



Patricia (Paddy) Robinson
Birth Block
 1992
 negatively carved laminated glass
 24 x 20 x 20 cm

I'm working out here [outside Sofala] in this odd context, but people float by here quite often. I think it is because it is very Australian and they think they are going bush. For me it's not odd at all, because it's like Ireland. This is my Australian Donegal. It's the bones. Think of all the painters who lived at Hill End – Donald Friend, Russel Drysdale and Brett Whiteley – all the big ones. I think it's the landscape that gets them, because looking at it you are always aware of the structure. It's a bit Cezanne-ish in a way. Now if you go to Donegal, in the northwest of Ireland, it's the same – totally different, but it's the same.

Most of my work is landscape. The pieces I had hanging on the wall [*Full Circle* exhibition, Glass Artists Gallery 2010], they are landscape for me – they're water, they're earth, they're seeds. It's about landscape because you can't be here and not be part of the landscape. It's a very 'landscapy' place. It's overpowering. I look at this every day and it's overwhelming. It has soaked into my work for many years. A lot of my architectural work (although it has religious things in it as well) is about landscape. It is about landscape and the place of people within the landscape. [Points to a figure in the yard with hills behind.] You look at Mike. He is six foot five and he doesn't look that tall at all, does he? It is an emotional response. It is also because I was brought up in the country in Ireland.

Not being Australian would make this more overpowering?

Where I was born and where I came from was mountains. They were the mountains of Mourne and it is as powerful as this. It is beautiful. It is so wild and so inhospitable and so rocky. The islands of Scotland are very similar, as is *Northlands*. It is all that mountainous, glaciated, harsh, poor country. There is no soil here and I am trying to make a garden!

Is the feeling it gives you spiritual?

Without being facetious – yes.

Do you abstract that into your work?

My work isn't at all abstract. In this show [*Full Circle*] there are seeds and things. They're literal and at the same time they are actually landscapes. There were seeds and there was water and there was earth. Isn't that landscape? Occasionally there is nothing but earth and then sometimes there is nothing at all.

Why use glass?

- Because the seeds came from beneath the earth. I carved through the earth (engraving the glass) to meet them. Those seeds aren't on the earth, they are in it and those seeds are in the glass. The glass is fused, slumped and then craved. I engrave a lot and carve a lot. I either paint, or I engrave, but I realise painting the glass is not the go these days - that will pass.

Anne [Dybka] and I were great friends. (She taught me glass engraving.) We went to the Czech Republic a couple of times together and the last time we went she was going to give a workshop on flexible shaft engraving (that is what I do). Over there they do it on lathes (usually called 'copper wheel'). There you take the object to the wheel. What I do is take the instrument to the carving, which means I have done life-size figures. One of the reasons the Czech Republic has symposiums on glass engraving at *Kamenicky Senov* is that they want to get a more modern approach. Then Anne put up this workshop and nobody came – because it was flexible drive. I thought that was madness. It doesn't matter how you do something as long as you do it. They totally missed that opportunity.

Process becomes more than means – it is the end in itself.

That's what's happened to engraving in the Czech Republic. You're still engraving for God's sake! It doesn't matter if you have a flexible shaft. It's the end result that matters. You could use a diamond pick. There are church windows– St Nicholas at Moreton, Dorchester, Dorset, done that way by Laurence Whistler and his son Simeon. It is interesting that the sort of images they have, because they do it that way, change. The process does effect what you do, whether you like it, or whether you don't.

I'm doing a job at the moment that was started in 1947 by this boyo Alfred Handel. He died (his son died recently age 80 something). Kevin Little took it over, but he's now eighty something and decided to retire. He rang me. There is one light finished and not two, so I'm going to paint an 'Alfred Handel'.

You can immitate a style?

Yes. I was trained to walk into a studio and be able to paint in any style they told me to paint in. That's disgusting, but it is true (laughs). To be able to do that is good, but why I exhibit every now and then is because it stops me going along a straight line. It enables me to [spreads fingers and expands up into the sky]. The painting I did in that exhibition at Maureen's is not good painting in the normal sense, because I was slathering on the back and then carving through it, but I wasn't interested in the paint. I wasn't interested in the brushstrokes (which I normally am, especially if I need to flick a line around a corner). I was playing with it.

That takes you to something unexpected?

Exactly - you do different things then. The trick is not to be bored.

Australian studio glass has always been experimental.

Isn't it everywhere? If you look in other places in the Czech Republic for example it is very experimental. I was at a BBQ last time I was there and met a man there that I disliked intensely. He was a pompous prate, but he was making full sized mould blown figures, so I was interested in him. (I didn't see them. I only heard tell.)

He was playing the virtuoso?

He saw us as the silly Australians in from the colonies and he thought he was the big banana. Maybe if I had been younger he might have been more sharing.

I have the impression that the old stain glass studios were very protective of their skills.

I worked with Stephen Moore for two years when I first came out here. He didn't have any techniques to guard because we had done it all at art school anyway. If I did my training with him it may have been different. I do remember Stephen saying to me once (and I looked at him in utter astonishment) – this is how we paint stars here. I thought Jesus, is that the only way we can paint stars? (Laughs.) I have never painted a star like it since I left the studio, I was so irritated, and I actually make a point of painting every star differently now.

Being experimental seems a characteristic of Australian studio glass.

But that was in my background with art school as well. As a student I was fusing glass that was incompatible back then. I was never an apprentice

Being experimental is an art school (as opposed to a trade) approach?

Yes probably, and I had a very good teacher called Edward Marr. There is a book about him coming out shortly and I'm in it along with Clifford Rainey and maybe Roy Dixon, now in Virginia in the States.

Talk about that art school approach against trade school.

Stephen Moore was art school trained in Budapest. You know Stephen Moore did a lot of fibreglass sculptures as well, and he was a fabulous glass painter, a very able draftsman with beautiful brushwork. Janos Janko used to do mould making for Steve. He also did a lot of work for Tom Bass, and that's how I met Tom Bass. Steve was the boss artist and he was scathing about Janos whom he saw as just being a peasant who could not understand concept. Steve considered he had an art school understanding, but that Janos did not. Steve considered Janos should only have been an artisan at best, He was amazingly chauvinistic, but a very nice man. He considered himself an art school artist, while Janos was not.

I started with Stephen January 1966. I had worked briefly with Mark Hill before that, but he was not the artist Stephen was. When Stephen was dying it was very sad that he felt he should not have done all those religious works, but that he should have been a painter. He had done some very beautiful work, but he did churn some things out. I never remember him having an exhibition, which was why I decided I was always

going to have some. He did make an extremely good living. He had to - he was supporting three wives.

You were in Australia at the start of studio glass.

Yes. I came out here in 1965 and taught six months in high schools. Then I looked in the yellow pages to find jobs and resigned the next term. Later I taught at Western Sydney/Nepean College as the glass person for eight, or nine years (1979 to 1988) just before it became *Western Sydney*. I was the only glass person there. Maureen was at SCA and she was doing kiln forming and blowing, so I specifically went into painting and carving and engraving. A lot of that was architectural. I wanted to have a different emphasis to SCA, because there was no point to covering the same areas. The students could do what they chose to do really, but there was an emphasis on answering briefs at times. That was a design emphasis, but not totally.

The situation then at SCA was dynamic and flexible.

Well it has to be. If you are going to have a material as big as glass, even though I might decide to mostly paint, I wasn't painting the way I was taught to paint. They could do what they like – as long as they could justify it. Again this was an art school approach.

Now I teach TAFE one day a week and I teach drawing and I teach basic skills. I am actually just trying to teach them to draw. That is a very basic thing. It is at year 9 and 10 level, but hopefully with a bit more emphasis on skill than they presently get in the system. They are just trying for 'words', not 'sentences'. That is what TAFE is and that is what it needs to be. They can go on to art school, but they don't have to. I would love to teach basic introductory glass, but I can't persuade them to tool up for that, and then there aren't enough people for that. We have enough trouble getting bums on seats for a general Vis. Arts course. My co-ordinator is a painter and she wants painting to be the 'big banana' (painting is always the 'big banana' in any art school).

Do you know what the fine arts areas were when I went to art school in Ireland? They were painting, sculpture and stained glass – as in stained glass painting. That was how it was taught. If you did any one of those three you had to do the other two. I had to paint and make sculpture as well. I actually did my thesis on stained glass as it was done in Ireland - there was really nothing before about nineteen hundred in Ireland.

Those making stained glass were fine artists?

Yes, but it didn't carry that out here. I came out here and people would say I was a 'lead-lighter'. They still call me the 'lead-light lady'.

That skill was not appreciated?

No. Engraving, as you know is coming into fashion again - witness Alastair Gordon recently doing a master workshop at ANU. Anne Dybka wouldn't have been asked to do that because she did flexible drive, which wasn't the European thing. I know that when you use a lathe you don't get the diamond chipping you get from diamonds. One of the reasons I haven't started sandblasting that piece in the studio is that I wanted to use cheap diamonds on it, because it gives it more life. When you work with a copper wheel it is such a soft finish. Anne used to spend hours and hours taking her finish back to being soft, because she wanted to be seen as comparable to the copper wheel

engravers. She was trying to fit in with that tradition, but she also tried to get them to listen to how she had achieved that finish – they didn't. It was fine here [in Australia], but not in the Czech Republic. It was so much easier to learn to engrave with a flexible drive than to do it with a copper wheel. I don't try to get that finish that Anne did. That didn't interest me. Anne to her dying day wanted to be accepted by those traditions, but she did it her way because she was living and working here.

Why did you choose to work in glass?

I trained in stained glass when I went to art school. The colour, the texture and the fun of it and just the beauty of it, attracted me. It was also the fact that you could make people live in your light - that 'ambiance' thing. You go in there and shine your light on people and they are part of your artwork – you and they are together. You are playing with the light in the room. You are making an atmosphere. Depending on whether I succeed or not, that is good or bad and it depends on the time of day too. There is one particular architect I did a lot of work with called John King. I walked into one of his churches one day (I have done a lot of glass ceilings with him) and the light coming through the glass was shining on the tabernacle. Now I'm not catholic, but this light shining on the tabernacle was just amazing. I thought then that if this doesn't inspire you nothing is ever going to.

I went to art school to do glass. My mother always told the story of when I was a child and had a cubby. Someone had given me a leadlight for it and I carried that leadlight around instead of dolls. I don't remember this, but they said I told every one that I like the colours. I still have an emotional response to colour. How else could you possibly produce that wonderful colour you have in Australia. It is just gorgeous. You fuse float glass together and it is just like those grey plants there. I like playing with that.

I have played around with other materials a lot. I still sometime paint. I often work with clay, although I never did like ceramics. Pottery and I did not get on, but we have a pottery wheel that I am about to convert into a small flatbed.

Backyard-shed innovation is characteristic of Australian studio glass.

It's very Australian. We do that much more here than we ever did in Ireland. We worked much more by the book there – even in Ireland, and Ireland is probably where the Australians got the tendency.

There is a certain adventurism – the American approach of making your work individualist and different.

But that was also the case where I trained in Ireland. You actively sought to make your work distinctive. That was not in the trade work that was happening here, but the trade never taught glass painting. They did lead lights – what I call 'fast flowing tulips'. There might be the slightly upmarket ones who paint, but they will train in the studio, not in an art school.

You were on the ground when studio glass arrived in Australia.

Yes, there was a big cultural shift. We started at Nepean in '79 with an associate diploma. I had been regarded as totally ludicrous when I went to art school in Belfast in 1961. I was fusing glass, but nobody knew anything about it. I made a leadlight piece that was three-dimensional and painted in the background. It was leaded vertically with

a fused surface done with English Hartley Wood glass, which was highly incompatible. I fused it together get chunks of this stuff in different colours, which of course didn't hold. Nobody knew anything about this, or why it failed and nobody could tell me. Keith Cummings hadn't even started at Stourbridge. I was doing that in my third year – so that would be in '63. I nearly fail the course because this thing kept blowing up and Edward Marr was getting quite shitty with me. His line was that you could do something traditional and do it very well to earn a living. He said he wanted to know that we could do that to survive (and you can be an art teacher anyway if you did your dip. ed. which I did in '64/65). I got a job in a leper colony in Basutoland after persuading them I would be of great value. Then I went to Australia.

I couldn't have got a job even in a stained glass studio in Northern Ireland because every studio had more than enough people. They had been there since the year dot doing the same thing, and anyway I didn't want to work like that. Two years after I came out here I had worked with Stephen Moore. I went home on a holiday and they all offered me jobs, but I was out of there. Back in Australia glass was happening, but people like Stephen Moore were anti the new stuff. Stephen wasn't secretive to me about technique mainly because I had done all that at art school, but he was angry that people like Warren [Langley] could come into it from other areas. He thought they didn't know what they were doing, but they weren't trying to do what Stephen was doing anyway.

You were doing experimental work yourself.

Yes, but Warren being a boy was more likely to be listened to. It was useful that my name was Paddy, because people didn't know until they met me or spoke to me on the 'phone that I was female – a bit sad, but true in the early days here ('73 when I started my studio). In my case it is still stained glass to some extent. Sometimes it's engraved, sometimes it's painted and then engraved. It's not necessarily traditional, but it is stained glass. For me leading is just a way of putting glass together – it could, as easily be copper foil, or fused. That was something that was emphasised to us when I was learning. We did a lot of laminating as well with silicones, or epoxies. David Saunders did quite a bit of innovative stuff. I know quite a bit about adhesives, because I have played with them for forty years. It might be float, but I'm about to do a stained glass job for a church, which is in fact laminated (the new thing in Europe). The large blocks I did early in the piece ('87) (before computer firings so you couldn't have firings over weeks to anneal) were glued.

In the time you have been involved as a practitioner with studio glass in Australia (from before its beginning to now) is there a characteristic you would note as distinctive?

Sydney (basically my base) is a fashion capital. It does things because of fashion trends. We had a trend in leadlight (God help us) in the late eighties – more 'fast flowing tulips'. Art Nouveau, or a bit of Deco, so many people think that is where glass was great, but it was depression work, decorative at best. You see things being fashionable and unfashionable (not so much in Europe where everything has a chance to be fashionable). You know Ann Wolff's work? She worked in Orrefors for a while and when she was there she was Ann Wärrff. She does lovely things and she has always painted, blown and done stained glass mixed with cast glass. I find it fascinating that in Europe people regard the whole spectrum as being what you do, whereas here, it goes from one thing to another to another. It could be whatever, but the odd part is that if you are on a particular wagon you almost have to do it. The

strange thing is that it is mostly technique. It has nothing to do with concept, because with concept it hardly matters how you do it. You do what you need to do for that idea.

The reason I stick with glass is because it's versatile. I can be a painter, or a carver or whatever. I can be all of those things and I can do things you can't do with other materials, but in the end the only thing you can offer is your self. That is the only thing I really offer anybody, even in a church window.