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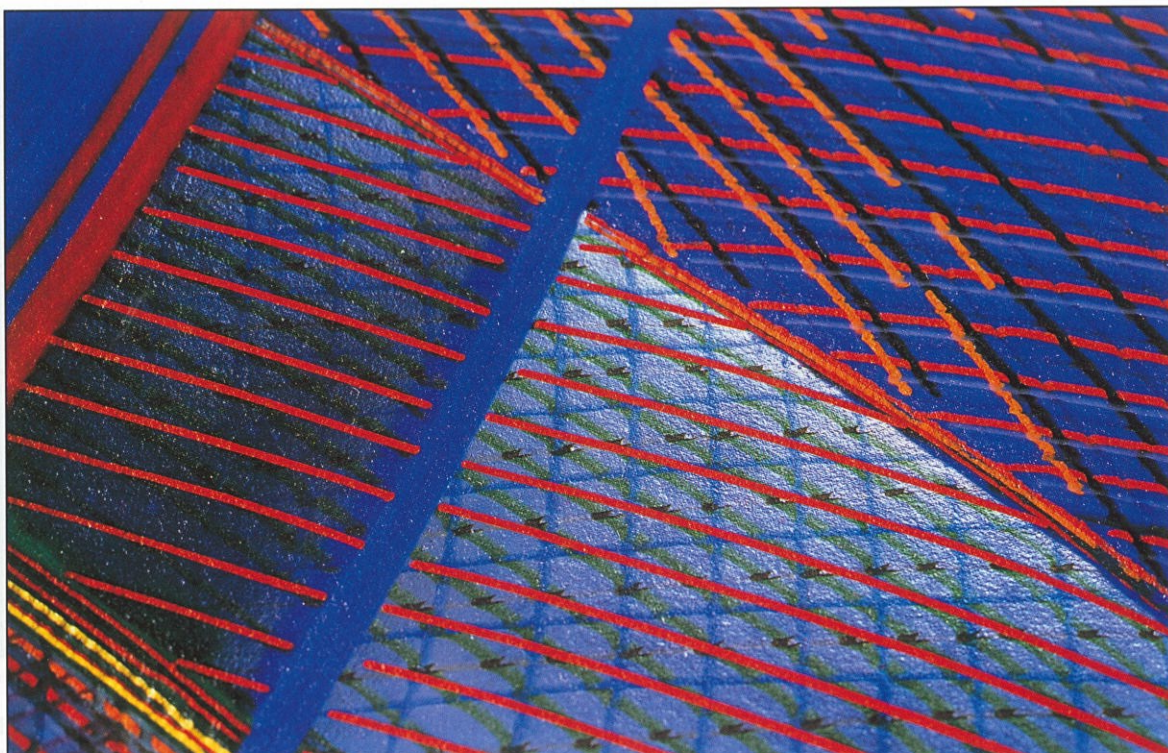


01

ART GLASS BY GERRY KING  
PAINTINGS FROM UTOPIA BY EMILY KNGWARREYE  
EMPIRE OF ADORNMENT BY SHA SHA HIGBY  
THE INTIMATE ART OF MARY HUSTED

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Gerry King, 'Beginnings No. 2' (detail), 1996, kiln and cold-formed glass

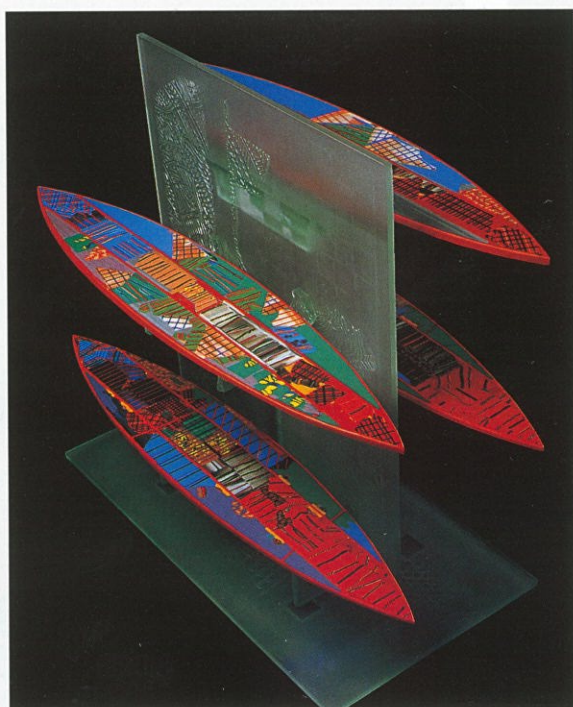
## PATTERNS OF EXISTENCE

A lifetime of knowledge and experience in making glass art lie behind the exuberant new works by Gerry King, who pays tribute to the efforts of artisans throughout history.

Text by Jenny Zimmer. Photography by Grant Hancock.

ONE of the advantages of living in a "new" culture is that individuals enjoy the opportunity to be first to do this, or that, under a different set of circumstances than has ever pertained elsewhere. With a little over 200 years of European settlement, some Australians can reflect on nearly half the history of this current culture and many more are conversant with at least a quarter.

It induces a curious feeling to think this way, and to compare our circumstances with those of old-world cultures of deep antiquity and continuous development. Obviously, those whose creative lives have encompassed the past eighth of Australia's history have faced – if not the great individual challenges of pioneering – the most diverse, rapid and complicated set of cultural changes imaginable.



'Trepein No. 1', 1995, kiln and cold-formed glass, 35 x 80 cm



'Trepein No. 1', section detail of patterned glass





*'Fragment Vase No. 1',  
1998, kiln and cold-  
formed glass, ht 80 cm*

*'Fragment Vase No. 2',  
1998, kiln and cold-  
formed glass, ht 90 cm*



*'Beginnings No. 2' (detail), 1996, kiln and cold-formed glass*

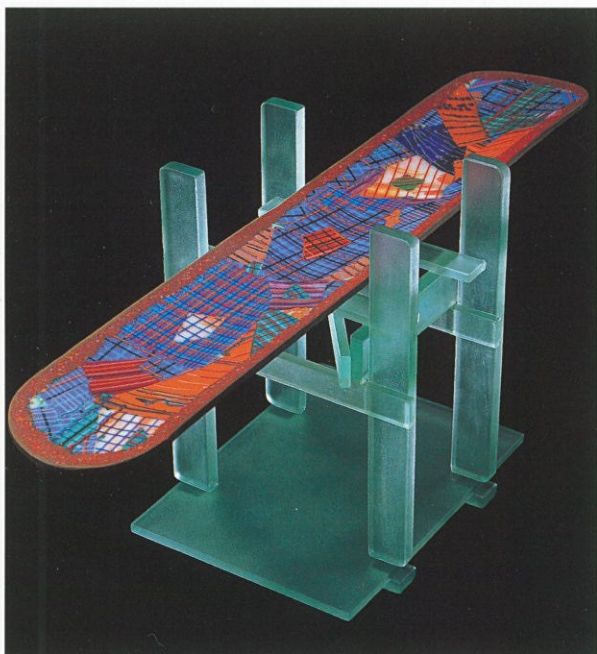
*Below: 'Beginnings  
No. 2' (detail), 1996,  
kiln and cold-formed  
glass*

Within this context numerous perplexing dualities have been encountered, such as the resurgence of hand-crafts concurrently with the most rampant technological advancement in human history. Perhaps pre-eminent among Australia's particular dualities has been the post-war re-opening of the culture to the rest of the world via migration, travel, trade and the electronic media in relation to the slower and less eager recognition of the country's own traditional indigenous cultures.

Gerry King is an artist whose career encompasses both of these important dualities. While his specialisation in glass has provided opportunities to be among the "first" in re-introducing an almost lost art form, it has also addressed concepts arising from Australia's relatively recent consciousness of complex cultural issues that cannot be ignored. It was very soon after learning basic hot and cold glass skills in the US and Canada in the early to mid-1970s that King abandoned their application to functional glasswares. By the early 1980s he was creating virtuosic non-functional glass sculptures suggestive of human torsos. With these he embarked upon what John Neylon has described as a "...search for a body of work and significant motifs capable of giving expression to his concerns related to social and culture-related issues".

Thereafter, whilst continually developing his studio skills and, through extensive travel, knowledge of world cultures, King devoted himself to the production of ideas-based works. As an academic, he was

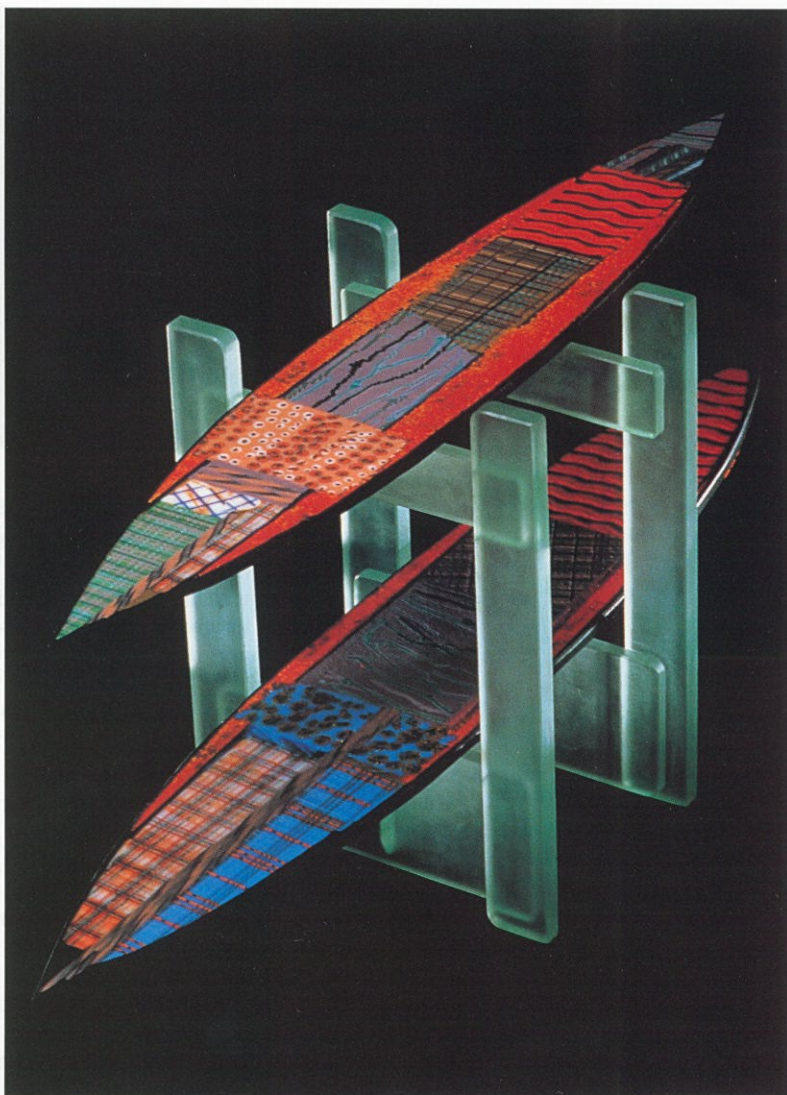




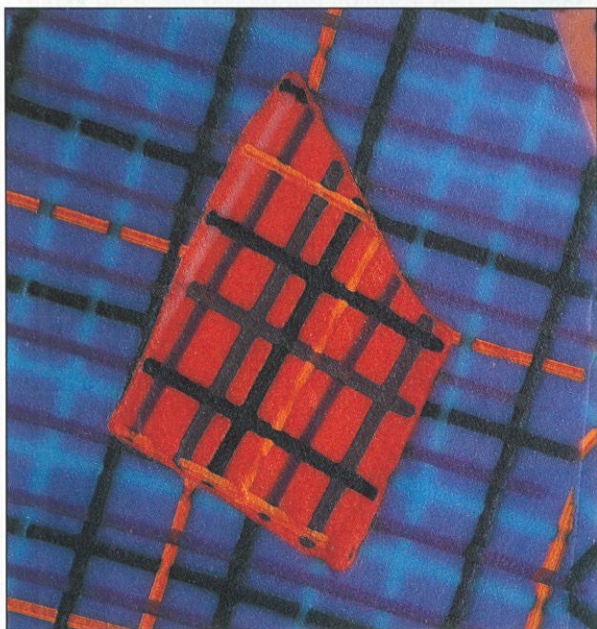
*'Cicatrix Shield No. 32', 1996. Private collection, Denmark*

often in a better position than others who blew glass for a living to provide "exhibition pieces" when called upon to do so by curators intent on raising the status of the craft to that of conceptual art. Where at first he had subverted the traditional vessel-form by making open-ended human torsos, he now began subverting the viewers' expectations of the medium by limiting its natural transparency and free-flowing forms. His new works were "glass houses" with an acute socio-political edge.

The 1980s was largely devoted to a series of domestic interiors – a little like dolls' houses with fine detailing and furnishings – used like theatrical sets to project socio-political commentary, sometimes left deliber-



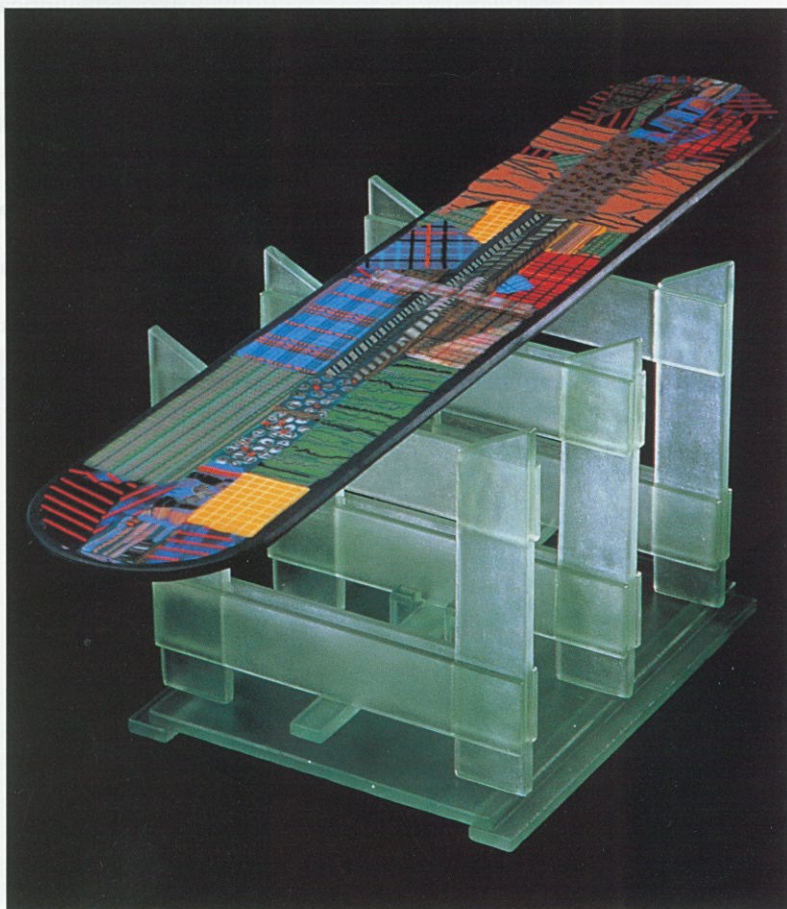
*'Trepein No. 2', 1996, kiln and cold-formed glass, 35 x 80 cm*



*'Cicatrix Shield No. 32', 1996, section detail of patterned glass*

ately obscure. Travel and an interest in world affairs guaranteed that the concepts were not restricted to local concerns and usually their significance went far beyond the prevailing craft-world interests at that time. The *Views with a Room* series tackled global themes – like women's issues, corporatisation and the onset of

*'Trepein No. 3', 1966, kiln and cold-formed glass, 35 x 80 cm. Collection: Museum Aurcon, Madrid, Spain*







'Quilt Plate No. 2',  
1998, kiln and  
cold-formed glass,  
38 cm sq

the AIDS epidemic – and then began to focus increasingly on affairs closer to home. He created a series of wall-pieces commenting on the arrival of Asian “boat people”, interpreting them as victims of colonisation, who themselves now sought to colonise. Presented as “doubles” they offered stark options such as “sink or swim” or “you or me”. Between these brusque alternatives lie the many opportunities people can find for new solutions.

Reflection on such matters led naturally to consideration of the wounds inflicted on Aboriginal culture by European settlement. In the *Cicatrix Series*, that dominated King's production from the early 1990s, the artist's concepts collided in timely fashion with post-modern thinking on cultural colonisation generally, and Aboriginal affairs in particular. He is one of the few glass artists willing to engage directly within social and cultural inequities. Departing from the architectural illusionism of the earlier works, which by 1991 had evolved into cast clear-glass sculptures with enigmatic titles like *Facing the Wall* or *Climbing the Ladder*, he suddenly switched to the boldly coloured and beautifully patterned elliptical shields or coolamon-shaped bowls which were to be his signature pieces through the earlier 1990s. Presented horizontally, on finely crafted clear-glass plinths, they persisted until at least 1996 when they evolved into the “monuments” of the *Trepein Series*.

Scar-shaped, like ceremonial cicatrix wounds, and often coloured predominantly black, red and yellow, the references to indigenous culture are unavoidable. But the extent of his thinking on post-colonial issues is not immediately evident in the *Cicatrix Shields*. For a more detailed explanation of the ideas behind these exquisite glass objects, formed by a variety of traditional glass-art techniques, it is necessary to refer directly to King's comments a *propos*

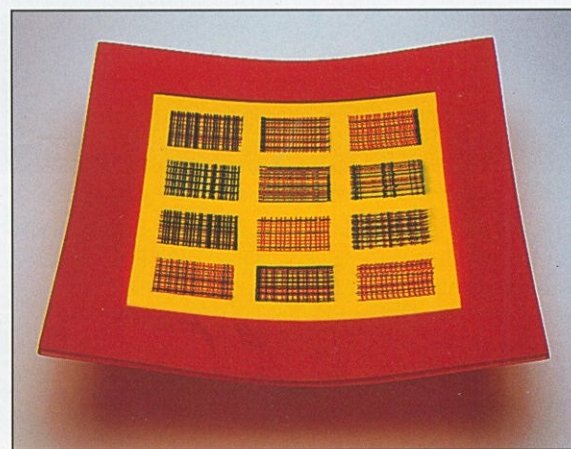
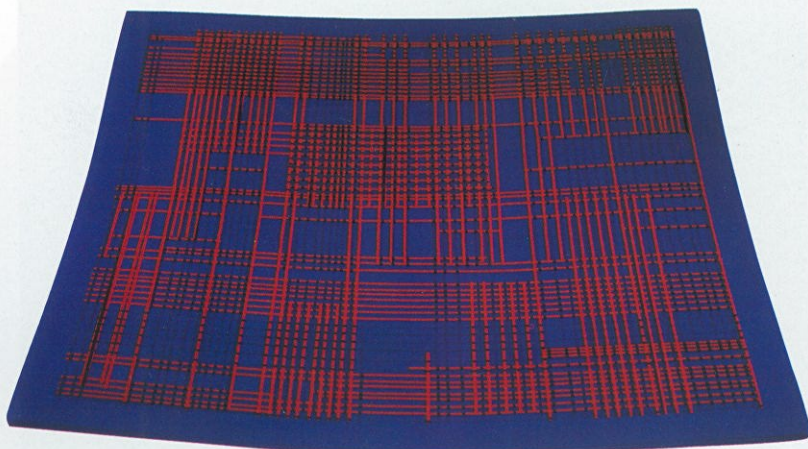
cultural colonisation. He says, ‘We take the artefacts, but not the people.’ In the *Shields* he acknowledged the two-way process wherein the coloniser often adopts aspects of the colonised culture by referring to “dot and circle” Central Desert paintings in the patterns he applied. However, the sculptural plinths on which the oblong forms rest refer to Western sculpture and its museumisation.

Of the *Cicatrix Series*, and most particularly those that fall into the group known as *The Cicatrix Shadow*, King has written: ‘This series seeks to present the contradictions and ambiguity of cultural colonisation and depicts fragments of the prevailing influence held at different times by the two cultures once separate but now forever bound as each in turn lays a facade over the dominance of the other.’ He admits the dangers and pitfalls inherent in drawing source materials from cultures to which he does not belong and carefully avoids the direct appropriation or theft of Aboriginal motifs or techniques. The “no-man's land” of his semi-deceptive patterns leaves the viewer in an interesting quandary and obliged to think upon the central issues before arriving at interpretations.

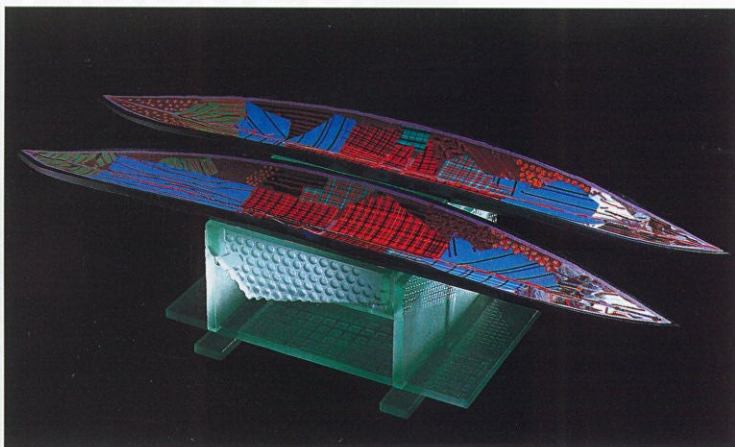
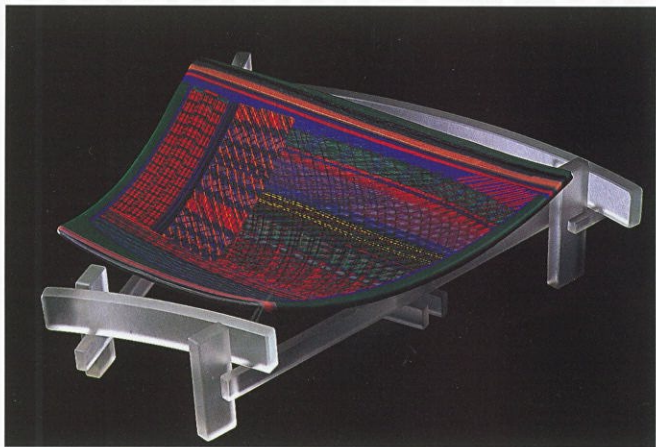
The superbly crafted *Cicatrix Shield No. 30*, with its dot, stripe and tartan-weave shield shapes mounted side-by-side on a plate-glass sub-structure, was seen in the exhibition “Gerry King and Graduates” which toured six galleries between Brisbane and Adelaide in 1996–97. The exhibition reminded the viewer that, alongside his pioneering approach to “conceptual” glass, King had maintained an important teaching career. With colleagues he introduced students at the University of South Australia's Underdale Campus to glass studies and regularly opened his own studio to others eager to learn. He also worked tirelessly, through Ausglass, to promote the recognition of Australian glass art internationally. Given the energy and drive of the earlier phases of his career, it seems natural that after retiring in June 1996, aged 50, from his academic position as Head of the School of Design at the University of South Australia, King should take some time for reflection and perhaps “change tack”. Though it is uncertain where the new direction might eventually take him the immediate changes he has implemented are quite dramatic. They involve a return, after 20 years to the vessel and to the aesthetics of form and function. The socio-political references appear to have disappeared, or more probably, gone underground, in favour of a renewed focus on images and skills. These are developed in a series of square platters, vases and bowls entitled *Beginnings*. The *Floor* and *Quilt* plates, with their virtuosic patterning, allude more to the warp and weft of daily domestic life.

Below left: 'Threads  
No. 1', 1997, kiln  
and cold-formed glass,  
36 cm sq

Below right: 'Summer  
Love', 1998, kiln  
and cold-formed glass,  
38 cm sq







Thus the mature and long-practised craftsman now applies skills, formerly used to underscore the expression of complex and deliberately enigmatic ideas, to the production of beautiful objects of pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction. Using a combination of flame, kiln and cold-glass working techniques he has developed since his introduction to glass in 1975, he now allows himself the obvious enjoyment of reflecting on the sensual impressions and visual delights of a lifetime of aesthetic enquiry. Just as some of the earliest abstracted glass pieces were reminiscent of a chance glimpse of a kimono hanging on a Tokyo washing-pole, so he sees the square plates as suggestive of magnificent mosaic floors found in European churches. But scratch a latter-day aestheticist like King, and we soon discover the socially aware artist lurking underneath. He observes that fine cathedral floors, made with skill and care by countless generations of artesans, rarely attract the attention lavished on "master-works". He also speculates on many other forms of labour whose results are unthinkingly received '... without wonder or acknowledgement'. Among these are various lost abilities, like the stacking of stones for fences, or the skilled mechanic's judgement of tensions – tasks now superseded by technology. Reflecting on his own background and family history, King says, 'I am unable to make glass-works in a less than "tradesman-like" manner.' He seems, at the moment, to be giving himself a reward: the unaccustomed luxury of time to reflect, and to exploit skills, learned over a lifetime, for their own value. He says, 'These new works are an adventure in enjoying opulent patterning and vibrant colours. They are perhaps a self-indulgence, a feast of regal colour and intricate patterns such as are used to indicate the nobility of an object or the social class of the user. The patterns are inspired by an almost inexhaustible range of examples of human efforts to bring significance to an artefact by the addition of not one but many patterns. I regard the efforts humanity has put into patterning similarly to the effort of work in general. The works are a celebration of pattern and the efforts of those artisans who have gone before.'

*The Beginnings Series* and the works represented in King's new exhibition, "Changing Tack", are inspired by life's complexity as it is revealed when a skilled and thinking person takes time to respect, observe and celebrate the minutiae as it is revealed in the perpetual flux of existence and how it is punctuated by instances of human creativity.

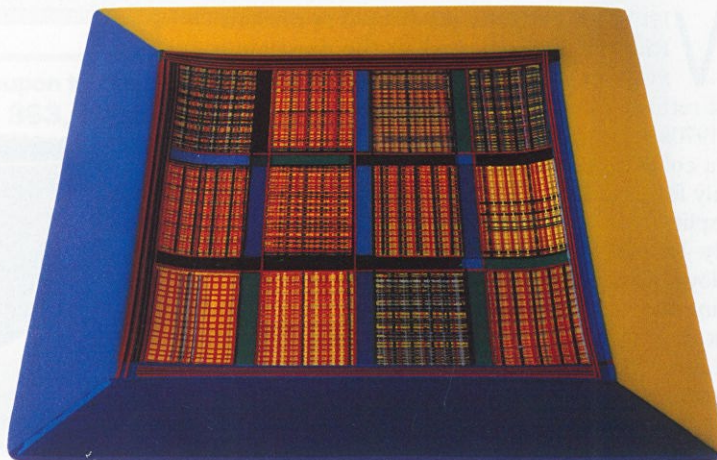
**Jenny Zimmer**

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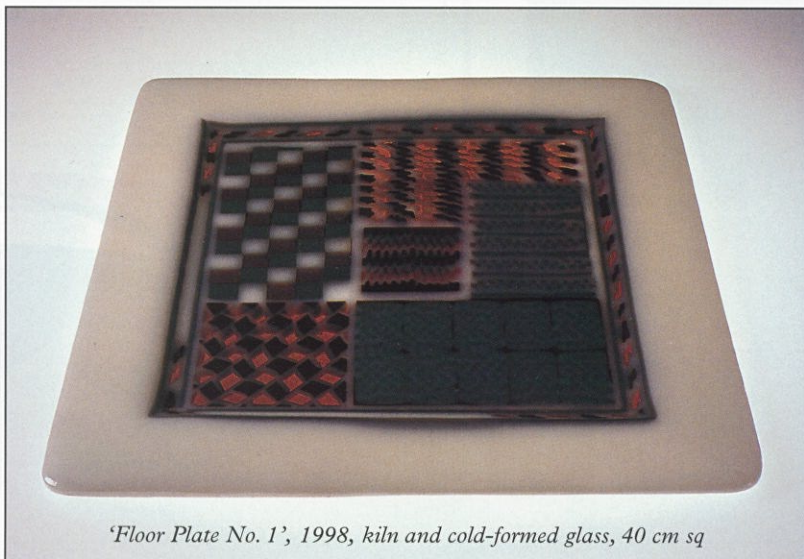
*'Beginnings No. 3', 1997, kiln and cold-formed glass, 35 x 80 cm*

*Top right: 'Cicatrix Shield No. 30', 1995, kiln and cold-formed glass, 20 x 75 x 30 cm*

*Right: 'Floor Plate No. 2', 1998, kiln and cold-formed glass, 40 cm sq*



*'Quilt Plate No. 1', 1998, kiln and cold-formed glass, 38 cm sq*



*'Floor Plate No. 1', 1998, kiln and cold-formed glass, 40 cm sq*