

ON VARIOUS LEVELS THE ART OF GERRY KING

By Dan Klein



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ON VARIOUS LEVELS

Gerry King has the knack of producing visually stunning work. His brilliant colours and dazzling patterns create optical effects reminiscent of the kinetic compositions of the best Op. Art painters like Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely. The jazzy colours and rhythmic vibrancy of his work sets our sensory perceptions on edge. His patterns do not stay still. They dance around the eye. Their bold colours stir the senses into action and reaction. One cannot just walk past a piece by King. His work has a theatrical presence that makes one stop and stare. The intensity of his colours is electric, the movement in his patterns dynamic.

But behind the arresting 'showbiz' surface mood there is consummate craftsmanship, technical sophistication and heart felt thought. King is as much academic as artist and craftsman but manages a harmonious balancing act between these sides of his nature so that none of them dominates. What emerges from his fertile mind and agile hand is an all round composition. He is a thinking man with a conscience about socio-political and cultural issues although he never falls into the trap of using his art as a soap-box. He manages to distil his complex thoughts into artistic expression, part abstract part figurative, that reveals a message only to those who wish to take the trouble to delve behind the scenes. For those interested to do so there is a fascinating hidden agenda. He is quintessentially and proudly a fifth generation Australian of English ancestry and sees Australia as having a changing role on the world stage: "Australia now senses a maturing nationhood. The issues of becoming a republic and removing the Union Jack from the national flag are argued resolutely from both stances. Many seek to position Australia, socially, politically, diplomatically and economically in Asia rather than maintain the image and self concept of being a part of Europe removed only by distance. [Australian] Studio glass similarly is maturing to see itself as other than a colony of the Northern Hemisphere."

As a glass maker King has made it his business to understand and perfect a wide range of skills that enable him to work with equal ease in hot glass, kiln-formed glass, and using diverse cold working techniques. He is an honest and committed craftsman and a perfectionist who has spent a lifetime honing

his glass making skills. To master all the different techniques he uses in his work requires many years of diligent training and practise. Glass making is an athletic as well as an aesthetic art form where practice and yet more practice make perfect. The necessary skills can only be taught up to a certain point after which it takes years of practice, patience, experiment and observation to control the medium as King does. He began working with glass in the 1970s when he was swept along by the enthusiasm of new attitudes to hot glass, first learning about glass skills in the United States and Canada before returning home to Australia in 1974 to build a furnace studio. In the United States he had taken a course at Alfred University best known for its ceramic studies and, like other contemporaries, his passage to glass was via ceramics. In the beginning, in line with the 'make it yourself' and 'make it new' ethic of many glassmakers of his generation, he worked without assistance 'in an era when, as a studio glassblower, I came from a methodology of working alone'.

Pieces from the recent *Semblance Series*, which form a part of this solo exhibition, refer back to that time in his career. The *Semblance* series does not mark his first use of a form suggesting the human torso. Back in the 1980s he had produced a series of non-functional sculptural twin necked bottles, which he developed into the *Yukata* (kimono) series. The idea of using the kimono as a symbol came to him partly during a trip to Japan and catching sight of a kimono on a washing pole, partly as a result of a kind of mental pelmanism whereby he associated that image with a bottle form he had made in his studio. The association of imagery set off a train of sculptural thought for him to develop. Twenty years later he has returned to the bottle form. 'There are visual memories which stay with me for decades' he says. But now he prefers to work with a three-person team of glassblowers. This has allowed him to create larger scale work than he was able to make alone 'when the length of the work was governed by the reach of the arm'. He enjoys the collaborative process of working within a team, which has the added

advantage of his being 'able to view the work from different directions while it is still hot'. He also talks of 'a developing aspect of collaboration as the team contributes opinions about the optimum way of producing the form and variations that might be employed in subsequent works'.

The group of work in this solo show is taken from three different series, *Semblance*, *Atlantis Find* and *Tartessos*. Both the *Atlantis* and *Tartessos* series relate to the mystery of lost worlds. Could *Tartessos*, a lost island thought to be somewhere off the Spanish coast, in fact be the vanished kingdom of *Atlantis* to which Plato makes reference, or are archaeologists after another lost leader? All pieces in the *Tartessos* and *Atlantis Find* series are presented on steel or aluminium bases reminiscent of antique fragments mounted for museum display. The references to antiquity and museology are deliberate, reflecting King's feeling that artefacts dug up from a past era can only theorise about earlier civilisations. Seen in museums they can only hint at the truth, like so much that scientists, archaeologists, philosophers and theoreticians have conjectured by means of what Gerry King refers to as 'mental gymnastics'. Human thought is at best fallible and new discoveries may disprove accepted tenets as it has so often done in the past. This is a conundrum that fascinates King. 'We tell ourselves that there are certainties upon which all can be understood. But what if carbon dating was found to be fallacious! How might understanding of the past be changed if the relative age of all that which has been unearthed was realigned by a yet to be discovered system?'

It is from musing such as this that the *Tartessos* Series and in turn *Atlantis Find* Series were born. In these works King shows off his skills in cast and kiln formed glass, having come to that way of making after the initial excitement of hot glass. Of the *Atlantis Find* Series King says 'Conceived individually, each work of this series explores the notion of assembling a composition from a juxtaposition of related and disparate elements....in a lifetime in which fundamentals of science have been shown to be erroneous I have learnt the delight of suspicion of a 'certainty' that may be asserted not proven'. To the glass lover, apart from their intellectual content, these pieces

are virtuoso performances, which show off King's superb technical skills as well as his abilities as a colourist. In the process of performance he brings us a final result which delights the eye: hot colour combinations provide the kind of visual thrills that are so characteristic of his work. As a colourist his palette is really up front. Can one perhaps describe it as unashamedly Australian, reflecting the brightness of the sun drenched coastal scenery, with its exotic flowers and birds, of his South Australian home? Seriousness of content is always embedded within a riot of colour. Light shines from or through every piece. Even the opaque kiln-formed work that has been his main vehicle of artistic expression since the 1980s sheds an aura of light. Like his earlier 'Cicatrix' series, the *Tartessos* and *Atlantis Find* Series pieces are endlessly playful, with a repertoire of inventive patterns that tease the eye. He uses colour and pattern to communicate his thoughts to us just as if they were words.

In the past King combined his life as a glass artist with teaching. He has also played a central role in the short but dynamic history of Australian studio glass and was a founder member and one time president of the now firmly established society of Australian glass artists 'Ausglass' whose biennial conference attracts interest from the glass community world-wide. His principal commitment to teaching was at the University of South Australia, where he was Head of the School of Design, a position which he held from 1993 to 1996, having passed through the ranks of senior lecturer and associate professor there between 1976 and 1992. He has given up teaching and now works as a freelance artist, designer, lecturer and consultant. As well as teaching at the university in South Australia he invited students to visit his own studio and learn from what they saw him doing there. In 1995 King organised an exhibition entitled 'Gerry King and Graduates: Contemporary Australian Studio Glass' showcasing his own work and that of five of his students. In the catalogue for that exhibition his contribution was recognised as follows: "All graduate participants have studied for varying lengths of time under King.

They caught the fire and the passion for the medium largely from him and most acknowledge that his studio practice and advocacy for the medium were persuasive factors in determining their own commitment as glass artists".

Despite this public persona King seems to have lived and worked in comparative isolation in South Australia, very much his own master with deeply personal creative urges stemming from his lively interest both in home and in world affairs. Although sparsely populated the Australian continent covers a vast expanse of territory and the various states are far from one another, leading to some kind of inter state rivalry. One gets the feeling that King would strongly defend his South Australian home territory if called upon to do so. Even so Australia and the Australia Council in particular, has done a lot to encourage contemporary indigenous craft and art of all kinds throughout the land, partly in a bid to establish its own identity as a nation, and King has made the best of the opportunities provided. Australian glass is unique in that there has been a freer exchange of ideas than perhaps anywhere else in the world. Glass makers based in Australia have travelled widely as well as playing host to cultures from all over the world. Added to this Australia has its own rich plant, bird and animal life and a native culture in the form of aboriginal 'dreamtime' mythology that has been a determining influence on many artists. For Gerry King aboriginal issues have centred around the problems of cultural colonisation and during the 1990s in his *Cicatrix Series* he gave expression to his concerns about appropriating aboriginal artefacts whilst ignoring the aboriginals as people.

It is usually anecdotal memory snaps or individual landmark occurrences that kick-start the idea for a series in King's mind. Talking of his work during the late 1980s one commentator said 'it made references to specific events and issues (Falklands War, AIDS) but also expressed concerns about the false promises of materialism, the dead hand of corporate power and the oppression of women'. King takes a cosy familiar object like a chair, a kimono, or a traditional vessel form and invests it with new significance. This kind of duality

combines face value innocence with a knowing comment on socio-political or cultural issues and gives the work its depth of content. On the one hand it can be viewed (superficially but happily) as pure eyecandy, on the other it draws attention to matters of considerable importance. The familiar object becomes a symbol with hidden meaning and the audience is drawn into a guessing game to which the artist is happy to provide clues either through the titles he chooses or by means of written statements explaining his motives. The spectator can choose his own interpretation, derive his own level of pleasure. Gerry King's work has the innocence of woven textile but his fabric also has hidden depths of meaning that come from a mind working on many different levels. 'In the *Atlantis Find Series* though each piece is conceived individually each work of the series explores the notion of assembling a composition of disparate elements. As such, they reflect my interest in the manner in which theories pertaining to the artefacts of earlier times are evidenced in museum collections'.

Gerry King deliberates carefully about form and chooses his forms for their symbolic power. They act as either individual or related frames for a family of ideas in his head. This has been true throughout his career. In the *Cicatrix series*, which related to aboriginal issues, the connecting link between individual pieces was the distinctive coolamon, an elliptical-shaped bowl used in aboriginal ceremonial or domestic contexts. Gerry King borrows his forms from known or familiar artefacts and personalises them through colour, pattern and context. In an earlier series from the mid 1980s called 'View with a room' ordinary household paraphernalia is arranged in what look like scale model stage sets. As usual with his work they are delightful objects in themselves but always with an implied sub text, the ingenuousness of the object itself underlining its seriousness of content. In the present body of work the amphora and sword shapes, as well as the torsos, all presented on metal stands like artefacts in a museum, suggest a long history of theorising and posturing on lost cultures. The intent is both serious and mocking.

With the small audience available to Australian glass artists at home it has been important for King to be known on the international stage. He is a world traveller and as well as being represented in institutional and private collections throughout Australia, his work is already in museum collections in Europe, the United States and Japan. He has been exhibiting in the United States since 1992, but this will be his first major solo show in America. The work seen in this show is his very latest and the culmination of many years of experience as a maker. Subject matter has never been a problem for Gerry King. A fertile mind finds many related issues to consider and the artist in him uses familiar shapes and familiar objects, a carnival of colour and a diverse grammar of pattern to translate his ideas into objects with instant appeal. Part of the magic with all glass art is a sense of wonderment at the skills involved in the making of it. In talking of glass one often mentions the word alchemy, which according to its dictionary definition is 'the pseudoscientific predecessor of chemistry that sought a method of transmuting base metals into gold'. Everything about Gerry King suggests he is a born alchemist with the power of turning thought into art.

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CREDITS

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GERRY KING

Born: Adelaide, Australia

Position: Independent Artist

Education:

1993 Doctor of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong

1976 Advanced Diploma of Teaching. [Fine Art], Torrens C. A. E.

1974 Certificate Hot and Flat Glass, Georgian College, Canada

1974 Master of Science, Education, Alfred University, USA

1971 Certificate Printmaking, South Australian School of Art

1970 Certificate Ceramics, South Australian School of Art

1965 Diploma of Art Teaching, South Australian School of Art

Collections: [Selected]

National Art Glass Collection, Wagga Wagga, New South Wales

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Victoria

Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, Tasmania

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia

Banyule Collection, Victoria

Latrobe Valley Arts Centre, Victoria

The Art Trust, Australia

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Victoria

University of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia

Niiijima Contemporary Glass Art Collection, Niiijima, Japan

Notojima Glass Art Museum, Notojima, Japan

Glasmuseum, Ebeltoft, Denmark

Auckland Institute and Museum, Auckland, New Zealand

Wustum Museum of Fine Art, Racine, Wisconsin, USA

Museo Municipal De Arte En Vidrio De Alcorcon, Madrid, Spain

Marinha Grande National Museum, Marinha Grande, Portugal