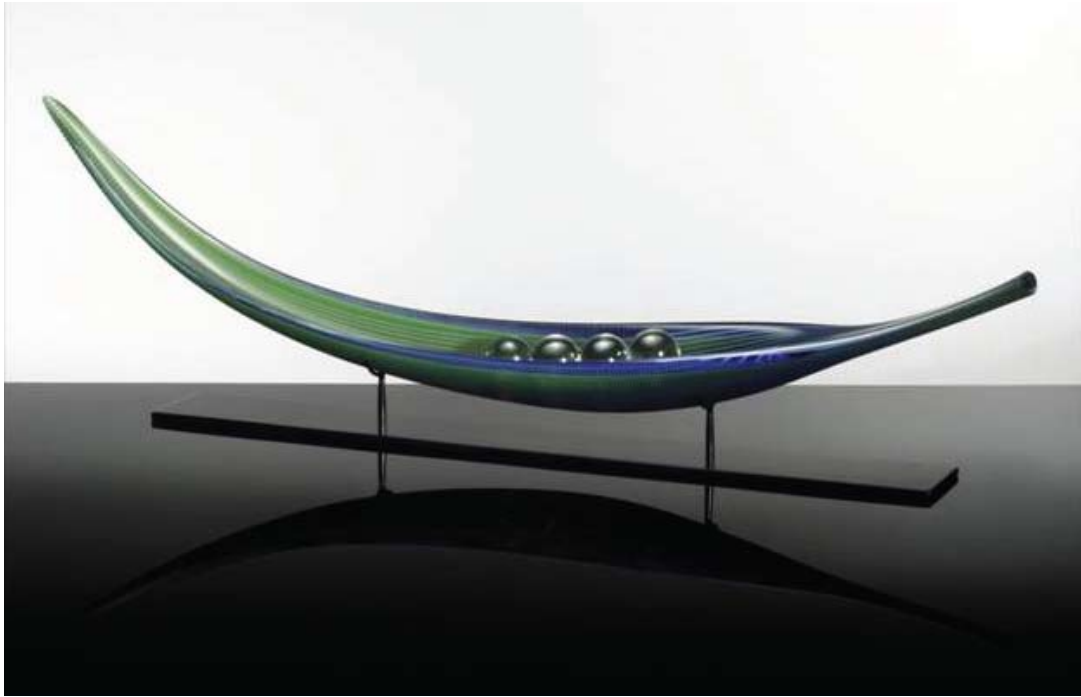


The Many Faces Of Glass



Benjamin Edols and Kathy Elliot, **Blue & Green Fallen Leaf with Seeds**, blown glass & steel base, 50 x 95 x 10 cm. All photographs: Courtesy of Gaffer Studio Glass, Hong Kong.

Australian glass artists have gradually come into their own as a major force within the international glass world. Their work has won numerous major international awards. It is now broadly represented in many private and major public art collections around the world, not just because of the impeccable craft skills but because Australian glass artists are making great art.

By Jonathan Thomson

During the past 40 years, the crafts in Australia have grown from being a hippie, alternative lifestyle into a slick and sophisticated component of what are now called the creative industries. In the 1970s, craft became an increasingly popular way for people to get in touch with their own creativity. The result was a lot of lumpy brown pots, macramé wall hangings, and hand-hooked rugs. For many it was a phase which ran its course. However, for a smaller number of more committed practitioners it was the start of

an evolutionary process that has resulted in an exquisite array of breathtakingly beautiful objects being available to an increasingly discerning market in a world that is coming to value more the things which are truly unique.

The process was facilitated by the establishment of organizations and networks that replicated in some ways the Middle Ages notion of a trade guild, although rather than taking responsibility for the training of the next generation of craftsmen—from apprentice through to journeyman and master—these State-based

associations were more concerned with representing, promoting, and developing the commercial interests of their members. It was also facilitated by the establishment in 1975 of the Crafts Board as an autonomous part of the fledgling Australia Council for the Arts. Since then craft practice has been encouraged in good schools with good teachers; discussion and debate has been encouraged and fostered through a range of specialist publications, seminars and conferences; skills and standards have been honed through travel and other professional development opportunities;

national and international markets have been developed and fine collections of objects have been acquired and exhibited and used to build the professional reputations of new generations of practitioners.

Craft and craftsmanship have always been about the application of “craft” skills, by which we mean things done by hand. In the 19th century, William Morris championed handicrafts as the way of returning to the quality of design and manufacture in the decorative arts to pre-Industrial Revolution standards. His stance was a critique of the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and mass production. In the 1970s, the popularization of the crafts recognized subtle or not so subtle imperfections in the finished object as evidence of the mark of man, in much the same way as weavers of the finest Persian rugs would include a deliberate mistake, because only God was capable of true perfection. Today the term craftsmanship has come to mean the finest things in life. The advertising campaigns of luxury goods firms such as Louis Vuitton, Hermes, Cartier, Bulgari et al., all hark back to their master-craftsman beginnings. And today while the hand may work with a mouse rather than some other tool and may employ industrial processes, it is still a vital part of craft practice.

Many of the philosophical, theoretical, and critical debates in the crafts are concerned with issues of identity. Underpinning many of these debates are concerns with status and the way in which the work of craft practitioners are perceived in the marketplace. The nomenclature used to describe craft practice and the people involved in that practice includes applied art, decorative art, art and design, craft and design, a variety of media-specific terms, the more generic term designer-maker, and the awful “craftartist.” The current popularity among practitioners of the term “designer-maker” may have its roots not just in the quality of design, which has always been an essential part of craftsmanship, or in the slick minimalism of much recent design and craft practice, but in the political arena. The emphasis being placed by many governments on the development of the creative industries has seen some jockeying for position as different component parts of those “industries” stake their claims for support.

Australian glass artists have achieved both critical acclaim and market recognition both in Australia and internationally for the quality of their work and the use of their medium as an expressive

and allusive vehicle for contemporary art practice. A survey exhibition by Gaffer Studio Glass in Hong Kong, and later in Singapore, of *Contemporary Australian Studio Glass* affords Asian audiences the opportunity to see an exquisite range of work that employs a wide variety of techniques.

Benjamin Edols and Kathy Elliot have together created some truly memorable sculptural forms that are aesthetically and intellectually satisfying on many different levels. These artists work collaboratively—Edols is the glass-blower and Elliot is responsible for the cutting and grinding. In *Fallen Leaf with Seeds*, molten glass canes have been blown then pulled, stretched and shaped into a long lithe leaf shape that curls high at one end and flattens to a narrow wedge at the other. The middle of the form is slumped, forming a depression in which nestle five colorless translucent spheres. The work is comprised of clear blue green glass that turns wholly transparent at the edges. Running through the entire length of the form is a series of evenly spaced thin black lines that are just a hair’s breadth apart at the ends but more widely spaced in the middle. Edols has clearly exerted extraordinary control during the pulling and stretching and slumping process in order to keep these lines evenly



Gerry King, **Virtual Vessel**, 2003, kiln-cast glass & steel base, 34 x 20 cm.



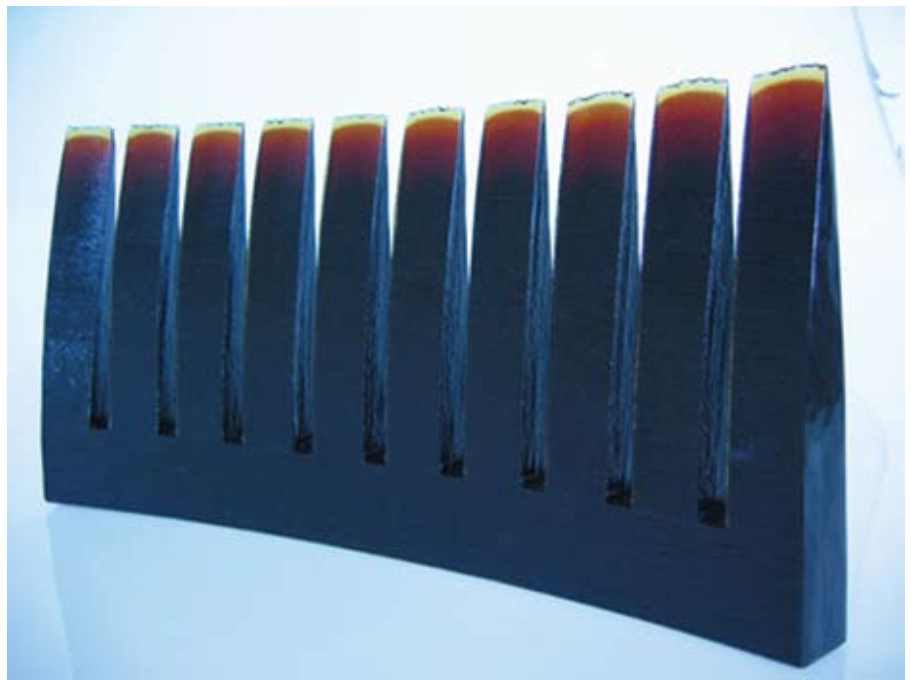
Ben Sewell, **Flowing Void**, 2005, 45 x 20 x 8 cm.

spaced throughout. Elliot's contribution has been to etch the underneath of the form with a series of transverse parallel lines. The black lines in the body of the glass and the underside of the etched lines that trap the light can be seen through the glass and combine into a series of precisely regulated rectangles that complement perfectly the lithe flowing lines of the sculptural form.

The botanic allusions of this work are clearly evident in the curling leaf shape. The spheres read as seeds nestling in a seed pod and like a seed pod, this form appears to nurture and protect them. The vessel is the standard form in most glass artists' *oeuvre*, and while this work is designed to hold something, it also reads as a vessel in the other sense—as a ship or boat—perhaps a high-prowed gondola—that is poised to embark on a journey. Alternatively the form could be viewed as a scythe, but instead of cutting its crop, this one has gathered it into its own body.

Botanic allusions are also evident in the work of Rob Knottenbelt. He works in kiln cast glass and traps within its fluid depths the richness of color and the teeming variety of form that may be found in an inter-tidal rock pool. His *Aleph* presents as a half-egg shape, flat-side up, mounted on four stumpy legs that are joined to each other by arches. Looking from the top, you see beyond the highly polished reflective surface into the depths below. Down there are tendrils of color that are reminiscent of different varieties of seaweed and mysterious shadows. You half expect the stillness to be disturbed at any time by the lazy waving of an anemone or the flash of a darting fish. It is a captivating experience.

In the 1960s, the late great Australian landscape painter Fred Williams invented and developed the strip gouache painting in which he captured the enormity of the Australian landscape in a series of long horizontal format paintings that were placed one above the other on the same sheet in a series of bands. In this way he was able to represent either the endless horizon or the passage of time and hence the timelessness of a particular place. These associations are evident also in the work of Emma Varga. She constructs her work by building up dozens of layers of cut and fused Bullseye sheet glass each with scattered glass mosaic elements, colored powders and frits in a mold. In the kiln the layers fuse and merge. The result is very painterly and evocative of the natural environment. In *Purple Dawn – Sky Piece #5* she replicates the colors playing on the high



Kirstie Rea, *Fence Form 111*, kiln formed, wheel-cut glass.

wispy cirrus clouds that may often be seen in the relative cool of a summer morning, just as the sky is lightening before dawn, but which will dissipate as soon as the sun rises and it turns into a blisteringly hot day. Similarly, in *Ocean #32* she evokes the vastness of the open illimitable sea stretching into the distance until it merges with the haze of the horizon.

Kirstie Rea uses glass as a sculptural form enclosing and defining space. Her work explores the tactile and physical properties of the medium in forms which are by virtue of the process employed quite

small, but which look and feel like maquettes for work on a much more imposing scale. It is easy to imagine her sculptural forms fabricated in sheet steel and taking their place as major public art pieces at the gateway to a city or in significant ceremonial sites. However, while her forms could be scaled-up in size, alternative means of production could never capture the brittle quality of her edges or the colors she employs or the way light is trapped in the dense depths of her chosen material.

In *Ensbelter* two mirror-image arch sections are placed just far enough apart for their tips to be almost touching. Each section begins at ground level as a rectangle that narrows in both section and plane as it reaches upward and bends towards its partner. A short distance above ground level the forms are divided into two like the tines of a fork. The inside surfaces are smooth and mat finished while the outside surfaces are striated vertically in long close-set gouges like the block of a wood-block print and polished to a high sheen. Each section is comprised of kiln-formed glass in a deep dark green that appears almost black when viewed lengthwise, dark olive on the matt surfaces, and rich emerald near the tips and between the furrows on the outer surfaces.

In *Fence Form III* she creates a form in which both the horizontal and vertical elements are in perfect balance. The base of the sculpture is a long square-sectioned rectangle that curves laterally in a gentle arc. Rising seamlessly from this base are



Emma Varga, *Ocean 32*, cast, fused, laminated glass.

an equal series of square-sectioned rectangles each half as high as the length of the sculpture that are separated from one another by narrow gaps and which taper to a knife edge at the top. The work is made of a dark brown glass that appears almost black where it is thickest but which lightens to a pale brown and yellow at the jagged knife edge. Both of these works are elegant vehicles for exploring the interplay of voids and solid space and shadows and light and notions of enclosure and exclusion.

Catherine Aldrete Morris is also concerned with the exploration of negative space—which for her includes the spaces between pairs of sculptural forms and the spaces which may be found within her forms. In *Blush* she positions a tall rectangular plinth of colorless glass standing on end within the embrace of an equally tall half-pipe that is also standing on end. The rectangle has a satin finish which gives it a milky color and close examination reveals a scaling effect over the entire surface. The half-pipe is divided lengthwise into two parts—one larger red section and a narrower gray one. The junction between them is a straight line but is off vertical so that the red section starts

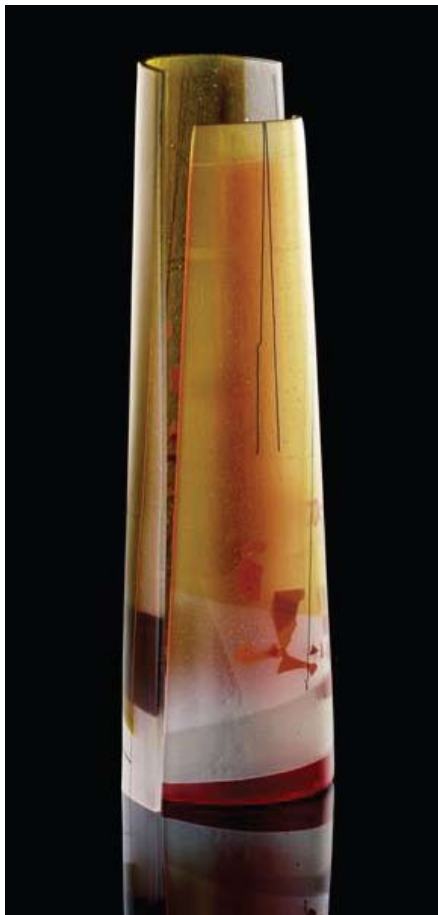


Nick Wirdnam, 3 Wishes, 2004, hot-formed glass & steel stand, 45 x 45 x 10 cm.

wider at the base and gets narrower at the top and vice-versa. Within the half-pipe an array of tiny bubbles adds to the complexity of both the surface and the structure. The juxtaposition of planes and lines also results in subtle shifts in tone and color as you move around the work.

Nick Wirdnam makes sleek, pared-down fish shapes and suspends them on metal stands so that they appear to be schooling. And just like a real school of

fish, his appear to be moving individually but together. He calls his work *Wishes*—perhaps inspired by the traditional folk song that begins “I wish I was at home again, at home in my heart again” and which includes the famous saying “If wishes were fishes, we’d all cast nets in the sea.” Be that as it may, his work does invoke a rather melancholy mood that transcends its symbolic associations. The fish are presented in summary form, without



Catherine Adrete Morris, Solcite, kiln glass, 54 x 25 x 10 cm.



Mark Thiele, Red Overlay, 2004, blown red overlay with back opaque glass, engraved surface, 59 x 15 cm.



Rob Knottenbelt, Prime, 2004, cast glass, 54 x 25 cm.

fins or tails or any surface embellishment that might detract from the flow of the line of their bodies. The only concession to nature is a mouth and eyes and yet that is more than sufficient to capture their character. His material is flawless transparent colored glass that varies from light to dark dependent only the volume of material at any particular point.

Most of the other artists represented use the form of the vessel to convey their ideas and they do so in an extraordinarily diverse way. Simon Butler's elegant forms rise up from a narrow base and flare outwards in much the same way as a clay vessel thrown on a potter's wheel. Unlike clay, however, these richly colored, jewel-like objects seem to glow with an inner light. He casts his vessels in crystal and then polishes them to achieve a variety of surface finishes. In *Red Dawn* the bowl of the vessel has a bubbly matt finish that is similar to that of vesicular basalt found in lava flows and which references its genesis in the furnace. This surface traps and holds the light in counterpoint to the broad flat rim which has been polished to a highly reflective mirror finish. The outer surfaces are polished to a soft sheen.

The most seductive surfaces in the exhibition are found in the highly tactile *pâte de verre* works of Penny Fuller. The extraordinarily demanding process that she employs results in work that you may almost be tempted to taste. The work appears to be made out of sugar crystals that have been pressed together into a variety of delicate forms and which are then infused with subtly nuanced liquid color. The result is an object of great beauty. The term *pâte de verre* literally means paste of glass and involves mixing colored-glass granules with a binder that is then shaped into the desired form and fused in the kiln. In *Green Palm* she takes the natural world as her inspiration and makes leaf-shaped vessels that use a pattern of small veinlets radiating from a main vein to support a crystalline blade of extraordinary color and delicacy that is remarkably robust despite its apparent fragility.

In the 1920s Margaret Preston became one of the most outspoken and visible exponents of early Modernism in Australia. Through her work and her writing she became a tireless advocate of the development of a distinctively



B Jane Cowie, Trust, 2003, cast glass & found brick.

Australian style in art. In the 1930s and 1940s, she was inspired by the colors and patterns of Aboriginal designs and produced work characterized by the use of strong light and dark ochre colors, distinctively patterned surfaces, unusual compositions and spatial ambiguity.



Penny Fuller, Simply Being, 2003, pâte-de-verre glass, 40 x 15 cm.

Echoes of Preston's influence may be seen in the painted glass work of Maureen Williams. In *Altered Landscape 5* she adopts the red and yellow ochre, white gypsum, and black charcoal colors of Aboriginal painting and areas of distinct patterning that may be found in Preston's work. In *Obscured Landscape 4* there are suggestions of the x-ray style of painting practiced by the Aboriginal artists in Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory. Suggestions of an Aboriginal influence may also be seen in the blown and cold-worked vessels of Mark Thiele. His works, both *Untitled*, one transparent red with black overlay and one transparent blue with black overlay and both engraved with a matt finish, are superbly crafted and echo the rhythms and patterns of the Aboriginal artists of the Central and Western Desert regions of Australia.

Exhibitions such as this indicate that the critical debates about the role of designer-makers in some supposed pantheon or hierarchy of contemporary art may be convincingly laid to rest. Australian glass artists have won major international awards and are represented in the collections of many major international art museums not just because of their craft skills but because they are making great art. Δ

Jonathan Thomson is the Hong Kong contributing editor for Asian Art News and World Sculpture News.