



'Toledo Blade 1/05', 2005, kiln formed glass, metal base, 53 x 79 x 20 cm

## GERRY KING – INTO THE FOURTH DECADE

Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, NSW, 1 October, 2009 – 17 January, 2010

WAGGA was sweltering through an unseasonable heatwave when I visited "Into the Fourth Decade", the Gerry King retrospective at the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery. It was a timely reminder of the necessary role played by heat in the creation of the glass objects which I had come to see.

Gerry King was introduced to the medium of glass whilst studying in the US in the early 1970s and is recognised as one of the pioneers of the art glass movement in Australia. As an artist and a teacher, his influence has been widespread. King has been collected by the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery since the inception of the National Art Glass Collection. The exhibition features eight of those works and others from his own collection.

It is a tough ask to condense nearly 40 years of art practice into an exhibition comprising 33 objects. As one would expect in a show that surveys the career of a pioneer of the glass art movement in Australia, the exhibition is a display of technical virtuosity: exuberant decoration meeting disciplined form. He is clearly a master of his art: blown, kiln-formed and cold worked glass are all represented. Nevertheless, the only object in the exhibition where process appears primary is also one of the earliest. *Adrenalin Bottle*, made in 1979, is a pale lavender glass bubble from 'And all Things Nice '08/2', 2008, free-blown glass, stainless steel base, diam. 26 x 37 cm



which extends a coiled glass tube. It was created by swinging the hot glass form above the maker's head then wrapping it around a mould: the text panel warns "don't do this at home".

The other pieces dating from the same year, *Reclining Bottle 1* and *Reclining Bottle 2*, are early statements of intent. With their anthropomorphic shapes and narrow openings they are vessels that can-

not contain. Non-functionality is a recurring theme in King's work. There are garments that cannot be worn, blades that will not cut, and shields that offer no physical protection. From the start, ideas were the important aspect for King and, although there is a group of beautifully formed and richly coloured *Musketeer Bowls*, the emphasis in this retrospective, as in King's oeuvre, is on conceptual rather than functional work.

Despite its apparent diversity, the show highlights how particular themes and ideas have appeared and re-appeared in the course of King's career. *Presence and Absence* is one theme that appears in different guises. It is evident in all his garment forms, the earliest of which is *Yukata Form* from 1982. Similarly, *Semblance GS* and *Semblance No 5* reference the shapes of Japanese clothing, whereas the pieces in the *And all Things Nice* series are evocative of Western garments. All are empty, but the human body is suggested by the curve of a collar, the nip of a waist, or the swell of a hip.

King's miniature rooms, perhaps the most overtly socio-political works in the exhibition, also speak of absence – and loss. *No Entry*, *No Exit* appears at first glance like an architect's model, or a doll's house, but on closer scrutiny chips and cracks become evident. There are stairs which lead nowhere; a blank door. This work, part of King's PhD research, was surely influenced by the post-modern, post-colonial theory that prevailed at the University of Wollongong in the early 1990s. It's a bleak commentary on European incursions into the Australian landscape. He refers to the impact of colonisation on the indigenous population, but also with the use of fragments of buildings reminds us of the abandoned and crumbling homesteads of early settlers, who sought to tame this harsh and unforgiving land – and lost.

King's interest in cultural colonisation, in the way humans appropriate, reconstruct and transform fragments from other times and other place, is another recurring theme. In the *Cicatrix* series his sculptural objects reference indigenous culture, in terms of form and patterning, but transform them into something different. Similarly, there are pieces that draw from history and archaeology. Tartessos, the lost city of the Iberian peninsula, gives its names to a series of vases; sumptuous amalgamations of colour and pattern. *Toledo Blade 1/05* also has a Spanish connection. Unlike the fearsome weapons forged by the blacksmiths of that ancient city, the sharp edge of the artist's blade is an illusion. King's

blade will not cut. Nevertheless, it reminds us that the blade is both a blessing and a curse to humanity.

As someone whose own work, both practical and scholarly, is centred on textiles, I am struck by King's recurring references to Japanese textiles. There are the garments, of course, but it doesn't stop there. In *Angela's Other Scarf* a formal problem King had set for himself was finally resolved by studying the woven structure of Japanese cloth. The patterns on *Fragment Bowl No 3* are reminiscent of *boro*, the Japanese coats that are made by piecing and patching worn textiles to create something new. The patterns on *Cicatrix Shadow*, part of the series about cultural colonisation, also have a Japanese flavour. I'm interested too, in the way in which the relationship between technique and idea in King's work has shifted over time. When you work with glass you have to master the techniques and you have to understand the material, for this is the language in which you speak. Although ideas have been important to King from the outset, in the early pieces you can see him coming to terms with the vagaries his chosen medium. Then the pendulum swings. In the architectural



'Virtual Vessel 1/05', 2005, kiln-cast glass, steel base, 87 x 22 x 20 cm



assemblages there is great technical skill, but it is subsumed by the idea. In the later work, however, technical virtuosity and a delight in the material melds with King's desire to imbue meaning, reaching a point of balance which I find very satisfying. *Pharaoh's Treasure* is perhaps my favourite piece. In King's words, the show contains 'cornerstones of the journey' and works which are 'hot off the press'. It is a retrospective exhibition, but



'Pharaoh's Treasure - Virtual Vessel Series '06/3', 2006, kiln formed glass, metal base, 61 x 21 x 15 cm

not one which dwells on the past. It charts King's career, drawing our attention to key points along the way; it also indicates that the journey is not yet ended. As King approaches the fifth decade, the work continues.

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'And all Things Nice '08/2', 2008, free-blown glass, stainless steel base, diam. 15 x 52 cm