

firing across the gaps

cath bowdler

The genesis for the *Crossfire* exhibition really began with a glass piece, *Salt on Mina Mina*, by Warlpiri artist Dorothy Napangardi that had pride of place near the entrance to the National Art Glass Gallery in Wagga Wagga for a time. It was a work that grabbed my attention on my initial visit to the Gallery, when I went there for a job interview. I was well acquainted with Dorothy's extraordinary paintings and prints and was surprised to see her distinctive iconography reproduced beautifully in glass. As it happened I got the job and became Director of the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery shortly after.

My initial idea stayed with me and I wondered how many other artists were represented in both the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery's collections – the National Art Glass Collection and the Margaret Carnegie Print Collection – and what other possible links there might be between them. I decided to make an exhibition out of it, started looking through the database and in the collection room and right away synapses started firing. I was working largely on instinct and intuition, as an artist does, not always sure why things worked together, but trusting the process and leaving the research till later. I was excited about having a way early on to get to know the Collections, seeing them with new eyes, not bounded by disciplinary allegiances or too much baggage.

The exhibition, which spanned both Wagga Wagga Art Gallery spaces, showed over 40 pairings of prints and glass pieces. It was an attempt to look at the collections in cross-disciplinary and innovative ways, breaking down the barriers between media and incorporating literary as well as artistic responses. *Crossfire* included artists who worked across both media, artists who responded creatively to works by other artists,

processes such as etching and engraving which are used in both media and pairings of prints and glass that had thematic and conceptual resonances.

It may not sound like the most ground-breaking exhibition, but the combination and juxtaposition of certain works sang. Some examples of the pairings were more successful than others but those that worked particularly well included Emma Varga's *Red Red Sky Burning # 1* and Jorg Schmeisser's *Fire Front*, both of which graphically captured the movement and intensity of bush fires. Matthew Curtis' *Grey Print* resonated strongly with Melissa Smith's collograph *To Remember* as did Elizabeth Kelly's *City of glass* with Dorrit Black's linocut *Elizabeth Street*. Other connections were more conceptual than formal such as Neil Robert's *Untitled (knife 2)* and George Baldessin and Imants Tillers' collaborative print *According to des Esseintes (2)* both of which referred to Marcel Duchamp's iconic work *The Bride Stripped Bare* or (*The Large Glass*).

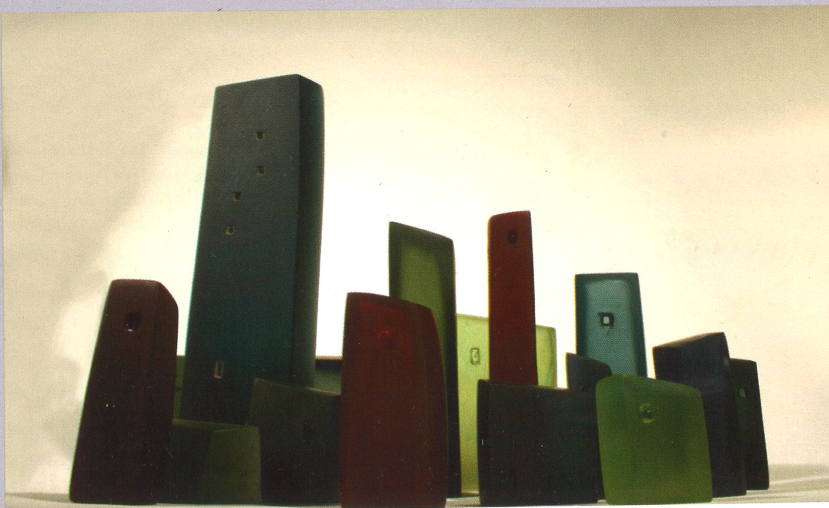
One of the most interesting cross-cultural pairings was the inclusion of a glass *pukumani* pole by Tiwi artist Jock Puautjimi. This piece, like Dorothy Napangardi's, represented an assertion of Jock's cultural life in a dynamic new form. It was paired with Annie Franklin's *Pularumpi Stories*, a lyrical view of her life in the same Tiwi community, which is dominated by the presence of pukumani poles at the apex of her semi-circular print.

Crossfire was a very successful exhibition for the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery. The locals loved seeing their Collections displayed prominently and in a way they had not seen before, visitors got it and enjoyed the experience and the catalogue was sent far and wide to promote the Collections. More than anything, for me as curator and new Director, it was enormous fun and a chance to get to know the Collections. It was not the sort of thing you would probably do if you thought too much about it. Rather it was a quick flash of insight which was followed through – a fitting exhibition for a regional gallery and a good introduction for a new Director. ☞

After 15 years working as a curator and manager in the Northern Territory and three years completing a PhD in Indigenous visual art at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at ANU, Cath Bowdler is now Director of the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery.



LEFT: Dorrit Black, *Elizabeth Street* date unknown, linocut, ed 2/50, 25.6 x 18 cm (image). RIGHT: Elizabeth Kelly *City of glass* 2006, kiln-formed glass, dimensions variable.



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