



Kirstie Rea
Outside/Inside 6
2008
kiln formed glass and painted steel
50 x 140 x 30

How do you perceive your practice?

When people ask what I do? I say I'm an artist. I suppose it could depend a little on the context of where I am and whom I'm with, but I would say I'm an artist and I primarily work with glass.

Have you always seen yourself in that way?

I think so. I actually found a schoolbook from 1963 and I wrote, "When I grow up I want to be an artist and paint pictures to make people happy". I have no recollection of writing that. I was looking through those old books when mum died and I was cleaning out the house. I thought, "Oh my God! I wrote that in 1963".

You wanted to have a positive affect on other people.

Yes, I found that part of it interesting. It was not just what I wanted to do, it was what I wanted to do it through. When I left school I didn't know I wanted to go to art school. I didn't go to art school until I was twenty-eight – ten years after leaving school.

At Canberra School of Art you mix with painters and sculptors. I remember when I turned up at school and being in its first year the school had put up signs - *Wood Craft* and *Glass Craft*, and whatever. Klaus Moje's first act was to chisel the 'Craft' off, so it just said *Glass*. I always thought (and I suppose this verges on that 'art/craft' debate) that it is pointless talking about it, because you are just reinforcing any debate that remains. We are all artists in a way. We are all makers. If some one calls me a 'glass artist' I don't mind, but I don't get hung up on it, I'm too busy.

There are implications in a name. It reveals relationship with material and the way you work.

I don't know if I agree with that. I just like to see what people make, and I am judging them on overall form. I suppose everything I'm judging them on (whether it's technical finesse, sculptural qualities, or painterly effect) is all in one lot.

In the object that they produce?

Yes.

You didn't say you were looking for the idea. You were looking for formal qualities.

I am looking for formal aspects and that brings me onto question number three – the language. And it is that typical rigorous art school language of looking at an artwork, whether it's two-dimensional, or three-dimensional. With three-dimensional objects you look at those basic sculptural principals of point, line, plane and volume. How we move around a work – those very basic things.

Was going to 'art school' important in giving you a key into art?

It was for me, definitely. It was not about the paperwork at the end. It was about learning. I knew I didn't know. In that very first semester of drawing classes when Jan Brown, who is a well-known Canberra sculptor said, "We don't teach you how to draw, we teach you how to see". It is being taught all those fundamentally basic things that you are not taught at high school. Anyway I certainly wasn't in the sixties.

I learnt so much at art school. I really did, but I think it is an individual thing. I know artists who are amazing artists and have no formal qualifications at all. They're really artists and maybe I would have gone onto some creative (artistic even) activity if I hadn't been to art school, but I wanted to study. I wanted to learn more.

The language thing again?

It is. The answer to the training question is that I went to the Canberra School of Art (as it was then known, now ANU School of Art) in 1983, which was the first year of that glass course with Klaus. I graduated in '86.

Did the art school broaden attitudes?

That's the beauty of an art school. You are not hidden away within your workshop. You certainly weren't in Canberra. There was a full year foundation course, and you didn't even go into your selected workshop until second year. By then you had made friends with others who had their majors in other workshops. It was a very open school and it was easy to walk through other workshops. There were programs like art forum – our weekly lecture program. It was absolutely planned by the school (aimed at providing a rounded education) that you were exposed to painters, you were exposed to sculptors, to installation artists, to video artists, to everyone. You were encouraged to go to exhibitions, as you were encouraged to go to anything to do with glass. I really appreciated that.

One more thing where I was really lucky was that my first two lecturers in the glass workshop were Klaus Moje and Neil Roberts. They were at either ends of a spectrum really. Neil, even in those days (though he had come from a glass background), was already thinking so out on the edge. It was wide sculpturally – other materials. His approach to the medium was so different to Klaus's. Klaus was hands on master of technique – really work at it, then you are free to work with it. Neil was, "Pick up anything that makes you happy, put it together and then we'll talk about it". These were two very different approaches. At the time, I don't know... I probably swung towards Neil's way of working, but as I learnt more at art school and got that understanding, I

really got to appreciate Klaus's way. I think I was really lucky in having experienced those two people.

The next question concerns the way you work with material.

I think this latest show [Sabbia Gallery: *In the Presence of Blue*] is an interesting show for me. It is a show where I do think (and I don't know if this is 'post body of work', or whether I began to think this as I worked through it) there is a certain confidence building (I don't want to be cocky here) in using glass in any form.

It seems there is so much in glass making that helps you grow, but you are branded by a technique. You teach that and you stick to it. I have been very lucky in my years of teaching. I taught alongside the hot shop. I've taught a little bit inside the hot shop with things like sand-casting and all those years of the 'roll-up' working with Scotto [Scott Chaseling]. So, I have a good understanding of the material through all the techniques and processes. This show does illustrate a little bit of that. I'm now confident enough to know when I need a blown form, rather than a kiln form. I'm not going to struggle to cast a really fine cylinder. That would be crazy. I'm not into that at all. You have the confidence to say to someone who is your gaffer, please make me this. That's because you know the material is right for that (the glass is right for that) and the process, the blowing (for example those two cradle pieces – the bit of sky, the bit of air rolled down into that holding area) is right for that.

You are happy to get someone else to do it?

I'm really happy to do that. More important is the whole look of the piece and that the look reflects the conceptual underpinning of the work. It is about that big blue space out there. It is about just capturing that momentary thing in that open-ended cylinder form.

It's timeless?

I like the timeless thing.

About that relationship between work, material, process and technique – I kind of think I am confident in relation to material. I hope that continues and there are works where they will just be kiln formed - pretty basic. I never think of myself as technically refined, but I do believe in Klaus's promotion of mastery of technique, then being free to work with it. I think that is really true. When you can confidently put something into a kiln and say I know that is what I'm going to get out. I do like that. I do like knowing.

There are very occasionally surprises, but I would have to say they are an absolute minority. In teaching, I would encourage that more with students, but with my work I really know what I want to get out of it. If I don't, very rarely would it be a positive surprise, usually it's a negative. It's "Umm, do it again".

You strongly preconceive the work before you make it?

I do. I absolutely do - without fail. I don't think there is ever a piece where I don't know. I have that whole idea for the whole body of work that's bubbling away there (for this show for a year or more). It's always rolled on, for twenty-three years since graduating. My ideas have moved slightly, but they can be brought back to one point in a way that

is always there. So as new works evolve in my mind that conceptual underpinning doesn't change. It's there.

It's really about knowing a space. It's about a sense of belonging. I said something the other night that just came to mind then. It is always to do with memory, space and a sense of belonging. In this work [the exhibition] it still is there, but it has removed location. It could be anywhere. That big blue sky – sure there is so much of it at home, but it could be anywhere. So for the first time in this work, I have removed location.

In the previous body of work I talk about light in the landscape. That could have been about my travelling, which I really enjoyed. It could be light in Northern Scotland. It could be light in the Pilchuck forests. There I still have location, but in this work it is though I have removed location. I think there is a real universality.

Is this tapping into some response deep inside you?

I think some of it I'm still putting words to, but it is that feeling when you step out there and it is through a threshold, there is a space you enter, but once you are in that space (when I am on my deck for example) that moment has gone. A friend said I should research a Swiss architect called Peter Zumthor who is on about this liminal space. I thought this is really what I'm talking about – this space that is momentary.

I really love being by myself. I'm not a city person. I can be out in the bush for example. There is a big blue sky and no sound except for the birds. It sounds cliché, but it is such a clear head thinking space. Referencing this latest work, I find clear blue days are a really creative space. Whereas on a cloudy days (I love cloudy days, they are so atmospheric) are days where you may as well be in a room. It is a lot more closed. Then I'm more self-reflective and I think about things I have been doing.

On the ABC about six months ago, they interviewed a writer from North Carolina, David 'someone', I have it written down in one of my drawing books. He talked about writers writing their best work on cloudy days. They turn you inward. I thought that was interesting and I started to think about cloudy days.

So I was really enjoying that blue day to move forward.

This answers that problem of how you move forward working in your head (you only know what you already know) – because you are moving into that unknown space.

I think it does. It is an unknown spot in my head and it's an exciting space. It really is, because you don't know what is going to come up.

That touches an interesting point, as with so many people working in glass, Jess Loughlin for example (I love her beautiful spaces), and a lot of my previous work... This is why I am really tentative about this show. I didn't know how it would be received, because pieces are so different. They jump around. I thought the one thing I need to keep to unify the work is that blue. That will anchor it. Often you go in and it is 'box form', 'box form' and 'box form', or wall, wall and wall – people tend to work in series.

I think back to my vertical wall works that stem from the trees, the beautiful light that came through new growth. Most of my shows would have been wall work, wall work

vertical, vertical, with occasional other work. What I have enjoyed about this show is that pieces have change in form – radically. If you took away the colour...

But it is not just the blue.

That's really good if it is not just the blue... I was thinking about the concept and it is so open. I have another body of work to make for Bullseye in a relatively short time. When you have your show and you get it up and go whew! And then when you are not working in series you ask, "What next?" But I do have some ideas of using the steel and the glass.

When you don't have the representational anchor it's a scary place.

Yeah, but interesting that you just said that word edge, because I suppose if I am trying to develop a concept... quite a few months of last year I was stuck. Where was this work coming from? (until I really pinned it down).

I often just take a word like 'open', or like 'edge' and then not only do I try to grow ideas in my head, but I will draw an edge and then, if that is the edge, where am I going from there? Am I going to step off it? Am I stepping back from it? And is it me, or is it something else? All of those things then start to inform form and material. Then I go, is my edge going to be glass? Do I want the qualities of glass, the ones that people will easily get – the sharpness, the fragility, colour, or do I want that edge to be steel. I'll write those words in my journal and scribble – do I want this [sketches in journal], or do I want this?

The words are a departure point?

It is the departure point. I'll actually teach that. I will say to students that my journal is at least half words, if not more. Phrases, sentences, words, but going back to that edge thing, I might just say to students when they are stuck, write a couple of key words – 'edge' and then ask, is it sharp, are you at the edge, or behind it? Then build this whole thing out of words. Then continue with, what images, what forms are coming out of that? I do work with words, not that I am a wordsmith at all. I always struggle with words, but to develop form, yes.

Using form you push beyond the words to find something words can't express?

I suppose that is when you hope that form (and if there is ever room for the unplanned – I don't call it accidental – it's as you develop form), even if it isn't a reality then, but form in your head, pushes you in another direction, or it embellishes.

With a golden thread coming from the word? You find a direction?

Yes. I hope it doesn't sound not too controlling.

It's not using word as a boundary, but as an point to move beyond.

I remember Neil Roberts actually. I think I was in about third year and really stuck. You know when you get a third year of a four-year degree and you are meant to be on the track in making a body of work. Klaus had gone off to Pilchuck and Neil had the run of us. He said to me, write down ten things that make you happy. I couple of mine were

actually physical things, but he said, no I don't mean anything physical, or material. Just go away and write down ten things that make you happy and start with that. I think he was saying get some passion into your ideas. Get some passion into your work. Maybe something that is coming from the core of you. Our core is so different from our brain.

Talking about your current exhibition, when you now look at a specific piece, how are you reading the work?

It might be easier to look at a piece from a while back. I think the other work is still too new and I could pick a piece that did everything that I wanted it to do and other pieces that didn't quite do what I wanted them to do. You know if you have a show, there are always those pieces you would cull if you had more work. There are pieces in that show that I would take away.

You would look at works to see how they matched up against your concepts of them?

Yes. How individual pieces matched up against my concepts and I can talk about a piece that does fall short – this piece [draws illustration], with the two pieces swinging out under the steel. It is the most unsophisticated piece in the show. It is so even. These are right in the centre. It grew from an earlier piece that was in the *Procter Show* where I had the one. I think that was a better piece. I think this one (because it is so symmetrical) has lost any sense of surprise. There are angles of that piece that I like, but from front on and straight through the back, I don't think this is a sophisticated piece. It lacks tension, which I think some of the other work has (a nice arresting tension). The glass is too heavy.

Because it is so balanced, so simple in its resolution, it doesn't engage you?

I think that is it. There is nothing that actually holds you there, but I also think the glass doesn't have any of the 'lightness'... the work aimed to pull that light in. I don't think it actually does that. There is not the right visual weight between the metal and the glass. I think the glass outweighs the metal and that wasn't what I planned. Yes, it didn't do as I planned.

You come to your works with a strong preconception?

I do. I do and I wonder if I did that as much in the past – maybe not.

Let's talk about a work you made five years ago?

Yes, I did think about that. One of them was a work from 2004. That's a piece with three tines. It's called *Balancing the Blades*, the three larger tines that come off the wall. These are the tines that directly reference the tines in agriculture, that implement that marks and cuts the ground. *Balancing the Blades* grew out of an earlier work called *Fine Line* and *Fine Line* was four tines lined up, sitting on a plinth top. *Balancing the Blades* came off the wall. I wanted to look at that balance, *Fine Line* did that too – the fine line we tread between intensive agriculture and keeping the landscape.

A narrative?

The background for the work, I was looking at country south of Canberra, up near Kosciusko National Park, right on the edge of the park. It was country that was really heavily ploughed and a new crop was coming up. It seemed bazaar that there was this fine line, literally a fence line, between this country and the park. *Balancing the Blades* again looked at that balance that we need, that some of us seek, between what we do to country and what we leave.

It came off the wall. I don't really remember why it came off the wall, but something I know that wasn't planned, that was unexpected (and a few people picked this up and I felt it), was that, as they were large forms and they came off the wall, they actually came at you. It was quite menacing in a way and as you approached the piece, it put a stop to the viewer. It stopped them in their tracks and sometimes it pushed them back, because 1) – it was glass and 2) – it was just that the form came at you. I thought that it created a really interesting response.

Another thing I wanted (but this was more a technical thing) was refraction through the tine that would mimic the blade of grass on the wall. So when those pieces are lit correctly (as I think it is in most of the photo documentation of them, because the piece is now in the National Gallery) you get blades of grass coming up from the floor. Here is the blade physically, menacing in a way, a cutting instrument, but behind it, subtly, is this beautiful green spear of glass (I can send through an image of that).

There is an ambiguity that breaks with your preconception. Something happens with the light.

Yes. It started happening when I was working on the vertical wall works. That was those stark burnt tree trunks after the fires around Canberra in 2003 and watching that amazing waxy translucent growth with the light coming through. So I was making those wall works and I came to designing the fitting for the back so they could hang on the wall. The aluminium profile that suited them best actually took them off the wall an extra 20mm to 30mm. What I hadn't planned was that with that much distance (when they were lit beautifully) the colour reflected back on the wall. So you were feeling that void between the work and the wall. Painting can't do that, it something only the material glass can do and it was so close to what you saw in nature, it was incredible. That was a surprise.

So working with that (it was the same time I was working on these tines) I knew that (here material definitely comes into it) by using very pale tint colours of Bullseye, I was going to get a really soft colour reflected onto the plinth top. Then I started thinking, how can I use the material glass, and its transparency, how can a little bit of lighting add to what I am saying? And with *Fine Lines*, they were the four tines lined up like that with the reflection. I thought that was a real connection to ground. It's through light and colour, and that was when I started to put the tines off the wall. For *Balancing the Blades* I was literally playing around in the studio with a light, moving it around thinking, "Oh I can get that if the light is coming from the right angle. I can actually create that blade of grass".

So it was not even the glass. It came through the technical thing of a fitting at the back, which pushed the glass off the wall a little bit more, creating that space.

'Pushing you away from the glass', or 'drawing you' into subtle effects of light create very intuitive responses.

They are things I talk to my students about. Do they want to bring someone in, and if they bring them in do they want to hold them there? Do they want to bring them in and somehow push them back? Think about things like that in your work. Think where the focus is. Think how it lies within a larger framework, whether it is a 2D or 3D piece. Think how you are pushed around an object.

You work with ‘emotional’ space?

I don't have my drawing book here. Giacometti has this fantastic quote about sculpture – about it filling the void. It is not about the work, but it is about the void. It is about the space around the work and engaging that space. Do you ever read Elizabeth Farrelly in the Sydney Morning Herald? When I come up next week I'll bring this article and it's a small little thing about negative space and it is called *The Whole of Everything* I think. Again it is about negative space. It's about the space around and not so much the object.

But I am really interested in where the eye goes. Where the viewer is pushed and where the eye goes are two different things. I became aware of that really early on, in the early nineties. I don't know if you remember this series, but you know my drawing book, if I'm drawing landscape (because then I was all about landscape) I would draw a hill line like this [sketches], very minimal kind of stuff. Then it was when I was living on the farm with all the cows, I developed a series. You remember the cows I had hiding in here, in these little bits? From my drawing book my drawn line became steel strap bent and curved on the wall. Then I had a little kiln formed cow hiding there, or the little calf hiding down here. These were little fused pieces and that was a simple steel line. But what I did find was that that steel line (it happens in the landscape when you go, “Oh!” and you are pushed. In Australia you are so pushed horizontally, whereas in the mountains in Europe, or in cities you are pushed like this [gestures vertically]), this steel, it didn't end where the steel ended, but it felt as though it could go on. It hinted that there was something either side.

You're talking about what the work implies. You are leaving room for the viewer?

I hope I am. It was so interesting yesterday talking to those second years. Howie was like – “I don't want to tell anyone anything”. “This is the work and they have to figure out what it is about”. That was because I had started to talk about artists statements and things like that, and how much you want to give away and how much you want to keep. The project left open with them was four little tiles all the same, one fused up to show them the difference between fusing up and fusing down, where you are much more controlled on the kiln shelf side. The third one, those are framed. They have taken this little ten centimetre by ten-centimetre tile from a drawing that they did around the workshop. This is to talk to them about putting a frame on something, how that holds it in and how different the focus is from an unframed piece. Then over the week they can carve, or draw onto it.

That is about edges, about bordering, about containment, or about leaving that open. I think about all those things when I am working. I do, all the time.

For you the words are a point of departure?

Yes and I was saying to Howie, “Don’t write sentences, don’t write phrases”. I remember someone in one of the Ranamok catalogues once just wrote words – it was “de, de, de!” It was a beautiful insight, but it wasn’t prescribed. It was as pointers for the viewer.

Naming work?

I do like to name a work. I do. There have been times when I have had untitled work. But sometimes, even though I know what the work is about, I struggle for something that is really poignant. So generally I like to title work. I like to see titles. I remember instances when (and I have nothing against blown, or ceramic vessels) I have seen works out there with the weirdest names and you think, “Oh Christ!, that’s really...”

Pretentious?

Yeah. There is a line there, but generally I would say you should use a title more as a poetic end line. Not as a control thing, more as a gentle push. It would inform a little. It might be a little helper into a work.

The danger is that it contains the work and forms a barrier.

Yes. I think in those works in my current show with the steel curved down and cradling the open ended cylinder, they are, *On the Outside of Inside*. I think that is fairly open. I think that is fairly ambiguous. *Inside* I think of as structure, and I think the people can associate the steel with that. Then *Outside* is that more ambiguous, fluid, open ended form.

I seek titles when I go to a show. I look at a work of course, that captures your eye – it’s colour and form, whatever, but I will move up and look at the title.

Do you find people interpret your work in ways that you don’t expect?

I thought about that question. They do occasionally, but not often. I do remember one time with the ‘Tines’ work and someone said that they were tuning forks. I hadn’t thought of that. I was so focussed on the agricultural implement, the tine, that with talking about fine line and talking about being in tune, that was a beautiful association. I acknowledge that little credit line when I mention it, but I do talk about that now as being in tune.

There is the whole aspect of ‘musicality’ with groups like the Symbolists in art.

When I give talks about my work, I show the image of this beautiful paddock with this green growth coming up (this is up near Adaminaby) and I talk about the cut and the lines being really rhythmic and being melodic. That might have fed that thought. That is a nice thing with speaking about your work – others are going to have input.

It ties into the poetic.

Into communication and a give and take thing.

Any opportunity to talk about these things is really good because it is what we teach and think about. You grow every day and you learn something every day.

Teaching is very important to you?

I really love teaching. I think I get so much out of it, and I love to see others move along and grow. I really do. I think it is so different if you are doing it full time and I really appreciate that all those years at school, except for odd semesters when Stephen, or Klaus, or Jane went away and I had to step in full time, I was a part time member of staff. I could develop my studio. I could still travel, so I can really say I have been so lucky and appreciative of those years. I had a bit of bread and butter money, but also time to spend in my studio and time to travel. It has been a really good balance.

If you are full time, it is like that time I spent in the Glass Works [Canberra]. In 2007 I made two works and although one work is OK, the other work is still sitting in bits in my studio. Unless you are really disciplined – Jane Bruce could do it.