



Richard Whiteley
Vesica
 2004
 cast, carved and assembled glass
 36.5 x 24 x 15 cm

At the time of this interview Richard Whiteley is Head of the Glass Workshop, School of Art at the Australian National University.

When I go into the studio to make there is a lot of work that has been done in developing an idea – having a form, having a relationship of shapes that are going to be made – but as you know there is a process of editing and reflecting that happens, even when I have worked with 3D modelling software. Taking that into the studio there is still fudging – manipulation that happens in the dialogue of making.

Working with the material?

Absolutely. That is a big part of it. That is part of the history of the crafts and intertwined with contemporary glass there has always been that relationship to the crafts. It has always been part of any material specific practice that the crafts are part of the dialogue.

There was a time, particularly in the eighties when people wanted to define themselves through silos of thinking (the internet was emerging). That was what I remember as the last hurrah of 'which category do we fit in' – are we 'crafts practitioners', are we 'designers', are we 'artists'. It was then that all those weird terms such as 'glass artists' came about. What I see with the generations of students coming through now is that pluralism pontificated about during the nineties has come to fruition. Students see themselves working in a specific way with a particular technique, they understand the history of studio glass, but they see themselves as visual artists who can do a hundred things and cross boundaries that I would have thought twice about crossing when I was a young student.

Where does that place a 'glass studio' within a university?

Funny you should ask that. I gave a keynote at a conference. Klaus wasn't well and I flew to Portland to give this address (it was mine, not Klaus's) and I talked about our philosophy here [ANU]. A very respected artist (one I have a lot of time for) at the end of the talk stood up and said, "but I have a different view". This was Dan Clayman and he said that he felt glass should be part of sculpture – it should be part of a sculpture program. I said I disagreed with that. I think that what you need to do as an undergraduate was to learn about a specific language (not necessarily material specific). If you study textiles you don't just learn about one specific fabric. It could be design, fashion, printing, but you are learning a set of skills around material, or material processes.

It is the same here with this workshop. We do a lot of technical teaching with undergraduates. I think the idea of the cross-disciplinary approach, a broader sense of investigation of sculpture and its possibilities is good, but in the studio a practise as the central area of learning specific things, is really important. What often gets missed is that it is seen as those 'silos', or it is seen as this 'multi-disciplined anything goes approach'. Both extremes are fraught with problems.

It is the wiring in the middle (not the gradation on a scale. It is more complex than that). It's providing deep knowledge within an area as well as encouraging a broader thinking, the interweaving of ideas and materials that lie above that. If you don't teach that when you are teaching fundamental skills (it is not something you layer over the top) I find that it is very hard to go back and open people up to those possibilities.

Good work comes out of restriction.

Certainly, look at the Czech Republic. Absolutely incredible glass has come out of there. A lot of young artists with incredible talent were drawn into glass, because it offered a little more freedom. It wasn't seen as quite so regimented.

If you have a first year student I think they have to learn about material. They need to learn the craft. They need to learn the language of manipulating and processing the material and thinking how to take their idea and push it through a process. An idea is important. Having a relationship with skills is important, but the most important thing is neither the idea, nor the technical skill, but how they interact. We call that the 'methodology' and we spend a lot of time (a lot of time) discussing that word and what it means to each individual student. It is that traction between idea and material. It is that negotiation. Out of that comes the self-confidence that they can 'drive' an idea.

One of the criticisms of our program is that we 'cookie cut' students, that we teach them a certain way. I have heard of this thing – the 'Canberra Style' and I am not convinced. We encourage students to find their own relationship with skills and we strongly encourage them to be their own person, but that is different for different people.

Glass practice could be seen as self-referential.

My response is that it is a fair criticism. Australian studio glass is somewhat self-referential – more than it should be. That is partly because it is trying to 'canonise' itself. It has its history and a couple of books have come out reflecting on its success. Sure it has been successful, but practitioners when they were making their work weren't thinking along those lines. I don't know if the younger artists do that. The ones that I've seen in academic institutions are generally pretty good. They learn [studio

glass history] here [ANU]. They may be bored by the history of studio glass, but I think they need to know about it. They need to know about the history of the material in its entirety. We give them a lecture series on that, but they are pretty good at opening doors on other practitioners in other areas, particularly fine artists and that is the genre of artists referenced more than studio glass. That's within the cohort of students, the wider community of studio glass artists within Australia are more self-referential. They do look at what other people do and they (and we) appear to negotiate their relationship to their work from that. That's disappointing, because I think the students learn at a young age that they need to be broader, and I do have a lot of experiential evidence to say the students do that. I don't have a lot of experiential evidence to say the wider community of studio glass artists in Australia are being self-referential. I just feel that is what is happening.

Could it be a marketing decision to mark off some area as your own?

Maybe. People say they don't do that, but we do think subconsciously about those things, even if we don't think consciously about them. We are trying to define ourselves as practitioners. We are trying to establish a profile, a position if you will. I don't know if that is such a bad thing. It is pretty delusional to think that your work comes from the point of doing whatever you want. Sure you can, but you don't. You work within systems. We work through habit more often than not.

In general trends do you see 'drivers' in play?

People do their show and it is like a radio station program. 2CCC in Canberra is a great example. It plays the same music it did when I was a kid. It is locked in this little time warp. A whole generation of people who listen to that radio station have grown up as a demographic attracted to that sound and era. Those people have grown old with that music and it is the same XRT in Chicago. Ann listened to it as a kid and it had the same DJs. It's not bad. It's just what people do. So there is this cohort of people who established themselves and drive their practice. Some of them drop off. Some develop their work into these incredible positions. Some don't. Then someone like Cobi [Cockburn] comes along and 'kaboom!' there is this whole new body of work and that's great, but it doesn't mean the work made by established practitioners needs to change. They don't need to keep changing (although some of them do). You define yourself within your practice.

I don't know of many artists in any field who have completely reinvented themselves from era to era. There are some extraordinary people within the broader visual arts, but generally they establish themselves within a certain direction and they move within the corridors carried by the momentum they have within that practice.

You spoke last time of the difficulties in changing the direction of your work.

It was difficult, but it was absolutely the right thing to do. It wasn't a radical change. It is not as though I left my love of casting glass and my love of working with this material. I made a change after graduate school. I worked here [ANU] with Klaus. I had a great experience and I learnt this relationship with the material. It wasn't as articulate in my head then as it is now. I was a kid, but I learnt, and I really loved it. Then I went to America and they said, "This is craft, we don't do that - we make sculpture".

I remember a work painted in a bell jar.

That work, *Madonna and Child* was from graduate school and it was trying to take traditions of stain glass painting (Gothic religious imagery) and put that on a scientific apparatus (I had friends in the science labs of the University of Illinois who gave me this stuff). I was trying to embed a sense of crafting within this sculptural language. With that work I think it was successful, but a lot of the work was miserably unsuccessful. The work I did before was fused glasswork (when I was a student here [ANU]), and Wagga has just got a piece out of the collection. That was quite different to the work I did in graduate school, but I thought if I was going to go to do work at a graduate level I needed to open myself up to that experience. I am really glad that I did.

I came back to Australia from graduate school (I had done these kinetic pieces and other experiments) and I had taken a lot more time as I tried to reconcile this quite contrasting language of visual arts, as opposed to the way that I had learnt here. Klaus taught us 'truth to material' and it was a very valuable lesson, but I didn't know much beyond that. Graduate school was an opportunity to learn about the wider visual arts. My main material was glass, but my degree was in sculpture. Sculpture was this umbrella term for all these different people and technical areas. Glass was just one of those areas. That was a good experience and Bill Carlson was an outstanding supervisor. He was able to critique. His work was very architectonic, very much about material and process and yet his vision for what visual arts could be was very, very broad. He could critique work very successfully.

That experience was quite a shift from my time here. It was six years living in the States, and when I came out of that experience to live in Australia I really wanted to start working in a very deliberate way with material. I made a deliberate decision to start casting glass. I said that was the process I love most and I feel I had a real affinity with that process. That is when I told you the story of having a lot of success with the *Lens* series and I think the early *Lens* series were the most successful ones. In refining that visual canvas it got sucked up by the collecting world and I made a lot of work in that area. I left my teaching role and focussed on my work, but it was pretty clear and I knew it at the time (like turning a big ocean liner around) it takes a lot of energy to change the direction of your work, because there is so much wrapped up in it – money/income/livelihood.

You had created 'a history' with the collectors?

Exactly and I didn't want to smash it and tear it down (I mean I built it). I just wanted to mature it, to develop it. I didn't realise how hard it was to build that body of work and to build that visual language. I had been working in glass since I was sixteen and yet here in my early thirties I was really starting to investigate kiln casting. I poured a huge amount of energy into developing a studio, developing a practice, and really again learning all the stuff (that I kind of knew) and applying it at scale was quite difficult. Then the aesthetic maturing of the work – doing all the stuff I had been trying to teach for several years, reflecting on the work and not just being in this default setting. The work had to be continually renewed and matured, but not necessarily completely transformed.

I feel with the new work I got there. It took four years, probably four and a half years of some interesting pieces, some mediocre work (laughs) to actually make that transformation, to build sophistication and layering in depth into the 'method' of the work and have that expressed in the final piece. That took a long time.

What has drawn that 'beautiful object' out of you?

That is a good question. I could talk to you about the thinking, the method and the ideas and that spiel, but that is not what is being asked. I think that I am drawn to well made and well-articulated ideas. I am not saying that all my work is those things, but I think we make objects and we develop a visual language and what motivates us is partly taste. With my current and latest work there is that element that is not just about decoration. There is a layer in there that is the expression of an idea that I am drawing much closer to. It is still wrapped in this thing that is beautiful and refined.

What I really like about the current work is the 'negative', the 'hole'. It was hinted at in the *Lens* series pieces, but it is much more manifest within the new work. There is this 'void' that has this charged energy. The glass actually becomes the sculpture by filling space around this void. The void is this powerful, but invisible space (you can see it, because you can look through the glass). I love the simplicity of that. I love the simplicity of working with that idea through the glass. I am not trying to make sculpture like a three dimensional hand [representation]. I really enjoy that ambiguity. I like the way those negative forms hover in space. The most successful works I feel are the works that are absolutely simple. They are rectilinear forms.

It is hard to get feedback when you are a practitioner. People either in one line say, they like it, or they don't say anything. So to have a dialogue about ideas in your work, it needs to be orchestrated. My most thorough approach to that was bringing some people, whose opinions I really respect, into the studio and having a critique. They basically said the same thing. They said keep it really simple. "Do you need these things on the side?" "Do you need this?" "Do you need that?"

These are formal considerations, because the work is formal. It has that presence. That's what I love. That's what I am into. The most successful artworks for me are those that you have an immediate 'gut reaction' too. Those are the ones that flip your buttons. The intellect is something that comes along and tries to sort out why. It has always been that for me where it was minimalist abstract like Richard Serra's works that you see and go, "Oh my God, this is powerful". It is a felt response, then you can intellectualise it, analyse it. It is an obvious driver for the type of work that I do.

What response do you want from the person looking at your work?

That's a very good question and I don't think artists can say they don't want a response. Absolutely, the audience is important. I suppose I am making a visual statement implying certain things. I don't want them to necessarily see a series of words, or have the same formalist approach. I want them to have that same 'feeling' though. That is something that can be talked about and communicated. That sense of power – power of structure and a softness of edge and form – those really organic corners on the more contemporary pieces relating to the body in their industrial anthropomorphic quality. I would love people to see that. A power and a softness, where the surface is really silky (they're not shiny anymore – it has taken a long time to give shine up as a default setting) and the colour has real radiance, like this power in the room. It's like stained glass, when you stand in a stained glass cathedral. The power of cast glass can have that, and it can have it in a brooding, powerful way.

These are the things that I want to have acknowledged by the viewer. I would love the viewer to be able to experience those things. I suppose if you are switched on to it though, if you engage with anything, or anyone and it turns those dials for you, then it

is more than an object, or more than meeting a person. It is something that can carry you and motivate you. It becomes much more, the object can transcend and empower.

Some objects have that. There is an exhibition on at the school [Glass ANU] at this moment and there are some people in it who have done really well. They have worked through their ideas and they have developed a body of work that is very competent, but it just doesn't float my boat. I can appreciate its competence and we do that every time we assess work, but then there is other work that comes along and it is somewhat sublime. It works.

Are you pursuing the sublime?

For some people my work will always be only an object. I think the way it is becoming structured (particularly in the last couple of years) I have tried very hard to make the work about this relationship of space. In that sense it is about a shape defined, but space not there. So by its very design it is not about an object, it is about a void.

You said 'tension' and 'charge'. That implies forces.

Maybe that is a response to notions of the object. It may be that the later work is a response to my experience in making those original objects. I remember early on in the *Lens* series I was really interested in the way the voids created this relationship with form. I think it got a little buried with commercialism. The later work is starting to pull that back. I am selling a lot less work (surprisingly I am happy about that.)

Those early pieces were beautiful 'decorative' adjuncts to architecture.

I always saw them as architectural vignettes, but I feel I was kidding myself. They were self-referential much more than not. They were well-crafted works that were more decorative than not. I don't think the ideas that I was trying to empower in them were coming across as successfully as they are now.

Once into a commercial loop I found it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. After a year you are left asking what next and their answer is, "More thanks, we will take more".

What future do you see for Australian studio glass?

It's changing and it definitely needs to change. Studio glass in the late nineteen-nineties, early two thousands in this country became well aware of its success and its history. It became more defined as it was established. As soon as that happened people wanted to pull it apart and that's good, because it needs to be renewed. It's a reaction, but also a maturing and diversifying. It is not like we want to pull it all apart and pull down this studio and start again. That is not going to succeed. For a start no university is going to add glass [to its curriculum] – universities want to cut it, because it is very expensive to support. We had a lot of excitement during the eighties. People got on board. There wasn't a lot of knowledge. It was great, but nobody really thought about it. Nick Mount sums this up the best when he says, "We were just doing it and now people are writing books about it. That seems ridiculous". They may not be his exact words, but it was the implication I took. Some people come to study here [ANU], because it is very successful and it has this long pedigree. A lot of kids just present because, "Glass seems cool, this seems like a great thing to do". I think what is exciting about the younger generations of artists coming through is that they are seeing the material in a very different way.

People like me tell them about its history. They listen to it and they appreciate it, but they don't feel bound by it. I think that is an important thing. In this program we put much more energy in talking about cross-fertilization and giving them seminars on artists, who perhaps work in glass, but more on the peripheries, because that is where the energy is. They would not necessarily learn a lot by us doing lectures on Billy Morris. We will do a lecture on Dick Marquis, but we will pair him with someone else in that post-funk crafts thing and talk about that as an era and talk about a methodology framed by the time.

The students are framed by a very different time. Their world is quite different to the world I grew up in at school, so ideally their work is going to be different.

Studio glass is now quite open?

I would like to think it is, but people outside the critique might say it's very insular. It is very hard for studio glass to be as exciting as it was, because it isn't new anymore.

It's a discovered country.

Nice analogy and very much the case. Another thing is, if we look back at a lot of the work made in early studio glass, it was exciting, but it was pretty crappy work. As far as interesting visual art, it did not qualify. There was some work that was interesting and is now starting to take its place and be recognised as such, but a lot of work was part of the hype of what glass is.

My work has just been shown at *Art Miami*. *Bullseye* were the first 'glass only' gallery to be allowed into *Art Miami*. They took Jessica Loughlin (no surprise there), Mel Douglas, April Surgent and myself. They got into that cohort of galleries because their work didn't look like studio glass. Some looked architectural, Mel's looked like it was woven - it looks a little bit ceramic, but it isn't and it was that curiosity and sophistication (particularly in the other three that they took) that got them in.

That shows that in contemporary studio glass a few artists have made that leap into broader fine art identities. I don't think that is a destination for everyone. I do not think it is the ultimate goal that we all should strive for, but I do think it is showing a maturity and diversity of studio glass. The hype has gone out of studio glass and now it not because you work in glass that your work is interesting, it is that if your work is interesting it will be successful.

The stigma of studio glass is still there. The success of the Billy Morris's and the Chilhulys pushed the identity of glass into this 'kitsch/sparkly/colourful' position. I strongly think it is going to take some amazing work to re-contextualise glass, and there are artists out there doing that. There is Dan Clayman, whose work is absolutely stunning. With people like Howard Ben Tre – those two have been doing it for years and they are being seen in a very different light while still working in this single material.

The challenge is that it isn't 'cool' to be in glass anymore. It has to be about making really interesting work that is critically informed and intelligent. It is the same with processes like photography. If glass is to succeed it will need to bring that innovation. That is what will define it now.