



THERE'S AN OPACITY TO Brian Hirst's glass works beyond the cloudiness of the surfaces. The symbols engraved in bands of glossy platinum below the lip of each bowl are iconographic but their meaning is often unclear; the large, solemn forms have a ceremonial atmosphere, whispering of history, mythology and mysterious rituals within a religion that doesn't exist.

The Sydney-based glass artist and printmaker acknowledges his work's potential to confound and gently insists the galleries in New York, Europe and Sydney that exhibit his work are aware of the historical and cultural material that informs it. It is also loopingly self-referential, pointing to past pieces. "People can't read the pieces unless they know my work," he says.

A postmodern pastiche, his work references the history of studio glass, organic objects, the Cycladic sculptures of the Greek Bronze Age, and Japanese aesthetics. The symbols, he says, have evolved in the 30 years since he left art school in Gippsland and moved to Sydney. "At that stage, I would have been living in a share house in Glebe with an historical archaeologist. But I was always interested in encyclopedias and culture and anthropology."

Hirst uses a combination of casting and blowing techniques before heavily working over the surfaces using metal-based paints and engraving tools. He moves freely between printmaking and glass crafting, often combining elements of each medium in hybrid works, creating a dialogue between the two. "I am known for working in 2½-D," he says of his tendency to experiment with object and image. In past work, he has paired a glass vessel with a 'portrait' of the object rendered in paper or engraved stainless steel; he also engraves sheet glass. The nod to printmaking is most obvious in the smoky residue that clouds the glass surfaces, mimicking the ink residue of a printmaking plate. "The work doesn't quite fit into the craft area; it doesn't fit into fine art, particularly. It fits in this funny area of design and contemporary decorative art," he says.

Another place it fits is in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Via an Australian donor, the museum in the west wing of the Louvre has acquired a 'Vermillion Votive Bowl' almost 20 years after the museum's curator first expressed interest in Hirst's work. The timing was fortuitous, says Hirst, as he was just putting final touches on the work when the phone call came. It's now all a matter of history. MADELEINE HINCHY
For more information, visit brianhirst.com.

In addition to his artistic work, Brian Hirst, **top right**, designs and makes decanters, **top left**, for Sydney restaurants including Balla, Vini and 121BC. In the three decades since he left art school, Hirst has established his own distinctive imagery. The recurring symbols – faces, triangles, dotted patterns – appear in both his printmaking and glass work, and the pieces that exist somewhere between both traditions. One of an ongoing series, the 'Vermillion Votive Bowl', **left**, glass with fired and engraved platinum paint, was donated to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris by an Australian collector.

A TOUCH OF GLASS

A mysterious mix of historical and cultural references converge in the beguiling works of Sydney-based glass artist and printmaker Brian Hirst.

