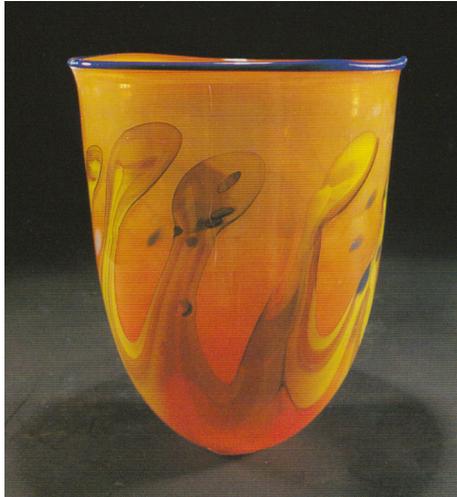


At the time of this interview Keith Rowe was President of Ausglass and as an adjunct to his practice as a glass blower he operated a gallery shop in the village of Blackheath NSW. Before and during this interview Keith was tending his gallery/shop and continually dealing with customers.



Keith Rowe
Inferno series
 1994
 36 x 30 cm

What is happening when people come into this gallery?

Over the years I have managed to become quite good at a number of things. When I was in Chicago last year I realised that I wasn't a really good salesperson. On the sales side I wasn't reading people well. I decided that the next thing I had to take on board was how to be a good sales person. This is part of my practice now. I'm pushing myself as an 'artist', as a 'gallery director', as an 'experience'. "I am an experience – experience me and enjoy it." Then they might buy something, but the prime platform is the experience – entertainment and education, and also reassurance

This is also a space where I can put my pieces out and look at them over a short period of time to see if I really want to go down that path and make a series of works for another gallery somewhere. Seeing this work once a week, two times a week, three times a week in an exhibition context tells me very quickly whether I want to continue on with those things. If I don't want to continue on with them as they are, it leads me to think what I might do with them. Other pieces I have in here because I love them. I don't have anything in here that I don't like.

This gallery is a pure indulgence. I don't care whether I sell anything or not. I had an installation in the window and nobody knew what it was. I am using this space to explore my concept of what art is. I can't do this in someone else's gallery, they would not wear it and I don't have a high enough profile to go to the NSW Art Gallery and say I want to fill that room with something. I don't want to wait until I get a reputation before I can do these things.

The other galleries I am involved with are purely object-oriented spaces. I can deal with those, but there is something else that I want to dig out and have a good look at.

There is the stuff I left behind at art school. In running a furnace you have to run a business – that is all there is to it. I have to make money to pay my way.

I also find that a lot of the exhibition style work has a two-year lag. I make one to half a dozen pieces in a specific format – shape, colour, whatever. The next step is to have an exhibition somewhere, so you make twenty, or thirty of them. What happens is that you sell some, but then it goes quiet and a small selection of pieces will end back in the studio. Two to three years later someone asks for some, then demand goes 'bang' and I have to make them.

In the early days it was quite difficult. There was an idea that was around (I think it is still there) that you make one or two objects. At some point in time you get positive feedback and then you make that particular object for what seems like an eternity.

When people come into this gallery, what are they looking for?

I have no idea. The only thing that I can put it down to is that when I work I make each piece as well as I can and I invest myself in virtually everything I make. I can't just sit there and make something without being interested in it, because I can't. I suppose that if you are able to imbue an object with character that is probably what I am doing, somehow getting my character into the objects I make. I am constantly trying to make it satisfying to me. The be all and end all of that are shape and the colour – combinations in balance.

You have two roles, as a maker and as a gallery director.

I suppose if I were doing my post-graduate, it would be this gallery in sales. I use the strategies from here when I go with my work to other galleries. The gallery is not new to me. I was involved with Maureen [Cahill] back in '82 [Glass Artists Gallery].

Going back before that you were an early student at SCA?

I was at Sydney College of the Arts the first time they had three full years. The end of the first year I was there was the first time there was the opportunity to blow glass. Before that there was Peter Crisp with slumping and Giselle Courtney with jewellery moving on into flame working.

It was a 'conceptual' college. It was tied in with the minimalists and the conceptualists. Our teachers at the time were the product of that schooling – '79, '80, '81 – the first five years of Sydney College had conceptualism, minimalism, performance art as driving forces. Painting was discussed as something that was of little use any more.

My training had been through black and white photography. I loved going into the darkroom and I loved taking pictures. That is why I enrolled in art school, but then it was, "What the hell is all this?" For me it was like a slap in the face. I had to wake up and start to think about things. The whole 'art school thing' was very beneficial for me. It opened up a whole world I never knew existed.

That sounds very different to the 'materials and technique' based world of glass.

That's correct, but I had to cram a lot into my mind. I had to read and I went to all the exhibitions, lectures and to performance art to see what was going on, and I still do

this. I am trying desperately to get back to the Venice Biennale this year, because I have been to the last four or five in a row. I like going to these things because they are full of new rich ideas (and some crap as well).

Glass tends to demand conventions.

It's a decorative art. You can't carry those contentious political issues and put them into a decorative object. The only thing you can do is put a funny title on one of these things. It's a piece of glass with shape and colour. It is nothing more. With the painted pieces where I use the *Paradise* paints I can get political, I can get emotional, I can talk about something else, but when it comes to my normal glassware I exhibit and sell everywhere, it is purely decorative art.

The initial thought to make something may come from something like a political idea, or an emotional concept. By the time I finished college I had only had a year and a bit of glass making. I learnt about colour in those years, that colour was very exciting for me. With photography I did some exciting images on hanging glass and I would like to get back to that.

I never got any criticism from the tutors, or the lecturers telling me I shouldn't be doing that. There might have been aesthetic criticism, or questions about why I put that with that, but by the time I put my pieces together there wasn't really any need to ask me why I did something. You could see straight away that it did what it was supposed to do. It created a response from the audience.

There was a freedom at college?

I loved it. The whole place was all about ideas and I think it still is a little bit. There were times when there were complaints about not learning anything. I was in the darkroom all the time and I was learning. I was out there blowing glass. I was learning all the time. I learnt as I went. I learnt what I needed to know when I needed to know it. I didn't want someone giving me mechanical exercises to plod through – like how to glue two pieces of wood together.

You were around at the birth of the Glass Artists' Gallery?

I was there in '82 when it started. I finished art school in '81. I had already organised to go down and work with Nick Mount in '82. During that year in '82 I came up to Sydney quite a few times. When I came up there would be exhibition openings and I would help set up the gallery right at the beginning there. I wasn't there all the time, but I was one of those founding members.

I returned to Sydney in '83 and started participating as one of the directors. There were seven of us to start with. I came back to the city after the first year, when there had been an agreement for us all to stay (we all had to put a little money in to keep the thing running, as well as man it). After that first year four of them dropped away. That left Maureen, Giselle and myself. The three of us ran that place, until I left in '86 (I think).

The 'Glass Artists' Gallery' implies deliberate intention?

It was the first dedicated 'glass gallery' in Australia. When I was at art school and for those first years when I was working for myself, the catchcry was education – educate

the public, because they don't know what the glass is. Educate the public and they will buy, because everyone was trying to make money. That decade from when I first came into contact, there was this emphasis all the time to get this information into the newspapers, on to the television, on to the radio, exhibitions in big places, get people to see what this stuff is – as Dale Chilhuly did. He was the prime mover of the glass movement through P.R. So that was picked up (subconsciously – I don't think people acknowledged the importance of Dale). In this country and in New Zealand everybody picked up what he was doing. There was a subconscious drive to educate the public, so we could end up with some income.

Like show biz?

Oh it is. You go and blow glass.

Why did you call it the Glass 'Artists' Gallery?

You are going to have to ask Maureen that one. I wasn't ...

You weren't fussed about the politics?

Never have and never will be. This gallery was Maureen's baby right from the word go. The rest of us got on board to help. It seemed like a good idea and I am incredibly pleased that I went down that path with her. Straight away (once I engaged in running a business) I comprehended what happens in galleries. It taught me about the relationship between maker and gallery, and the importance that the gallery has. I have never had any qualms about what galleries did, as long as they were respectful to me.

You hear it from other artists. Complaining about the way galleries do stuff. While I was running the gallery I was hearing this stuff, people making horrendous noises about money. I was in the middle of both running my business and running a gallery and I was thinking that these people had no idea about what was happening.

What do you do as a gallery director when people come in the door?

In a way I don't see any difference between this gallery and K Mart. You have a product. You place it so it can be seen and if you are a sensible manager of the gallery (or the K Mart) you make sure you have staff on hand, so that the customers are being serviced adequately and they will return.

I don't think that it is true that you treat an artwork in the same way that you treat a packet of cornflakes.

OK! [lowers his head and raises his eyebrows]

It is a packet of cornflakes, is it?

Yes! It's a product. The only difference is that you have different products and you have different audience, but the format is still the same – put it in the right place, light it correctly and give service. In here I chat and am nice to people, because I am talking to them about my work, and it is easy to talk about my work because I love it that much.

What do you share with them?

Some times funny little stories. If they start to go deeper, then I will launch off into a whole rave about, “When I was doing that I...” – I start dragging all this stuff out. It is like any bonding situation.

Establishing a relationship?

Because the things they are going to take away from here are things they are going to treasure for a lifetime. The life of a packet of cornflakes is much shorter. It is something that was said to me a long time ago by an accountant when I first started doing my books. He said I was no different to the plumber, or the electrician around the corner. I thought he’s right, I have to earn an income and I have a product and I have to pay taxes.

You have more of you in ‘a piece’ than a plumber has in an ‘S’ bend.

That’s another little thing, yeah. I think I am a socialist at heart. I believe that we are all equal. Nothing that you do entitles you to elevate yourself above anybody else, but even though I talk about a non-elitist structure, the world that I live in is elitist. In some ways I believe that as artists we live on the edge, and it’s our duty to keep pushing the boundaries, to show the rest of the world that there is more than what they’ve got. If I can get across to someone a new way of looking at something, then I have done a job.

People have done that for me and I am forever grateful to those few artists who have shown me these new perceptions of life. Prior to art school I thought that was the sort of thing I would love to do.

A plumber can have great pride in what they do, but it is hard for a plumber to show you a new vision of the world.

[Laughs] Yes, but I do have this thing of not wanting to put myself above other human beings. This is my job. I am a maker. I am an artist, and I am as important to society as the plumber. There is a lot of distorted self-belief. God knows what they think they are and yet they don’t do anything really. They don’t make anything that incredible, but they think they are the bee’s knees.

People playing a role?

Thanks to Dale (and it wouldn’t be just him. He’s picked it up from generations gone by). This whole thing of ‘self-promotion’ goes back three, or four hundred years. In order to get anywhere you need people to perceive you are something important and then, if they perceive you are important, they will pay the extra dollar.

Where do they get that impression?

Education that is what we were doing via the glass Artists’ Gallery, and part of the training through art school was that self-promotion.

A person walks in the door and you try and create a story around the artist?

Yes I do. It's easy for me to sell my own stuff, because I do like what I make. I have been selling glass for twenty-five years. I can sell any piece of glass. There is not much glass out there that I couldn't look at and work out exactly how it was created. If there is some other political, or other issue going with it, because of my understanding of art and the way it is put together, I can translate whatever they are saying to an audience.

I would like to make this gallery more avant guard – to shake up people's perceptions.

But as a treatment of form, your own glasswork is conventional.

The glass is an emotional thing. It sits within my emotional state. Whatever is going on that particular day, whatever my emotions are, that gets streamed into the object. I look at the work later on and think, oh yeah that was the way I felt that day.

I think that is the reason I have managed to keep earning a living. I haven't relied on a set formula for the material I make, I'm reliant on my moods and I have trusted that for twenty-five years. In the first decade that I was working I couldn't settle to one or two sort of objects. All around me the other glass makers here and overseas that I saw were doing permeations of one, or two objects all the time. One day I would be making something blue and big and the next day something red and small and another day it would be multicoloured. It was hard to define any kind of production line. There were four, or five platforms with different decoration.

Luckily at the end of the eighties I teamed up with *Dinosaur Designs* and the next decade was a wonderful blossoming of my ability to make things. Aesthetically in the process of making these things for Dinosaur, I got to make things that I had never thought about making, working out ways to make them efficiently. My skills improved and concepts developed as I thought, I could make those.

In the early nineties, when we moved up to the mountains, we had some horrendous bushfires up here that I went and looked at from various vantage points around here. I had never seen a bushfire in my life, but they were insanely beautiful. After I saw that I decided I wanted to transfer that image into the glass. I wanted to make something that gave me that excitement, so when you looked at it you got that sense of power, that sense of terror, or joy. I started to make a range called 'Bushfire' pieces. That was probably the first range of work that I made that came from an emotional response to something outside of myself.

From then on I tried to find a starting point. I had become quite proficient at colour combinations. I didn't have any fear about decorating using different colours. I had gone through enough experiments that I could just do what I wanted as long as I had an idea to jump from.

As a maker you have got to a stage of technical competence that enables you to formally create many of the things you desire to make in the glass. Now you are looking for ideas and it sounds as if you are pulling them out of the landscape?

Yes that's true.

and into the glass.

I was probably doing that prior to moving up here [Blackheath]. Then it wasn't a preconceived thing, but since the bushfires it has been a thing that I have done.

You're saying you are feeling something in the landscape and you are putting that into the glass?

Yes, and trying to get the same emotional response to the object as I got from the landscape.

Looking at the object you get the same emotive response that you got from the landscape?

Yes, and I find it difficult to work any other way now. But I have lost that desire to translate. I feel the coastal series, that piece that I just sold before, was probably the last of it. I am going through another change now. I think running the gallery is accelerating that process. I want to make more a statement for myself. It doesn't matter about anybody else.

You find yourself redirected by the gallery?

I think it's more age. Maybe I'm changing again. See that new piece in the window there that I made last week. It has a couple of funny little marks on it so I didn't want to send it to SOFA. I brought it over here and it is probably one of the nicer ones of the whole lot. That's what happens now – I sit here all day and I will ponder this particular one and work out new ways...

The thing we are looking at is a technical piece, a landscape in itself, but not necessarily representative.

No. It is just an object on its own.

Using particular techniques.

The thing is it's a technique that I have been working on now since '94. '94 I started working with murinis and it is an ongoing thing. I was making these the other day and I'm sick and tired of all this other stuff and I'm intrigued enough to hammer the murrini to the nth degree. All my talking about not wanting to make the same thing over and over again is going to get lost because I'm going to do that, because I love making them.

What change do you see in the way people view the glass thirty years after the Glass Artists' Gallery was established?

I think it is the refinement. In the Glass Artists' Gallery in those first few years there was quite a variety of objects coming in to be exhibited, so many, many different ideas. I see now a refined object and refined ideas. It's not that there are new concepts out there (occasionally you will come across a new one), but it is that they are more distilled.

And (we have done this to ourselves as makers) in the early days we wanted to educate the public, didn't we, we educated them too much and now they don't want anything that isn't highly refined. They don't want to buy something with funny little

marks on it, or funny little ideas that don't quite work. The buying public (and the collecting public) expect a certain level of quality in idea and execution. When I initially started part of the reason I got into glass was that what was being made was kind of shonky and I thought, I can make that, and sure enough I did. I launched off into a whole business that, after twenty-five years, has led me here.

When I did start, I made sure that everything was cheaper than anybody else's, because it wasn't as good. That was a good thing to do at the time, because I managed to get some sales, and because I got some sales I could pay the gas bill and make some more glass. It was a business thing. When I started in the glass world in Australia maybe I could count on two hands those that were earning their income. In 1983 when I started there were probably only ten to a dozen people who could earn an income from glass in this country. It was that small and then there were a small number of people who were teaching.

I was selling through framing and gift shops that had funny little pieces of pottery along with the framing they did. There was one ceramics craft shop where I wondered why my piece wasn't selling and when I went in there one day. Everything was dark and brown and the glass was stuck under a shelf. I said, "You need to put lots of light on them baby".

It was a learning experience in those days – to educate myself, to educate the galleries (or those days the craft shops) how to display and shop the work, because nobody knew what glass was in the early eighties. Within five years, by the time it got to '88, it was accelerating rapidly. By then I had lost count of how many people were making glass in this country, let alone know who they all were.

At the beginning the first person I came across was Maureen of course, the second was Warren Langley, he was the first person to show me how to blow a bubble. He finds that rather amusing and he is rather chuffed, and I'm so chuffed that he was that person. At the end of that first year in 1980, I attended a workshop down in Adelaide at Gerry King's studio called a hot glass gathering. There was Nick Mount, Con Rae, Dennis O'Connor, Julio Santos, Stephen Skillitzi, Maureen and it was Richard Morel's first experience in this country. For me this was the glass community.

It was a sharing community?

Absolutely. I mean everybody was bitchy in their own little way, but it was too small to have any cliques. I thought, "I like this". Over the next few years I engaged with more of these people, I went to conferences and I met students from Caulfield and I met students from Adelaide, so I found this whole wonderful world of compatriots and friends.

Were they closed with their information?

No! No. At that point in time everybody was open. Going through art school I had no need for it, because I was getting information from the art school. When I started my own studio in Sydney in '83, I could quite easily ring anybody and talk to them about anything. There might have been one, or two weirdos out there, but they would have been weird no matter what was going on. We would talk about things where ever it was. The first conference I attended was in '81, I think in Melbourne, and that started off a whole career that went on for maybe fifteen or twenty years of attending

workshops. Every time one happen in Australia I attended it. In New Zealand I attended and started forming relationships with New Zealand glass blowers. I think that was '83 I went to a conference over there.

I wasn't there for the birth of Ausglass. The first meeting happened in '79 and I didn't go to art school until March of '79.

That openness has to play a great part in establishing a culture?

I think that culture is still there. If anybody was to ring me, there are very few people out there that I wouldn't accommodate. I know that if I know someone well enough to ring them up and talk to them they would be quite reciprocal. This would go with people I know in Europe, or America as well. I still haven't come across people who are closed towards me.

I understand there are areas where people won't let information out. That is part and parcel of glass history back to Venetian times. Thankfully it doesn't really occur here, but I think there are more privacy issues now, because people are concerned about their careers and people lifting their ideas before they have a chance to fully explore them.

At the beginning there seemed to be a lots of exploring, now makers seem to channel in to a niche in the market.

No, that was there when I started – absolutely. It must have been towards the end of my second year at art school that it slowly rolled into position, because I had to get a crafts board traineeship grant with Nick. He was, and still is very experimental and is a sculptor at heart. I returned to Sydney with no idea of what I was going to do. What instigated the way I work was a matter of luck, or misjudgement. I went along to a number of outlets with a conglomeration of stuff that I had made at art school. While at Nick's, I had had a show at the *Outsider Gallery* in Balmain, and that probably tells you that I was on the outside. It was a wonderfully free little show where I had the work in sand on the floor. There was glass and photographs with some classical forms as well. Some of those pieces were left over as well.

So I went along and said this is what I make, do you want some of it? They pulled out one or two samples, and they were all completely different. Right from the word go when I started the business I didn't just take one piece along. I took half a dozen and they all chose different things, so I had to keep making all these different things. That started that ball rolling.

Trying to start a business I began to take note of the work in magazines. I realised after two or three years that there were people out there just making the one object with different permutations. Not just blown glass, but other things as well. It struck me then – how could they keep making that same stuff over and over again. Doesn't that drive them nuts?

A prime example is that people would go through art school and by the end of the art school thing they had created two, or three fantastic looking objects that were picked up by some of the local galleries and then by the overseas galleries. They just shot to stardom, so to speak. So then they just kept making these same things over and over again. Attending SOFA and such over the years I realised that was the general trend

from those early days. You found one, or two things that were commercially viable and then you worked them to the Nth degree. That doesn't suit my character.

And that is still happening?

I think so, yeah. Also from what I see if you work for someone in a college department, if you aren't reliant on your own pieces to earn an income, I don't think you are going to expand as fast. The only reason I survive is that I come up with new things. If you have a regular income coming in you are not forced to survive on your pieces. You can get very intellectual about the whole thing. You are not against the coalface. The irony is that in order to be in that position [college income] you had to initially be very creative, very experimental. Because you are like that you then get a job and as soon as you get that job, you don't have to do that anymore.

So it cuts both ways – the market can force you into producing that one thing, but it also forces you to keep pushing yourself?

If you work for yourself, oh yeah, you've got to.

I thought the independent income would give you the freedom to play, but you are saying it robs you of the incentive of having to earn a living?

That's true. Over the last decade these are the noises I hear. How refreshing it is to see that I keep making different things all the time. Sometime people are astounded that I can keep doing this. I feel proud of this, but it was a long hard haul. I could never find something that I wanted to make over and over again.

Different galleries sell different things. They all have different audiences. That made me think I could still keep making all these different things, because there is always going to be an audience somewhere. My character allows that. I just love making different things.

I can usually recognise work as yours.

That's what surprises me. What have I done that makes people recognise me? I don't understand how you can recognise it. Because it is so different all the time, I'm at a loss at how people can actually read what I make, especially when it comes to basic production work. I think it must be the way I make something that has a certain form. There must be continuity there.