learnt. I was never interested in leadlight per say. I was interested in 'non-flat' work. I experimented with epoxy resins and things that broke barriers so you didn't have to use lead. I cast and appliquéd a lot of glass, I melted stuff (which you weren't supposed to do). I never had any conventional leadlight training. I wasn't interested in that.

I came home and I showed the kind of glass I had been making. People thought it was a bit wild, but some architects started to commission me. I melted wine bottles and did all sorts of things. In the end you might say I have earned my living doing commissions. Those commissions have included standard church windows, but I have always tried to do them so they were Australian. Interpreting things in an Australian context in as much as I could. It was the same with private house windows. If people would let me get away with making 'non-flat' glass I would make non-flat glass.

I graduated in '61 and by '64 I was casting and slumping glass. The courses in England were called 'stained glass'. They allowed you to make things with antique glass and use the kilns, but it was not formally taught, as it would be in a studio. You were not taught to 'paint angels'. The people who taught the courses in the schools weren't professional makers of leadlight windows.

The reaction back in Australia was that slumping and casting was no way to treat the glass?

People hadn't seen work like that before. They hadn't seen any contemporary glass at

all. They were living back in the era of Victorian and Edwardian decoration. I travelled via Mexico to America and I visited Chilhuly and co. up in RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] near Boston. I had already seen Chilhuly's images of the 'neon in melting blocks of ice' [large-scale environmental projects in collaboration with Jamie Carpenter froze neon inside of 20,000 pounds of ice]. I was interested in that 'melting glass' and I had already made a window about molten glass, which is in a church/home in North Adelaide. I was aware of what Chilhuly was doing. I was in reasonably close correspondence and in 1970 we emigrated to America. I could have stayed had my husband let me and taught at California College of the Arts where I had been offered a job. California at that time was pretty wild and in '71 I taught at one of the summer school colleges at a place called Mendocino up north of San Francisco. I got to know Peter Mollica very well. He was a contemporary lead and glass artist. I was aware of, and I was connected to, a lot of those people. Had we stayed in America I could have been part of that early evolving glass scene.

When I came back to Australia there wasn't much happening. People weren't into blowing glass yet, but I was involved with the first lot of people who tried to get the *JamFactory* started. The *JamFactory*, as we had envisaged when we set it up, was that it would make blown glass, but not exclusively blown glass forms. I would use a general term like 'hot glass' as opposed to 'cold glass'. There weren't going to be boundaries between glass techniques (like excluding 'leadlight'). As it turned out, when they did get it started they only wanted to make blown glass forms for production. What I wanted to do was make non-flat glass to go into windows. People couldn't understand that (or asked, "Why you would want to do that?") and the *JamFactory* certainly wasn't allowing for it. In the end I went to England and learnt blowing in a crystal factory program. That was how I started to make the blown glass forms in my windows.

I have always hated the term 'flat-glass', because what I have done has never been able to be classified as 'flat'. That wasn't how I felt about the material. My first influence had been blown glass.

You're looking to glass for sculptural form?

The term I used was 'bas-relief' – low profile sculpture. What I wanted to make was 'bas-relief' windows. People didn't have a concept for that, but when I made it a lot of clients would accept it. The problem is that you can't afford your own glass blowing factory. The fact is I didn't want to slump forms, I actually wanted to mould them from hot glass. I developed mould techniques when I was at Brierley Hill [Stourbridge area]. I was an apprentice in the program at Brierley Hill with the *Stuart Crystal* factory (we were actually blowing crystal, not standard glass). I worked to develop processes for making moulds that wouldn't damage the glass. I don't like glass that has metal marks on it from cooling, so I devised a process based on the technique of hot metal injection into moulds. There they use a form of sand and sump oil that reacts to the hot glass by steaming. That prevents the glass from picking up impressions off the mould. I was inventing techniques, or at least borrowing other methods of doing things.

When I was at Brierley Hill they said to me there was another Australian (as if I would know any other Australian!) in the area. It was Maureen Cahill. Maureen was at the Stourbridge College and she was intensely depressed by the brown and grey surroundings and the 'grey' people. She is a very colourful person. So she came down and stayed with us at Oxford and we became close friends. She needed someone who understood her cultural background. She was trying to develop her own sorts of colour

values in fusing up there and people didn't understand the work she was making. She was aware of what I was doing and I was aware of what she was doing. What she was doing was not what I wanted to do, and vice versa, but subsequently when she made those moulded clear glass forms that hung in the air, she did come back to an area we had in common.

When you came back to Australia how did ideas in glass change?

I don't think I tried to do anything to change people and I don't think you can. People came to me who were interested in what I was doing. I have been supported all my life by commissions from people who weren't contained within a square box. If people ask you to make something, but let you experiment at the same time, then you can do it, because you have sold that piece of work already. The change is by example?

I have never been dependant upon a gallery system. I have worked in real buildings making things designed to enhance and look as if they belong architecturally. I was bending and melting wine bottles, messing around with all sorts of glass and using epoxy resin to put things together and the clients were quite happy to accept that. I didn't have to deal with a world that did not understand what I was doing.

You were working in architecture?

I often worked with architects. I had allegiances with architects from the very beginning. Architects have wanted something different and they have used me. I have had long term working relationships with three architects that lasted over seventeen years. I think people saw me as somebody making contemporary glass, while the traditional studios were making only traditional glass.

For example, I exhibited at *Aldgate Crafts*, which was one of the early centres before the JamFactory, which supported SA craftspeople by exhibiting and selling their work. I always had one or two pieces hanging in the front window there. People would see my work and then come to me seeking to commission work.

You were an 'artist/craftsperson'?

That's right. I think that is a good description. I certainly always called myself a 'stained glass designer'. I have never called myself a 'lead-lighter', or a 'flat-glass' person. I think what you call yourself is important. I am not a stained glass painter in the traditional sense. In fact I dislike paint on glass, because I think it muddies it up. I think it interferes with the effect of the light coming through the glass. Other traditional people would hate me making remarks like that.

I am a William Morris 'truth to materials' person. What matters to me is that glass is a material with certain properties, just as acrylic is a material with certain properties. A good designer exploits the aperture that they are going to put the glass into and the light that comes into that aperture, but they also exploit the material to get the most out of it in that setting.

What qualities attract you to glass?

Transparency and the way it reflects and takes on things, and sometimes that you can see partly through it so there is a translucent effect. There are the effects that are

happening as the light is going down at the end of the day, so if you use iridescent glass, or glass that has atomic salts in it – it reacts differently. Opal glass does not lose its colour.

I am interested in qualities within the glass that create different moods. If you are creating a meditation chapel you want a different kind of mood from that you might have in a sunny dining room where you want people to feel cheerful and happy.

I have rather a large 'palette' (as you might say) of glass and I have always been a major collector of glass, because I want the glass to speak for itself. I don't want to impose too many techniques on the glass in order to make it, or the idea, express itself.

How important is it for you to have your hands on the material?

It is vital. If I could afford to have a hot glass studio adjacent and make moulds all my life then I would have done it that way. I would have made a lot more moulds. I really wanted to make bas-relief glass, but for most of my life I haven't been able to do that, because I haven't had access to the equipment. In most of my working life (once the children were well and truly at school) I had a steady flow of commissions and always worked in the studio with one, two, or three other people. Other people were fabricating with me, while I was designing at the client interface. I was responsible for the choosing of the glass itself, but I didn't always do the cutting and the fabricating. I think that is how you get work done when you are a woman and a mother.

You may be aware that a lot of my life has been spent as a community artist, working with people who didn't have skills with glass. I would be invited into an area and I would train people and together we would make something that was appropriate to their public building. I like that kind of work. I like working with other people, but I am interested (in a sense) in bringing them to their own maturity, rather than having them as little people beavering away on my interpretation. I am interested in the fact that all of us are different, and all of us have different potential.

I am a natural teacher. Say I produced a line (at one stage I produced mirrors and they were very popular), I could have had a production line, but I didn't. I am not interested in repeating myself, or having other people to do that process work for me.

That seems in contradiction with your 'designing' to produce a product.

When an architect commissions you, what you try to do is what they envisage. They say, "We have this project, can you help us?" You discuss it, develop concept drawings and if you agree, and if the client is happy with the proposal, that work goes ahead.

Do you see trends in studio glass?

Most definitely – I think the most important thing is that we have followed the American lead into having specialist shops and collectors who focus on the object above all sorts of other things. It is not necessarily a useful object; it's just an object and with it comes a cult of names and a commercial pecking order. The focus with hot glass has very much become one of getting into the top ten and getting your objects successfully marketed.

We are talking about high-end decorative art. I call it the 'cult of the object', where the object is the most important thing and you have specialist galleries that move the work at expensive prices.

The William Morris philosophy would have been that glass objects may be beautiful, but they would be usable. I don't think that applies anymore. Take Nick Mount's scent bottles. They are certainly not in any sense meant to be used.

A number of contemporary makers in glass are trying to break away from 'plinth' objects.

I think it is natural that most artists wish to experiment and to find their own voice, in their own style and that would always be something that is always there. Fused glass (warm glass as you call it) did not exist until Shar [Feil-Moorman] went to America on a scholarship and then wrote the definitive book on how to successfully melt glass, get it properly annealed and create a product that would last. After her came the 'Bullseye cult'. That was a company devoted to selling its product because it was fusible and they were running workshops. There could be no successful fusible (warm glass) until people had made that initial research and could produce a product that would work. Shar was there doing it before Bullseye.

At the beginning, when I started to melt stained glass it wasn't compatible so it wouldn't stay together.

You were never part of that 'plinth/object' area?

No, I had chosen to work another way. If people ask me to make something then it is already sold. Why then would I need a middleman? I don't. I am directly in control of my relationship with the client and I actually get the price that I want, whereas, if you're with a gallery you are generally losing one third to fifty percent. That might make the enterprise uneconomical.

Rather than putting objects out in a market hoping someone would buy them, you had people come to you to make works because those people liked what you did.

Yes and that may have been an accident. You have to remember that when I came back to Australia in '66 I had one baby within a month and then a second baby within eighteen months. My productive life was quite curtailed for the next four years. During those four years I formed the base for a business, so after five years I never looked, or advertised, for business. People always came and found me. I did very little during those years, but the point was that my reputation built up and at the end of the five years I had a full year of work ahead of me.

What drove your work?

My personal aesthetic, the feeling I had that made me want to work with glass as if it was a fluid material. In a sense glass was not set. It was not a hard-edged thing. Glass is liquid – like honey or toffee. It is that quality of the material I was chasing. Glass is not a solid. Scientifically it is classified as liquid and it has fluidity about it and if people put any classification on my work, it will say 'flowing line'. They will say it has fluidity about it.

That is probably a combination of me and the material. When I found glass after I had

done my university degree, it was like I had found a material that was 'it'. There was never a question that it was ever going to be anything else. It was glass and that was it. I was in a love affair with glass. I didn't want anything else.

Are you working with a 'language'?

Yes mine. I guess I have always felt that symbols need to evolve with the culture. For example the PX symbol in church windows is not understood by most nowadays. I think a culture needs ritual and symbols. Often these are universal – they are buried in the human subconscious, but an artist can work with these concepts to make them meaningful for the current generation and society. Perhaps you can say that is an evolving language of mine?

When someone comes to me and they have a hole in the wall and they say we want something here. I look through that hole in the wall and I look for light levels and what I call 'obstacle courses', that is things you may not wish to see, things like fences and clotheslines. I take measurements and plot those things into the aperture and then in my designing I will hopefully meld those things into beautiful colour patterns of light that will flow into the house and onto its floors to create what I call a 'light atmosphere'. My light is always about creating a 'light atmosphere' that is appropriate to the building and to its use.

I am designing for the client. I am trying to sense that client's dream and see if, as a designer, I can interpret that in glass. I have no fixed interpretation for a window. I am not following a recipe. It is what is appropriate for each particular project, each specific aperture.

Now we all have what is in a sense, our own graphic line and that links all my work, but I don't think I encourage my ego into my work. I see every project as its elements. They are a design problem to be solved.

I never ever go into a project with a preconceived idea. It is about a successful relationship between 'me', the 'client' and the 'building' – and the 'light'. Light is not stable, but the thing faces north, south, east or west. It may be hit directly by the sun, or it may not. All of that is critical, because glass responds to the light. It acts as a living material and it is your job to exploit the light that is coming into that aperture to create what I call this 'light atmosphere'. This is an affect. It is like being a stage lighting designer.

This is creating a felt response to the space. It is an experience you are creating.

Yes, because they want atmosphere. I don't want a picture. If I wanted a picture I would buy a painting and I would hang it on the wall. Glass lives because the light goes up and down and it changes seasonally. You must remember that in 1970, when I was in America, it was the period of art when people were doing *Happenings* all over the place. You would go to a street corner and have a 'Happening'. They were events. Philosophically you could say I was part of that culture. It is part of my background. If you put something of mine in an art gallery, without natural light it would be as dead as dead. That is not what I am on about.

You were getting away from the plinth from the very beginning. You have always been working with the work as an event.

I don't worry about what other people do, or might do. I do my own thing. As long as a client says to me here's the space and we want you to do this work, I have the freedom to do what the hell I want to do.

Sometimes clients do put restrictions on you, but then it is up to me to take the commission or, if I don't think we are a match, say to the client that I have a large work load, so why don't you go and see 'so and so'. Then I have passed the commission off my plate. Then I know I will not have to deal with people I do not match. There have been times in my life when I didn't necessarily realise that the client wanted to be the designer and for me that is a disaster. Then you do not get my work, but you get a crappy hybrid that grows from being pushed around. I suppose this issue goes right back to the Medici where it resulted in major distortions to works. It has always been that a person with power and money thinks that gives them power over everything. They do not realise that artists are not doing it for the money. They are doing it because it is what they have fallen in love with. They underestimate those things that are important to the artist. Some artists do sell out, but I have been fortunate in that some of my clients are people who have been waiting twenty years to commission work. I do not have a problem with my clients when they are that committed.

Are your works different when you see them after a long period of time?

I would have to say yes, because you have moved on. Unfortunately sometimes you get people who saw something that you made twenty years ago and in their fantasy they say, "I want something like that". That creates a problem because you can't go backwards in your life. If they want something like what I made twenty years ago, I may not be able to do it. I do encounter difficult situations where I say to the person that they must realise there has been a lot of water under the bridge and I am not where I was then.

Are there issues you would like to raise?

My vision, or my hope was that the Australians wouldn't copy either the Europeans or the Americans and that we would develop our own glass language/culture here. One of the things I have found most disappointing is that our education institutions have frequently tended to hire, not Australians, but people with 'names' from overseas. Those people don't understand subtleties in nurturing an Australian culture. This is particularly when Bullseye comes in and is pushing, pushing, pushing and people can be pushed very easily when you are giving them free materials.

Invasion is too strong a word, but we have a very strong infiltration of an aesthetic and a culture, which is not ours. Some people who have been students of mine and then been students elsewhere have said to me another twenty years down the track that they are fighting to find their own voice again.

Are they caught by a series of techniques applicable to a specific material?

Unfortunately it is a culture built within these schools and through selection for exhibitions. There is a culture that you will perform within a certain 'circus ring' and if you chose to be performing outside that 'circus ring' you will not be selected to be in these national exhibitions like *Ranamok*, or the one in Canberra. You won't be selected for those exhibitions unless you want to jump through the aesthetic hoops (they are not dictated) that are there. You can be sure the people on the selection boards are going to make a certain type of choice. When you ask why you don't see

work outside the square in Ranamok, that is the answer.

I don't know if that's deliberate.

Some of them complain about it to me. I think it is a shame, because for most of my working life I have had the freedom to teach as a community artist, and the works that we have made (including the big aboriginal window in the *Araluen Arts Centre*) are outstanding and very Australian pieces of work. That is because, with all of those people, I am on about understanding the place where they live and transcribing that into glass.

Now unfortunately, in the teaching institutions there hasn't been this nourishment of the individual that enables them to express what it is to be Australian (whoever and wherever they are). For me the land, my belonging to the land and my cultural background are critical to the evolution of my work, but other people will be prepared to say the aesthetic of their object may be this, or it may be that, but then what happens to them? Where do they go from there? There are quite a few of them. I won't be here in fifty years, but I will guarantee that some of them, after about twenty-five years of doing that, will move back to where they really ought to have been in the first place.

At the moment you might say we have sacrifice some of our Australian culture at the American, rather than the European shrine. The European influence has not been as strong.

A narrative that is about a particular type of glass rather than a place?

- And a type of exhibitionism that is exhibition for exhibition sake. Another illustration of it is that every year that major museum in Corning, New York State, has a selection of the most interesting works from that year. Those works are put on show. That will reflect the different judges from year to year, but it does give you an indication of where that culture is at that time. The young ones understand this because to get on they have to get into those 'in' galleries in order to make a name for themselves, in order to sell their works at a decent price.

They are paying in a design sense to get in there, but that's what they need to do in order to be recognised, or it is what they feel they need to do to be recognised, because they probably can't sell their works without those galleries.

We have gatekeepers?

Well maybe (laughs).