

Abridged interview with Wayne Pearson: 08/04/06

Subject: Australian kiln glass with specific reference to 'style' and glass artists Deb Cocks, Warren Langley, Jessica Loughlin and Richard Whiteley

It's a nice diversity you've chosen. Warren is interesting in contrast to someone like myself, because of the painterly approach and immediacy he seeks. It's a mindset.

My educational background stamped me with a certain set of values. I did an apprenticeship in stained glass that was very medium specific and it was about knowing technique, answering a brief and following a long process of firing.

Studying with Klaus was very much again 'truth to the material', very much a labour of love. Understanding that when work comes out of the kiln it's a blank, then you must start to work on your blank. Warren's approach was, "Kick it in the kiln and if it doesn't work, then it ain't worth pursuing". (That's flippant on my part.)

For you the material is central?

Yes. The material is central, or you wouldn't choose to work in such a difficult medium. One that is so hard to articulate, where the processes are so slow. Why would you bother working in such a slow material unless you wanted something?

Casting?

And cold working. One of the owners of Bullseye Glass (Larnie McGregor) is amazed at the Australians. She says, "We make this glass and you guys grind it, pound it, engrave it, fuse it 50 million times and then start cold-working it".

She's amazed at the labour we put into it. The contrast would be someone like Warren. It's not that he's not technically orientated, but there's an immediacy he really seeks. I seek a sense of process and understanding, and to be totally immersed in process.

I want the process to be an extension of my thinking. One of the important things for me as a maker is not to see that there's an idea and then it's made and finished for the pedestal. For me there's a process. It's very much part of our teaching at the School of Art here in Canberra – you focus on methodology.

It involves technique, but the methodology is about understanding an idea, pushing it into a material, getting feedback from that material and then rethinking and pushing it forward again. It's not just about technique. The process of making is a dialogue. It is not a one-way street.

'Doing' takes you on a pathway?

Yes, I believe that. I also think 'hunches' are really important. You don't only respond to what you see. You need to have a hunch and have an idea. That will inform the decisions that you make.

An example of this might be John Cage (the music performance artist), who set up a lot of apparatus, a lot of architecture dealing with chance, to create certain phenomena, but at every point he (as an artist) made decisions to keep what

was happening or to reject it. He selected. So it's not like you go in and it's, "Oh that's very good. Thanks very much, I'll go that way".

It is investigative knowledge, an investigative approach to understanding and expanding work. I don't know many artists working in glass who haven't (coming back to the technical side of it) developed some aspect of technique in personalizing their work.

Warren might be an exception to that.

His gestural approach bounces against the glass.

That's interesting. Actually I'll take that back. Early on (I met him when I was sixteen and he was in his late twenties) he was very innovative with fusing. No one knew anything about it then and he was out there doing it.

Jessica Loughlin has quite an innovative approach (visually and aesthetically, also technically). She is applying her processes to new ways to do things. Her *box constructions* are a good example.

Deb's an artist who works with ideas and isn't really tied to a process. She moves quite seamlessly between blown glass, cast glass and painted glass.

A consistent narrative?

Yes, but not with the material.

Do you think there is something that distinguishes Australian work?

Yes, I do. In the Margot Osborne book I wrote a chapter on education and I had a chance to reflect on that. A lot of its distinctions come from educational foundations. America saw contemporary glass as this wonderful, new playful material that artists were going to get and make art out of. The Europeans were shrouded in tradition (even Klaus Moje will say this). They couldn't see past their tradition. It was a fog. The Americans livened things up, but the Americans didn't know how to do anything technically. They (the early generation) weren't interested in conquering the technical articulation of the material. They were interested in expressing energy with the material (generally speaking).

Lacking a vocabulary?

'Technically', and you could say the Europeans were lacking an 'expressive' vocabulary. They had all the techniques, but no one was interested in them. Young men in Murano weren't interested in becoming glass blowers. They wanted to become stockbrokers.

What the Australians did (in pretty much all the institutions) was employ people who were trained in Europe (Klaus Moje in Canberra; Maureen Cahill in Sydney had trained in Stourbridge). Maureen was an interesting mix because she was expressive with the material and she made larger installation pieces.

Glass education in Australia was focused on technical training, because of that European connection. Yet the majority of visiting artists that came here (certainly when I was a student) were American and (but not always), there was a real expressiveness coming through.

There was isolation, but there was also a good healthy connection to Europe. A lot of European thinking ran the academic programs here, yet there was an expressiveness coming from another range of people like Warren Langley and Maureen Cahill.

Yes, I do think it was a unique fusion, much [stronger] than the one that occurred in the United States. The Americans employed Americans. People who went to graduate programs and learnt this expressive style were employed back as teachers.

Are there characteristics of Australian glass?

Yes, I think there are. They're not universal ones and generalizations can be dangerous, but let's go ahead anyway.

It meant that a lot of Australians learnt craft. They learnt a foundation for working with material and that was important. It was less important in other parts of the world. The other thing was that glass blowing was the headline act in America for twenty years and it's only in the last ten years that things have started to mix it up a little with fusing and now casting is getting a lot of attention. In Australia it was a much more even balance of those things. The 'Klaus' input in the early eighties certainly brought in cold working. People like Steven Proctor reinforced that. What I saw in America was that glass blowing was seen as an end result (even when Dante [Marioni] got involved). Dante perfected a skills-base and the *Venetian* thing took off, but the Australians would get something out of the annealer (whether it was blown, or whether it was fused, or whether it was cast) and they would cold-work the 'begeezas' out of it. That was a layering – a combination of processes that is something Australians also do.

It was a more diverse education. It wasn't just glass blowing. Even in Europe you might go to a general art school, but my understanding is that you would specialize. You would become 'an engraver', or 'a glass blower'. There was a mentality among Australians that you would be a 'Jack-of-all-trades'. And that certainly seems to be the case.

Personality became significant because of technical competence?

Certainly that was the case here. When I say 'a grounding in technical competence' (I'm trying to think of teaching that happened), it wasn't like people knew. With all due respect, when I was a student there was a lot of making it up as you go. *Bullseye* was a brand new product.

Adventurous?

Yes, and it was certainly the case in America that there was a lot of experimentation. Generalizations can be dangerous, but I sensed (particularly here in Canberra) there was a lot of 'figuring out' how to do things.

What is it about glass that intrigues you?

I had one of those 'aha moments' when I was an altar boy. I was fascinated by the power of coloured light coming through the window onto the marble of the floor of the church. It would arch its way across the floor of the church on a Sunday morning. The power of that light was just amazing. We are all aware of

sunlight, but when it comes through a church window it becomes this illuminated manuscript of literally biblical proportions

Look at my work. It's about form and colour. There's dynamic shape with this tension, but also usually there's a polychromatic approach. That's certainly how I see my work as different to a lot of European casters. Europeans tend to monochromatic.

Colour transforming a form. If you have a form that's clear and if you have a form that's grey, they're vastly different. If you have a form that's grey with an element of blue in it, it explodes. It really jumps out at you.

So there's that fascination with the power of the material (much more than paint). Paint is a 'reflecting' material, but light coming through a material makes it come alive. It makes it larger, more animated. There's energy within that that I find mesmerizing.

A quality that's 'alive'?

It's a jewel. I've seen it time and time again. People come into my studio. They pick up a bit of glass. It's just a coloured ingot, but they go, "Wow!"

Therein lies a tension – to control this inherent beauty, manage it and not rely on it as a crutch.

Not be dominated by this intrinsically beautiful material.

Absolutely. When I was in graduate school in the 1990's, I went to school with some amazingly talented artists (who are now absolute celebrities within the glass world, the art world). Chihuli was at his peak. Chicago SOFA was packed with glass. It was packed with work by Chihuli and Daley and this emerging guy called Dante Marioni. With the people I went to graduate school with there was a real wave of what I called the 'baby-shit brown' period in contemporary glass. I don't intend that in a derogatory sense, but a lot of people wanted to move a way from colour, move away from beauty, because they saw it as cheap. They saw it as a way of 'cashing-in', because glass had this momentum in contemporary eyes.

They looked down on that?

Absolutely. I got a lot of crap for my work during critique time. My argument was why should the beautiful object suffer. The beautiful object has a position. That was how I was trained.

I see this studio as a foundry and I see myself as a 'modernist' sculptor trapped in a 'post-modern world' (laughs). 'Modernist' in ideals, 'Modernist' in 'formality'. Now you're putting me on the record.

Understanding the process and having a dialogue with this casting process is what I want. There's another important chapter. I feel very passionate about the idea of these works exist as sculpture (not that I'm denying roots for this material and its connection to traditional notions of craft).

There's a group of craft practitioners, who see the 'crafts' as an endangered species. I'm quite happy for my work to be in a Robert Bell curated exhibition

called *Material Culture*. It was a craft exhibition. I felt honoured to be in that exhibition. In the same year I was curated into the *National Sculpture Prize* and had to withdraw because the delivery of my big kiln was late. (We hired another kiln but the casting didn't work.) I was looking forward to being in the National Gallery under two very different identities. I feel very confident about the mobility of contemporary practice being able to sustain that idea.

'Design', I feel lukewarm about. I've been supportive of its principal, but I feel we're in a time where glass is a very mobile material. It can exist successfully in a lot of different fields. My field happens to be a more formalist approach to space. Having said that, the strongest inspiring element for the forms I work with is negative space – the absence of space. Glass has a wonderful ability to make transparent forms concrete. This play between positive and negative is reflected in the material (excuse the bad pun).

I started by burying shapes into the glass (like lenses and bolt threads) – quite industrial forms. From one side they were a negative space, but through the material they became positive. There is this duality and that initial premise has not disappeared. I pursued it with great gusto. It intrigues me. I think it is something unique about the material. Also, intellectually, I find it quite mesmerizing that you have something that is industrial (and very deliberate as to a purpose), but it is rendered in something absolutely not fit for purpose. Glass has this brittleness

Implying paradox?

Paradox – also a sense of opposites – inside/outside, positive/negative, black/white.

Is there such a thing as signature style?

Yes, I do think so, but I think that the idea of a signature approach is a loaded term. I remember being at a GAS conference and a young aspiring artist asked, "What are you looking for when you pick up an artist?" This gallery guy stood up and (with a lot of confidence) said, "We're looking for that signature style!" I thought then that's something to be avoided. Yet I have one.

The negatives are two-fold. First, it can be a trap when the gallery is asking for a particular style of work. As an artist your work is evolving and transforming. Hopefully you're having this dialogue – so things are evolving and going forward. Therefore the work should change. It doesn't mean that the work is unrecognisable. It probably shouldn't be if you're having an ongoing dialogue, but it would be a negative if it is self-trapping – a repeated approach. I made a body of work during 1990's up until 2002 called *Lens Pieces*. I made them for one exhibition and probably worked for about three years before I had that solo exhibition. I made a decision in about '94, or '95 that I was going to cast glass. In graduate school I'd worked in a lot of different materials and this wasn't satisfying. I wanted dialogue with the material. I didn't want to work anymore in this mixed media approach. It didn't suit me. I was not comfortable.

So I started casting glass and the first *Lens* piece was kind of by mistake (as most things are), but I was very happy with the form. I saw it as a wonderful canvas on which I could develop a vocabulary. Then within a few years I felt I needed to move on. It was difficult to let go, because suddenly there was a lot of demand for it. I had a gallery.

At that time I had accepted the position down here [Canberra] and I had extraordinary incidences with a gallery. One member of the gallery said, "If you keep your prices down we can sell one of these a week. If you keep them at this price point we can just pump them out, we can sell one a week. It's going to be really good".

I knew that was a very good sign to stop making them.

The second sign was when I called my galleries and said I had applied for the position in Canberra and been offered the position. "I'm going to accept and I want you to know it's going to change the way we work blah, blah, blah." The gallery called me back a few days later and said, "We'll pay you \$4000 a month against future sales not to accept that position. No matter what happens, we'll pay you four grand a month".

Well, they'll 'loan' me four grand a month. There's a big difference, isn't there? "One of the reasons you are taking the Canberra position is cash flow. We know that. We'll be happy to set up more formal arrangements." And I thought I have to take this job, or I'll be trapped by this commercial interpretation of signature style.

I saw it as an imperative to move away from that body of work, because I felt I was going to get stuck very quickly. I saw the limitations in that body of work as well. As much as it had bought me a great deal of success, not just commercial success, but real success in developing a visual language.

There's an implication of a relationship that works both positively and negatively?

Absolutely. I listen to galleries and I listen to collectors, but I try very hard not to make decisions based on what they say. In fact, invariably what they say means I should do the opposite. (That is 'tongue-in-cheek', but) the work is a dialogue and you have to be truthful to that.

You start listening to other voices. I don't think that you shouldn't. I think you need to have other input, but it's a matter of priority, and the most important priority is not thinking up a brand new idea for every exhibition, it's honouring that dialogue with the material and keeping that in check.

Sometimes I get great feedback. I literally had a critique with my last gallery in Chicago after the show. It had been three years since I'd had an exhibition with them and the majority of the last work was lenses. They knew this new work was coming up and they were excited, but they found it a much harder road – harder to sell, harder to market.

I love the idea of the works being freestanding sculpture – that they interact with space and light, but also people. I wanted a dialogue – to push the work, to amplify it, to get it off the plinth.

It meant letting go of an approach. Not only an aesthetic approach, but it also meant physically changing the way I made the work. The technical processes that we use today are vastly different. We are still casting and cold working, but the forms I used to do – open-faced Czech-style castings, these are completely

different. These are three-dimensional castings with moulds that are hand-built. It's a different ball game.

Certainly it's having a dialogue with a material. I'm not just jumping from an idea to an idea. It's very much about those principals, about a great love and respect of material and trying to control that beauty around notions of positive and negative space, around notions of formal elements – colour, pushing the dimension of shape. It's not rocket science, but for me it's a compelling dialogue.

A dialogue that has got you to this point.

Yes, certainly. Czech glass is actually a different source of inspiration. I was fortunate to study with two Czech individuals – Libensky and Brychtova – for a short period of time at Pilchuck. It took me many years to unpack the kind of thinking that they brought. There was a stage where the work was more derivative.

Translating into your own dialogue?

Yes, absolutely. It took years, because in between I went to American graduate school and there they were not interested in that kind of approach. They were interested in sculpture. Technique was 'cheap'. If it smacked of process then it was craft. That was something that glass was running from. A lot of people were responding to the perception that to learn a technique was to be enslaved to it.

We have a wonderful, talented young glass blower. He's one of the best I've seen. He has felt trapped and says he's got to stop glass blowing. I said, "No you don't, you've got to do more thinking about what you actually make".

Does personality play a part in making an individual voice?

How could it not? It absolutely must! Sometimes I look at my work and I say, "My God, you've got to loosen up".

You're a planner?

In cast glass you have to be.

You selected cast glass.

That's true. It was a mature (in terms of years) and very deliberate decision. I felt that the dialogue with cast glass was under-developed. I had been casting on and off through undergraduate and graduate school. After I came out of graduate school, I started teaching at Sydney College and I cast a piece called *Transparent*. It was these cubes that spelt out the word 'transparent'. I used this big K7 glass. It was perfectly optically clear and I went through all this fussy 'Virgo-inspired' way of fire-polishing each ingot before cutting the block up exactly. Then the ingot was slumped into the mould so there were no seams, no bubbles. It was completely clear. I loved the piece. I loved the play on words. I loved the way that 'transparent' could be misspelled (being somewhat dyslexic). I said, "Look I don't want to make work that is necessarily a new style, but there's a process here that I've rediscovered. This is what I want to do".

Creativity by star sign?

There's a reasonable amount of truth in that, but I do think looking at your work sometimes you do see a mirror. It tells you a lot about yourself (positive and negative).

Dialogue has two elements.

It does and I think there are ideas in the work. Casting glass is quite unforgiving. You can get into a trap in the 'finishing' of the work. Everything polished, everything looking very sleek and smooth, and for me at one time that was a quest.

The 'purity' of that material can put incredible demands on you in terms of its perfection.

Yes, and for a lot of the 1990's it was about trying to conquer the material and give it that 'perfect' finish. Really with *Lens*, once I'd mastered that process, I realized I had to stop doing these, but it was probably another eighteen months before I actually finished working with them. There was a momentum and I had to rethink what I was going to do. What are you going to do in the mean time? You've still got demands for the work. I had to grow out from under a production schedule.

Sometimes dialogues just end?

Certainly the *Lens* was what I was known for. That particular time launched my career in a sense, but at the same time it was something that was finite, it had to stop.

It's hard to separate yourself from your context and I think a lot of artists wouldn't want to admit that, but we live in a time when glass is a very exciting material and it affords some great opportunities. Ten to twenty years from now it probably won't be that way. Glass won't have that 'razzle-dazzle' that it's had for an amazing period of time. That will depend on how practitioners take it forward. How the current practitioners evolve and how the new practitioners bring new life into it.

Market demand for a material because of its 'new' qualities?

Yeah, but that affords a lot of opportunity. There would be a lot less artists if there were not a pull – the opportunity for a show. Three of my students are going to be in a show overseas. Their work is good. It's innovative. It's fresh. It's challenging. It's articulate, and there is enough pull from the sector to drive these opportunities. It's amazing how one opportunity leads to other opportunities.

There are groups that provide patronage?

Yes. They have their own 'gravity'. You don't want to fly too close or you get sucked in. Never the less, we have all benefited from the great success of the forebears of the studio glass movement – those who launched it.

Let's look at 'the narrative'.

If we're talking about Deb, I see her having something to say and she finds the appropriate framework to do that. When Jess is working with a narrative, she's working with a very focused aesthetic in a process orientated way. Warren's a

little bit different. He's moving from idea to idea, and he's working with a wide range of materials.

Look at Tavetta Hava. He's at *Object* at the moment and he's Tongan. His culture comes screaming through his work. Yet he says he doesn't want to be the next 'Tongan artist'. He doesn't want to put Tongan symbols in there. Museums are bashing down his door to show his work, because he is Tongan. He is this 'island' person, but doesn't want that career. He wants to talk about who he is and what's important, but he doesn't want to do it as a veneer.

Here's something about Australia I learnt when I was 16. I'd just started my apprenticeship in stained glass. (I'd never been to Europe as a young adult, only as a child.) I went to study with Klaus Zimmer at the Caulfield Institute – night classes for painting on glass. I'd grabbed this sheet and just laid out colour (very un-European in my approach). He said something very interesting – “You know why Australians just embrace colour. You're Australian; you've got an Australian aesthetic. Europeans don't have colour. They don't have the light that activates colour. The sky is monochromatic”.

I remembered moving back to Canberra and that piercing sunlight. Even in Sydney light is vital and bright, but here [Canberra] it's intense. The colours in the natural environment are quite powerful. I'm not in any way saying my work is trying to foreground that, but it is definitely in the background as a point of inspiration.

I assume that's why the Japanese might see our work as colourful. Theirs was the same landscape – subdued, misted?

Yes. Someone like Klaus [Zimmer] was so good for me to study with, because he absolutely reveres process, but is so expressive with colour – very painterly and confident. He's quite deliberate about it, and he works in context. When I met him it was, “This is amazing. This guy has got it going on”.

I couldn't articulate it back then. I was too young.

How do you respond to Jessica's work?

She is one of the first of a new wave of thinking about glass – very minimalist, very reductive. Hers is a concisely worded aesthetic. Mel Douglas is another and Nicole Chezney is another. There are a number of them now.

We went through the colourful 1990's 'bells and whistles', colour and movement (Chihuli, big spun out plates). The way I use colour and form is quite different to that. Then we have this more sculptural approach (Yanich Valantonovich, Michael Shiner) more denying the inherent beauties of the material, pushing it towards a different dialogue. Then very soon after you have artists like Jessica Loughlin emerging who are very much about the material. It's very much about craft, very much about an articulate dialogue, but it's also a reductive and very considered minimal voice – a minimalist aesthetic voice. It's a controlled use of that translucency of glass. For me it is very articulate. It's very new and the next wave.

Jessica is inspired by landscape. In her artist's talks she always seems to speak about that horizon line, and in recent artist's talks she seems to speak about the vertical horizon line (New York) and how you can have that similar sense. For

me it's a mindset. It's not merely about landscape; it's about a quite meditative approach to environment. Initially, she had that one point of departure, but I see her voice as touching on principals of design and yet it's not design. It's firmly routed in a dialogue with the material, which is craft – yet sculptural. I love the ambiguity between those things.

Mel Douglas is in a very similar position. The work is 'vessel', so it touches on the tradition of the vessel, but it's not functional. Some of the works are donuts. It's ridiculous to think on that as a function. It's a compelling object.

Someone Jessica might point to is Rothko – not that her work is painterly, but it is highly meditative. She's a very articulate maker. She's an amazingly gifted artist of our time (and not just in glass).

Talking about that whole idea of making, one student said to me, "I understand what you say – that you need to read and look. I understand you need to have a context for what you're doing, but why does everything have to be justified through an artist's statement?" I responded, "If I'm giving you that impression then it's false. It's part of having a resonance, which helps you with context".

For some artists a rationale is critical in the articulation of the idea. For others, it's about dialogue in making beautiful work. There are some sources of inspiration for that and there is a longer history. The difficulty is (particularly with clubbing all these things together under the umbrella of the university) the notions of process and material converge in the one area.

I've looked at a lot of people outside the field. Richard Serra is a sculptor I absolutely adore. His work is massive. It's got this sense of intimidation, yet beauty, grace. Another person I look at a lot is Tadodo Tando, the Japanese architect. He did the *Church of Light* in Osaka. At the end of the church he has a crucifix, which is defined by four concrete blocks. It's a negative space. It's brilliant, an iconic shape that isn't there.

Ambiguity challenges.

Hopefully that's what it does. Then I went out and read a lot about him. He is a writer himself. He was a boxer who became an architect. I've consumed everything I can about the guy. He's brilliant – with his concept of space and people in space, the idea of membranes and walls and boundaries. It's been a strong inspiration for these more three-dimensional works and objects sitting within them – being contained and housed and distorted through veils.

That's one way of developing a dialogue. Looking at other people and incorporating ideas. But it's also important to have an exchange with your making that isn't only about an intellectual focus. An exchange that is about getting the hands grubby with the making, it's where I started I suppose.

An international visiting artist came to Australia and I was taking him around to studios. We had been into a number of the studios and artists would say this is my work and it is important that I explain this to you – blah, blah. At the third studio he said, "Stop! Let me experience the work and stop telling me about it".

Artist, object and audience have different dialogues.

Absolutely. If someone takes an interest in your work that's a wonderful thing, but it should not interrupt that initial dialogue that you have.

If you leave a space in the work.

Then they have a dialogue. Quite often I see it in student's work. I see it in my own work. You put too much in it and it's no longer a dialogue. It's a signpost. People say, "Big deal, I'll go and do something else".

You don't read a signpost – you just acknowledge it.