

The glass darkly

During my time as Director of Wagga Wagga Art Gallery I have had a wonderful induction into the world of glass. It is a very seductive world whose practitioners and supporters are some of the most passionate I have encountered in any art world. Glass is indeed a lucky medium - naturally seductive and sexy, lustrous and vulnerable, exploiting the interplay of light, form and colour.

My introduction to this silicon-based field came primarily through getting to know and becoming smitten by the extraordinary richness of the National Art Glass Collection as well as helping to facilitate a number of exhibitions by major Australian glass artists in the National Art Glass Gallery. I admit that before taking the Directorship at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery I had only a passing knowledge of art glass. What I knew about was Australian contemporary art, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. My experience with the National Art Glass Collection has been a rich learning curve and I have been truly lucky to have had the opportunity to discover this 'other' world.

By way of background Wagga Wagga Art Gallery has been collecting studio glass since 1979. In 1992, the glass collection was formally named the National Art Glass Collection, in recognition of its national significance. It is the largest public collection of studio art glass in Australia and currently consists of approximately 400 works that represent the history and development of the Australian studio glass movement. It includes work by artists who were invited to Australia in the early years of the movement to stimulate glass practice, artists-in-residence from overseas and subsequent generations of Australian artists collected over a 40 year period.

The Australian studio glass movement began in the early 1970s, trailing the American movement by a decade. The Studio Glass movement is different from other art glass movements of the 20th century because it emphasises the artist as designer and maker, focuses on the production of original one-off objects and is international in scope. The studio glass movement in Australia now encompasses a huge number of artistic and stylistic responses to the medium and a wide variety of conceptual interests.

Wagga Wagga was the site of one of the earliest hot glass teaching studios in Australia. It was established at Charles Sturt University, Riverina Campus (formerly the Riverina College of Advanced Education) by John Elsegood in 1978, when the studio glass movement was still young. The hot glass workshop was encouraged by visits from international artists such as Sam Herman and Eva Almeberg in the late 1970s. In June 1979, Judy Le Lievre, the then Director of the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, with the support of the trustees, committed the Gallery to 'develop a nationally important collection of contemporary glass'. In 1999, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery was relocated to a new purpose built facility which included a separate building specifically designed to house the National Art Glass Collection. The design, which references a splinter of glass, perfectly suits the medium that it showcases and has become one of the most prominent tourist attractions in the Riverina region.

The National Art Glass Collection represents a genuine overview of Australian art glass and the many currents that run through the discipline. The Collection includes works that demonstrate extraordinary technical skill and command over the medium, others that are charming and beautiful and some that are conceptually loaded, that inhabit the world of ideas as well as the sensate world of a particularly seductive medium.

For a collecting institution attempting to capture the context of the studio glass movement, it is important to be cognisant and embracing of current trends and changes in the focus of the movement. In the contemporary world of dissolving disciplinary borders, a rigorous and exclusive allegiance to any discipline or medium seems like an idea that has certain limitations, as is the hoary old binary position between the arts and crafts. However there are a number of tightly held and contested positions within the Australian glass movement and *Tour de Force* places itself squarely within this discourse, challenging some prevailing models and creating a platform where the relationship between the medium of glass and contemporary art can be explored.

Kevin Murray, in a recent article¹, postulated about some relationships between the media-bound and skills-driven world of 'crafts' and the world of contemporary art. The boundaries between these two art worlds have been permeable for many years but he noted that the perceived shift of artists whose medium defines them as craftspeople towards the realm of contemporary art, can now be seen as a more two-way street. Just as a number of artists have challenged the restrictions of their craft-defined media so too a number of contemporary artists have embraced skills, processes and media traditionally associated with crafts. Ricky Swallow, Fiona Hall and Louise Weaver, to name a few, have all embraced labour intensive, skill-based processes in order to realise their artistic conceptions.

Tour De Force highlights this phenomenon. At least three of the artists in the exhibition position their work within contemporary discourses and would not be considered primarily as 'glass' artists. Other artists in the exhibition who do use glass as their primary medium, push at the boundaries of the medium and situate their works within current conceptual, philosophical and political dialogues. They add weight, they go deeper, past the seductive surface lustre into the heart of the matter where the medium is not the only message. There are works in *Tour De Force* that deal with eroticism and death, the environment and science; there are works that employ a pop humour to provoke and entertain; there are works that compel the audience to look thorough the glass darkly.

Tour de Force is an important exhibition with which Wagga Wagga Art Gallery is proud and pleased to be a partner organisation. Give me the idea over the ornament any day... in the best of all possible worlds we have both!

Cath Bowdler
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¹ Murray, K. 2009 'The party's over, time to do the dishes: Thinking through relational craft' *Art & Australia*, Vol.47 No. 2