

*At the time of this interview Michael Scarrone was Curatorial Assistant: Glass at Wagga Wagga Gallery*

*What is your role within the Wagga facility?*

It's multi-faceted. Although it is the *National [glass] Collection*, it's within a regional gallery. When you are in that situation your tasks are quite broad. Although I am the curator of a national collection I don't just have that single focus. I have to cover the whole gambit of what is going on there.

There is the [glass] collection for a start. I have to research and collect works for the collection. The gallery is set up over two floors. There is the ground floor, which is dedicated to temporary exhibitions. I put through four three-month shows a year on the ground floor. I get proposals to exhibit there from glass artists all around Australia and I shortlist those to four three-month shows. If you try and do more than that the quality starts to suffer, and it is glass so all the work has to be crated. That effort needs a decent time for the exhibition's life.

The top floor of the gallery is always the *National Collection*. I have been there ten years. There are approximately five hundred works in the collection now. You have to rotate that constantly so everything gets viewed. There are a lot of local visitors and I don't want them to come back and say, "I saw that last time". I want them to always see something they haven't seen before. It doesn't matter for the first time viewer – everything is wonderful, but for regular visitor it is really important. There are quite a few visitors, not just from Wagga – the Riverina has a huge outreach and some visitors come every month, because they love it so much.

When you're in charge of a collection of that size the research and the documentation is critical. Registering the artwork and documenting all there is about it and the artist in a database falls on me as another role. When it comes to the layout of an exhibition and how it is going to be viewed that also falls to me. In larger institutions in major cities you get set things to do and there are others who get other things to do. I have to cross over all of that, helped by a few really good volunteers, and in the wash-up the buck stops with me.

*What are you looking for in work when researching and selecting?*

I have a wish list for the collection that I update every three months. It is usually about thirty artists I think would be great for the collection. In doing that I travel to the cities whenever I can to see exhibitions. (All the commercial galleries send me information about up-coming exhibitions.) Because Wagga is a long drive to any major city, I use the Internet as a major tool in seeing what everyone is doing. I will see artists that I haven't heard of before, or see artists that I have heard of that are starting to do really beautiful work. There is a hierarchy in this list, but when the funding comes around and I have my budget to spend on a new acquisition, or several new acquisitions, I go to the top of the list obviously. I think this is the person I was really interested in, but that person may not be making work then, or the work of that time may not be appropriate. Often it is not the top person on the list that I purchase, because if I stop and wait for that top person I may not buy anything and that is detrimental to the collection.

*There is the implication that the collection is telling a story.*

Yes, and the works would be key chapters. When my time finishes at the *National Collection* (whenever that will be) and people look at my tenure as curator and the work that was purchased during that time, there is going to be no imprint of me. I don't do it to purchase works I personally like (although often they are). I think about the collection first. I think if an artist's work is particularly strong and they are making a big impact on the Australian and international scene, then they should be in the collection. Whether I like that person's work is irrelevant. I try to avoid bias.

I was talking to Nick Mount and he told me that in his dealings with American curators it is important for the curator to have his or her impact. When the finish their tenure you can see when 'Joe Bloggs' was there – because that was the style of work he liked to buy. I work the opposite to that. I don't think it should have anything to do with me.

*Can you see a storyline?*

Yeah sure, if you look at now as against ten years ago, the evolution of technique is the critical thing. The techniques are becoming more advanced. What was organic and beautiful to look at has become hard, carved, sharp and technically spectacular. That is opposed to cast, or blown forms with an organic feel. You could roadmap through that story changes in the way people approached glassmaking.

That is the advantage of all these great institutions teaching glass in Australia. If you look at any major institution around the world you will see an 'Australian name' teaching there. 1.) because they are highly thought of (to get that sought of gig in a major institution they have to be) and 2.) because there is no way for the person teaching there not to absorb other ways of making and they bring that back. They go into their home institution and their students see that and suddenly a shift happens. That is really obvious.

*The implication is that the story is 'technical'.*

That is not what I'm saying. 'Technique' is because that is the nature of glassmaking. Painting a picture needs a piece of board and a paintbrush. With glass it is different. If you want to make glass you need to be able to work it. It has a technical nature and there is nothing you can do about that. Within that technical nature come the artist's images and a way of working, but you need that technical background to create.

*The technique is a language that is used to develop the conversation?*

Totally. You don't need to be hyper-technical to create glass, but the nature of glassmaking has always been better equipment, better tools and new techniques. I see a lot of carving now. It is an extra element. The tools for carving have advanced such a long way in polishing etc. and people are embracing that. There is this whole period within the collection where you can see all this carved work. I never went out of my way to buy carved work, but it is where it was.

*Work reveals the means by which it was expressed?*

There is no way to avoid that in glass. Not that people go out of their way to avoid it. It is part of the joy of glassmaking. If you are not going to embrace the processes in glass, it is sort of pointless. Do something else, because glass is process orientated.

*Returning to your role as curator?*

When it comes to openings and events in glass I have no problem in talking to the public about glass (I do it every day), but I think it should be someone else who comes in and talks about any show. If it comes from me (and it does on a daily basis) it is too one-sided. There should be more people involved than me.

*People read a show differently?*

Absolutely. Every time, and that's the beauty of it. If there needs to be a review done (another role of the curator) I like to have someone else come in and do it, because they have a different point of view. Hence rather than it be me who choose the works for the show, me that installs the work displaying it advantageously for public viewing, me that opens the show and me that writes the review, others should be involved or it would be too narrow. This is the national collection. It should be embraced by a lot of people. The curator should be background, because taking on so many tasks would make for one shade of grey.

The key is not to have too much ownership. Too much ownership becomes a really lonely club where too few come in.

*One viewpoint narrows the potential of the works?*

Absolutely, and art glass is such a big art form in Australia, and so strong in the quality of makers.

*Around number three in the world?*

I would agree with that.

*But we might be a little self-focussed within this medium.*

It is a club – totally. It is a really strong – ‘are you a glass artist’ club – ‘glassies’ as some people refer to them. If you like working in mix media and not just glass it is, “This table was reserved for glass artists”. It is very political, like most things are. I don’t think that is a negative thing though. It is just a reality.

There are disadvantages. Embracing other art forms (and more importantly other people) is always a healthy thing. It is not saying everyone is like that. There are glass artists in Australia (and I know quite a few) that only work in glass, but don’t see themselves as glass artists. They see themselves as sculptors, who just happen to be working in glass. There are quite a few people who don’t like the closed club of glass art in Australia.

I feel it is healthier if you approach it from a more open point of view. Say in the case of Charles Butcher. Charles is doing these beautiful big cast hard-edged minimalist pieces. He sees himself as a sculptor. He doesn’t like to be called a glass artist. That is not because he is against being in the glass club. There is no way around him being in that club, but he finds it easier to be a sculptor, because it is such a broad term. In that he opens himself up to a bigger world.

*There seems to be more installation work?*

I have seen a bit of installation work in recent times. It is a little bit early to say. Probably Sydney College of the Arts [Scarrone had just viewed its Graduate Exhibition] lends itself to being more conceptual in the way they approach their art practice. I went to the Monash graduate show last year and it was a lot more object based, but that may just be coincidence.

*It can take the focus off glass.*

Yes, it brings in another aspect to the work. It is not just purely the object.

*Like Richard [Whiteley], I would see Charles as modernist.*

It is a modernist technique – completely. Which raises the question, how can there be a post-modern without a death of modernism. Modernism is alive and healthy. I think 90% of glass is a modernist practice. You can say installation art leans towards post-modernism, but glass is a modernist practice. It is object based. It has always been a confusing argument to me, but an intriguing one.

*Do you see the colleges as having ‘signatures’?*

I think Sydney College is strongly based in the conceptual. Not that students in all the institutions don't have strong personal concepts, but Sydney leans to giving their students a broad spectrum for how they display their work. (Describes various works seen that day.)

*Talk about making work for galleries – their commercial considerations.*

That is a tough thing. From my point of view (as a person researching work for the National Collection) I have to take the building (and display) into account. That is the reality of the situation. If I am responsible for a collection, it has to be made up of pieces I can show – the public must view them.

I am going to all the graduation shows in the next month. For quite a few years I have been arguing for the Wagga City Council to have a national glass prize. It is important for the gallery (and the art scene in general) to have another award. The key is not to mirror the *Malone Prize*, or *Ranamok* - or whatever. I came up with the idea of having a *national student glass prize* where I chose work from all the institutions for a biennial prize. There is an exhibition with a catalogue and judges and the winner's work goes into the National Collection. The winner also wins two master classes and a conference at Northlands in Scotland.

In effect I am choosing one of these works for the National Collection. I have to ask, “Is it something I can display?” In this prize I decided rather than people fill in a form and send me digital images I would actually go and meet the artists and choose the work that way, because sometimes the digital image looks great, but when the object turns up it doesn't look so good.

*There is the ‘picture in the book’ and the ‘history in the book’, and then there is ‘the work’.*

And you may never see that piece, but all those things around the work are necessary. This exhibition of the student prize is a very good example. I wanted the work to be what I consider 'exhibition display quality'. The only way to be sure of that was not to be looking at pictures and a name, but to actually shake hands with someone who made the work and talk to them about it as seen with my own eyes. Then I can walk away knowing whether it was exhibition quality or not.

*The artist is essential to this judgement?*

Totally. I think in the age of emails it becomes 'how quickly you can type something up, get it on to someone and get a response'. It is nice to go in and talk to someone who made the work face to face. It is still the work that gets chosen, but it is nice to talk to the makers about their processes.

*That enriches the work for you?*

Absolutely. It is nice to know the trials the student may have been through in making the work. Not that it is a determining factor in selection. I am going to choose between twenty and twenty-five students and it will be works that are exhibition quality, but one of those students is going on the trip of a lifetime, and it is nice for me as the curator to know who that person is.

*Do you place work in categories when you first see it?*

I think I am guilty of that. I am a glassmaker myself and I have been at it for about twenty-five years. My day-to-day environment is art glass and for five days a week, it is all around me. I will see work and say it is 'figurative', or 'cast', or whatever tag I can put on it. Is it a vessel? Is it an object? Does it have functionality, or is it non-functional?

*You're placing it in a history?*

Sure, because in the art glass 'story' from '78 until now (the span of the National Collection) to begin with there were a lot of vessels.

When I look at a work I am considering for the collection (I had a look at one of Andrew's [Lavery] skateboards today which I think would be great for the collection] I do put it into categories for sure.

*You categorize within the history of glass?*

I do. It is because I am in a position where I see so much glass. Sometimes I look at a piece of glass and say that is 'production'. This is another of the big questions – what is art? People ask me that and I say I know what it is from my point of view. It is my right to say I feel something is 'production' rather than 'art', but then someone else may not agree.

Because I see so much 'high-end' work my idea of what is 'production' is different to some others. Not better, just different.

*Some works engage you more than others?*

But I don't let that influence what needs to be purchased. Sometimes you see works that you think are a bit dated, but that is the context of history. You are putting that piece in a time period and that might be advantageous for the collection. I might think it would be good to get that work to show 'the story'.

*Do you respond to work intellectually, or intuitively?*

Both, but the strongest is definitely 'gut'. When I go to an exhibition, or I am negotiating with an artist to exhibit on the ground floor for three months and I am seeing the work for the first time, I think it is a gut reaction to begin with. When I go to a gallery and see a work where I instantly get the feeling that the work is completely resolved, I go, "Oh wow!" It makes sense to me straight away – I think that is a gut reaction. Then the intellectual side comes afterwards. Because I work with glass myself, I can't help but deconstruct it, even if it is highly technical.

*You are 'engaged' by the formal success of the work.*

Once I stop doing that it will be time to move on. It happened today when I was at the College of the Arts. When I first saw that big long wall work. It was resolved beautifully right down to the brackets that held it. It has all been thought out, resolved properly and it spoke to me.

*What about ambiguity?*

The last thing I want is for the artist to tell me exactly what it meant for them. That is unimportant really. I prefer to have a task in front of me. When I look at art and the artist tells me that they were this age and it meant this to them, I really don't want to know. Hard in the abstract is better for me. I get to read it as I want to read it. I don't want to be led.

*Openness?*

That is at the core of Australian studio glass. If I had to pick the thing that would separate Australian glass in twenty thousand glass pieces it would be a really strong abstract element that leads the viewer to do some work, or walk away. If I go into a gallery and there is a horse eating in a field and the work is called 'Horse Eating in a Field', I am not going to stay long, even if it is technically beautiful. I would appreciate the skill involved, but it leaves me with nothing to do.

I couldn't count three works in the collection that do that. Glass doesn't work that way. The work in the collection is work you have to confront and think about and whatever mood you are in on that day will influence it.

Some work you look at and it says production. That is its resolution to me, but some work that appears production asks questions and I wonder what it intends. I love that. It instantly puts me in two minds and I am questioning and confronting it. In my role as curator to a certain degree I have to come up with some answers and resolve the work in my own head before it goes into the National Collection.

*You have a developed aesthetic response.*

That's right. I am bombarded with works and that develops a 'refined' (I don't like using that word) response. In the same breath (as said before) I don't want to be seen as putting some personal stamp on this collection either. In my time at the gallery there must have been over a million people go through (it is very popular) and 99.9% of the time people leave and they are glowing. They come out gob-smacked by what glass artists can produce. It is a very powerful art medium. People's responses are always highly positive.

*To the uninitiated it is the 'thing well done' appeal.*

Yes people love it, but then I do too, and that is the beauty of glass. There is a craft element and you add the expression on top of that and the mixture of both is very powerful. I have romanticised glass over the years and thought about it in a lot of different ways. Maybe because it comes from a natural product (silica/sand) nature plays some role in glass. Like being drawn out of a house to watch the approaching storm, glass can draw you out to watch some dangerous thing. Glass has that element to it. Fire makes it. It's very dramatic. Because you can see through it in a lot of cases light adds to it.

Watching people over these ten years I am just amazed at the energy people get off glass and I never get tired of asking for responses – "Beautiful work?", I ask and it's "Oh fabulous", or something like that. It's felt – "Oh God! How do they make these things?" They are bewildered by the technique and gob-smacked by the beauty of the thing. That is a beautiful energy to work in, and that is why I have been there for so long.

*Do your reactions to a work change over time?*

Yes, I think so. This is partly that question of a 'story' we talked about before. There is definitely a visual story in Australian studio glass. Something I may have seen and thought of as cutting-edge five years ago is dated when compared with cutting-edge today. I will look at it in a different way, but that is from someone who is looking at works all the time. I don't think that would happen to someone seeing glasswork for the first time. I'm probably looking for the next narrative.

*Where is glass going?*

I don't know. Look at Andrew Lavery's skateboard. It is an object that has become an extreme tool and people do extreme things on them, but here it is a high-end artwork and it is heavily loaded as an artwork. Then there is Charles Butcher's work sitting on the floor and that is heavily loaded conceptually, but they are opposite ends of a spectrum.

*That scale is interesting.*

We have a collection of paperweights. A lady called Margaret Gibb collected eighty paperweights in her lifetime from all around the world. Not wanting the collection broken up she gave the lot to us as the *Gibb Paperweight Collection* and it is wonderful. There is a little section in the gallery where I put those out, and I swap them over. People walk straight past them, but then I take groups around I show them these paperweights and tell them about techniques such as millefiori. It is then completely

different. It is easy to walk by something little, but when looked at closely it is like a universe in one of those paperweights.

*What factors do you consider important for engagement?*

Not putting too much work out is a critical thing. Each piece should have breathing room. There should not be too much outside interference. I try to do that and hence I rotate the collection display quite a lot. When I go to a gallery and see a lot of works in a short period of time I get a museum headache.

*What of the other things that surround a work – supporting text, the fact this work appeared in a magazine last month, or it was made by so and so, and not such and such?*

You can overdo that as well. I like to read about technique. I have some of Brian Hirst's *Votive Bowls*. Amazing things, they are incredible technical feats, but they then have the look of have been dug up two thousand years ago. That makes a pretty confusing piece. I have a text panel on a sidewall and for technique I might say hand blown carved glass, but Brian's would have line after line of things he had to do to make it. I think that is good for people to read, because then they can question and as an example, ask what electroforming means. It is a way for the public to engage by questioning what it is all about. I don't do that for everything, because then you are overloading the space with information and you confuse the public.

Often when I purchase a work for the collection the artist feels they need to tell me all about the work. If it is important for them, it is important that I listen to and hear it all, but in the end it boils down to how I read the work. I find that fun. That is the beauty of abstraction. The odds are low that you will walk into a gallery and have the artist there to tell you what it is all about (unless it is an opening).

I love the 'untitled' title. A title is just a way of being led by the hand. Although it's fine for artists to have titles, I like untitled works – but that is a personal thing.

*You were saying you like to see the works, but Wagga is somewhat 'isolated'.*

A lot of the time it is all done via emails, Internet and digital images and a lot of the time it has to be because of where I am, and we are all budget driven.

*So photographers take photographs of artist's work and they send it on to people like you who select on the basis of that photo. I suppose that is 'collaboration'.*

That's right. You might see this beautiful artwork and here is the artist who is taking credit for it and down the track I find that they didn't make the work at all. They had a concept and had a skilled blower make the work, which they finished with cold working, but the blower doesn't get credit. I think they should be credited.

*What about the photographer?*

Absolutely. They are highly skilled in taking these images.