



## HOT STUFF

*Glass-blower Philip Stokes turns the amorphous into the sculptural at Melbourne's Abbotsford Convent.*

IT'S A CHEAP pun-liner to describe Philip Stokes as a "glass act", but when you watch this nimble artisan create a sculptural vessel out of amorphous material – in a tight, two-person performance, the synchronicity of which has to be seen to be believed – the depiction is bang on. His craft-making is theatre at its improvisational, collaborative, risk-taking best.

"I do find that handling hot glass is surprisingly similar to being on the stage," says the Melbourne-based glass blower, whose radio voice and 'ripped' body hint at a personal history that is two parts drama, one part dance and a little competition gymnastics. "Spontaneity, immediacy, synergy, co-operation and chance are all elements that I enjoy and exploit from my theatre past, both in the making and in the final installation." >

< Working within the confines of a repurposed commercial laundry that once served the Good Shepherd orphanage – now an arts and crafts precinct called the Abbotsford Convent – Stokes claims to love the contradiction that a building born of such impoverished industry can now indulge the making of art-glass installations for some of the world’s finest hotels (the Four Seasons in Hong Kong has made a foyer feature of one of Stoke’s playful glass groupings).

He credits his mother with the life-changing introduction to the ‘hot-shop’ – the studio floor where glass is kept molten in a furnace, reheated in a ‘glory hole’ and cooled in an annealing chamber – and says that as peripatetic as his past might appear on paper, everything, including the left brain training by his surgeon father and the right brain nurturing by his crafts practitioner mother, has steered him to this vessel-making moment. And so, with the poise, precision and physicality of a ballet dancer, he begins a ‘pas de deux’ of intuitive design with studio assistant Scott Redding, falling into the choreographed movement of plunging blow-pipe into furnace, pulling toffee-like glob from its fiery heart, shaping this molten mass with in-hand twirl (sheets of wet newspaper preventing the 1000 degree Celsius glob from searing off skin) and frequently returning to the glory hole, where malleability is maintained. This enthralling act climaxes when Stokes breathes the blob into a glorious bubble of transparent colour, the form of which is fashioned by the pull of gravity and the twist of a wrist. It all seems so visceral and reactive, but the master craftsman assures that hidden in this dangerous dance is the decade of experience that tells exactly what rhythm and gesture will result in a tear-drop shape with a suggestive lean and a cerulean blue cast.

“Little has changed in 2000 years,” he says of the method that remains completely primitive in its processes. “The tools are pretty much the same and no software program can yet create this.” He lifts a blister-skinned vessel from his ‘Amorphous’ series to an east wall of window and whispers, “gotta love that.”

“But best of all is how it holds light, how it captures it, colours it, then shoots it back out into the ether as atmospheric effect... sheer magic!” ANNEMARIE KIELY  
*Philip Stokes Studio Glass at the Mercator, 1 St. Helier Street, Abbotsford Victoria, (03) 9415 7959; [www.philipstokesstudioglass.com.au](http://www.philipstokesstudioglass.com.au).*

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