

# CONTEXTS FOR CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN GLASS:

*Strategies for public collections  
and curatorship*

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## ABSTRACT

In just 25 years, 'studio' glass practice in Australia has developed from virtual non-existence into an art form of great diversity and importance. It now operates within a well supported network of social, technical, educational and professional systems, and has an established international profile. Its significance can be measured to some degree by its presence in the collections of major public galleries and representation in major curated exhibitions.

Australia does not currently have a public gallery or museum solely dedicated to the exhibition and collection of glass, so the medium has been assimilated into galleries and museums with wider interests. This arrangement offers the glass medium contexts that can contribute to certain perceptions and interpretation, but may also restrict its complete expression and appreciation.

Examining the glass collections of public galleries and museums is revealing of glass practice, but to then consider the histories and policies of the collections and the curatorial investment behind them is also revealing. This paper is an investigation of the glass collections of four Australian institutions, chosen for their commitment to collecting contemporary Australian glass. They are:

- . National Gallery of Victoria
- . Art Gallery of Western Australia
- . Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (The Powerhouse)
- . Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery

Clearly, each institution operates with a different set of resources, combined with a different agenda. This paper will explore the inherent biases and the differences between them. It will identify areas of glass practice that are excluded or misrepresented and propose strategies for future curatorial attention.

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## 1.0 Introduction

After completing the Graduate Diploma of Gallery Management at the College of Fine Arts in 1990, I directed my attention to Australian contemporary glass in all its diversity: conferences; exhibitions; discussions with artists, curators and collectors; reviews; publications; media coverage; industry coverage; education; opportunities; sponsorship; public perception and critical interpretation. It has lead me to involvement with many individuals and organisations who in some way have contributed to the processes by which contemporary glass "exists" in this country, and occasionally, overseas.

For my internship, I spent four weeks at the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA), with Robert Bell, Curator of Craft and Design, being exposed to an institution that was at the forefront of advancing the profile of craft. Bell had a reputation for curating serious and considered exhibitions of craft and design, mostly contemporary, though occasionally with historic reflection. He was actively involved in the development and direction of AGWA's craft collection, and was a distinguished member of the international craft community. My brief time in his professional ambit provided insight to the general processes of curatorship and the specific concerns that applied to craft. During that time, Bell was also preparing the 2nd International Perth Crafts Triennial which featured four exhibitions; one of these was *International Directions in Glass Art* (IDGA), a nationally significant exhibition of contemporary glass, and a sequel to *International Directions in Glass* (IDG) that toured Australia in 1981/82, itself a landmark exhibition.

Subsequently, I worked briefly as a volunteer at the Powerhouse Museum with the curators of Australian Decorative Arts and Design, which offered an expanded context for glass. There, glass was collected for reasons of scientific, technological and social history. Following that, I worked at the Glass Artists' Gallery (GAG), Sydney, a commercial gallery that exclusively exhibited contemporary glass from Australia and New Zealand. It is still the only commercial gallery on a national basis with sole coverage of contemporary glass. While there, I had regular contact with glass artists, arts professionals, collectors and the public and first encountered the complex interface between the maker and the public. It also gave me an understanding of the real dynamics of the glass community, and lead to involvement with Ausglass, the volunteer, artist-run national association of glass artists.

In 1994, I was able to use and consolidate my knowledge of glass by cataloguing the National Glass Collection at Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery, and became well acquainted with that collection, the Gallery and their histories.

In 1994-97 I developed an exhibition for the Gippsland Regional Art Gallery, in Morwell, Victoria, looking at the evolution of a group of glass artists who had worked in that region. It allowed me to research the background, aesthetic and attitudes of ten pioneer glass artists in close detail. As the work of these artists is held in various collections around the country, I was introduced to further collections of glass, including:

<i>Victoria</i>	Gippsland Regional Art Gallery Meat Market Craft Centre National Gallery of Victoria
<i>New South Wales</i>	Powerhouse Museum Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery
<i>Australian Capital Territory</i>	National Gallery of Australia
<i>South Australia</i>	Art Gallery of South Australia
<i>Queensland</i>	Queensland Art Gallery

For one year in 1996, I was appointed Craft Curator for a partnership of five organisations<sup>1</sup>, funded through the Australia Council's Contemporary Craft Curator Program. I followed Daniel Brine, and completed a specific program of innovative craft curatorship and writing.

Since late 1996, I have been with the Crafts Council of Queensland (CCQ) as Exhibitions and Public Programs Officer. I soon recognised that contemporary glass practice was underdeveloped in Queensland compared with other States. To address this, the State Government's Arts Office funded an Industry Analysis Report to develop a strategy to advance contemporary glass. Through involvement with that project, and have come to understand more closely the infrastructure and the mechanisms needed to develop glass practice and its appreciation.

In 1997 I was one of three judges of the Resource Finance Corporation (RFC) Glass Prize, having keenly watched the progress of the Prize since its inception in 1995. This provided further insight into the interpretation and appreciation of Australian glass, and demonstrated a commitment from the corporate sector to provide new challenges and audiences for the medium.

For my research paper, I draw on all the experiences above, as one conglomerated internship to explore the curatorial contexts for Australian glass.

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<sup>1</sup> The five organisations were the Centre for Contemporary Craft, Wollongong City Gallery, University of Wollongong, Regional Galleries Association of New South Wales and subsequently, College of Fine Arts University of New South Wales

## 4.0 Comparisons

The four institutions investigated offer four quite different contexts for collecting and curating glass.

The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), The Powerhouse Museum (MAAS) and the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) are all institutions over 100 years old with a certain amount of curatorial inertia: theirs would be a context of long term value and compatibility with large existing collections. All three institutions are State funded and maintain prominent profiles in and out of Australia. None of them specify 'glass' as a collectible item on its own, but infer its presence within the wider concerns of art. Being older also implies a greater size, and a history of amalgamations and separations with other cultural bodies and their collections. Table 1 in Appendix 1 confirms provides these details.

The older, and larger organisations would also have greater overall resources to operate with to be able to generate touring exhibitions with relative ease compared with Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery (WWCAG). Despite its size and relatively small resources however, WWCAG has however mounted several significant exhibitions, that have not only toured nationally but also internationally.<sup>45</sup> Wagga has been able to respond to collecting Australian contemporary glass more than others, which claims 85% of its glass collection. AGWA has the next largest proportion of Australian contemporary glass in its glass collection with 9% and NGV and the Powerhouse confirm that their reserves of glass are vast, but in areas other than Australian contemporary.

The NGV has the strongest historical collection of the four organisations, and has generated exhibitions of historical glass from its own holdings (refer to Appendix 2). While it has the smallest collection of contemporary glass of the four, it has generated important exhibitions of contemporary work, such as the recent *Klaus Moje glass: a retrospective exhibition*. The NGV provides the largest curatorial investment in staff and size of overall glass collection.

The position at WWCAG is constrained by overall lack of staff to give satisfactory curatorial attention to the collection, other than basic maintenance and purchases. The gallery's staff restructure in 1995 merged the curator's position with gallery manager. With the largest collection of Australian contemporary glass in the country, WWCAG has an important asset to maintain, and efforts are being made to improve its profile

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<sup>45</sup> City Art Gallery Wagga Wagga 1995 *National Art Glass Collection from the Collection of City Art Gallery Wagga Wagga*

with the public and glass communities. The relocation in 1999 to new architect-designed premises (refer to Appendix 4), and staging the 1999 Ausglass conference in Wagga Wagga to coincide with the opening of the new gallery will raise the Gallery's profile. Curatorial rigour may need to be imported for specific projects as the Gallery cannot provide it in its present arrangement.

The Powerhouse Museum (MAAS) has collected works of contemporary Australian glass (150 works since 1940s), for criteria quite different to those of the art galleries studied. With emphasis on science, technology, design and processes, MAAS presents glass with a dimension that is equally part of its fascination as the conceptual content.

## **5.0 DISCUSSIONS**

### **5.1 The role of the Art Museum revisited**

With five institutions currently offering glass courses at tertiary level, the number of graduates that enter professional practice each year is approximately 50. Art museums have a role to play in this process and provide an important resource to the glass community in the following ways:

- . by developing and maintaining collections of glass
- . by developing and implementing exhibitions
- . by developing educational programs to support and interpret exhibitions
- . by providing various expertise about glass: curatorial, display, conservation

All four institutions offer the above services in different capacities.

### **5.2 How well represented is contemporary glass?**

Glass is best represented in a historical continuum by the National Gallery of Victoria, while Australian contemporary glass is best represented by Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery. The Art Gallery of Western Australia offers a strong international context for glass within a craft and design orientation and The Powerhouse offers a more expanded context for glass that makes important connections with science, technology, industry, production, and innovation with materials and design. This last context reveals the complex applications of glass.

WWCAG offers the strongest proportion of glass of the total collection, with early 20% of the holdings. So far, glass in Australia has always been part of the context of other collections, which brings both advantages and compromises.

One thing to consider seriously is that there may be glass practice that exists outside

the gallery/museum context, This would include architectural glass, stained glass, and glass installations.

### **5.3 Other Models/The Future**

I propose that the strongest position that glass could assume would be within a museum or gallery for glass only, where it received undivided attention. While this is not yet a reality in Australia it is an option for further exploration.

The four institutions examined in this paper are already promoting and educating people about contemporary glass, and have a foundation to build on. They are all extending their contribution to glass on their own terms. Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery is certain to experience the greatest change with the relocation to new premises.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

Contemporary Australian Glass work has such a diversity of expression that it is difficult to consider that any one existing institution could represent them all. It is important nevertheless for glass practice to have a place and voice.

Being a relatively young aesthetic, it will take time to to achieve better representation and develop a continuing critical language. While the older and larger establishments have other collections to consider, perhaps it is time for the Australian glass community to be extended in more challenging ways. What is apparent for the contemporary glass community now, is that it is growing and its expectations of opportunities and representation are too. Overseas opportunities and challenges may be greater than local ones, which presents the question of what challenges Australia can offer glass artists to keep them developing their practices here. In the same way that the Craft Board of Australia Council was concerned about the lack of glass practice in the early 1970s, we could be concerned about the lack of local opportunities for glass artists. Exhibitions are certainly a mechanism by which this can happen, and it is up to curators to devise the formats and the platforms that will ensure continuing exploration.