



'Offering Bowl 3', 2002, engraved glass, platinum, 29 x 40 x 40 cm



'Platinum Offering Bowl', 2008, engraved glass, 15 x 25 x 25 cm

## THE ART OF BRIAN HIRST

### Conversations between glass and metal

The relationship between glass and metal, forms and their shadows, transmitted and reflected light, are fundamental to the work of Australian glass artist Brian Hirst. Profile by Sarah Evans. Photography by M. Myers & G. Piper.

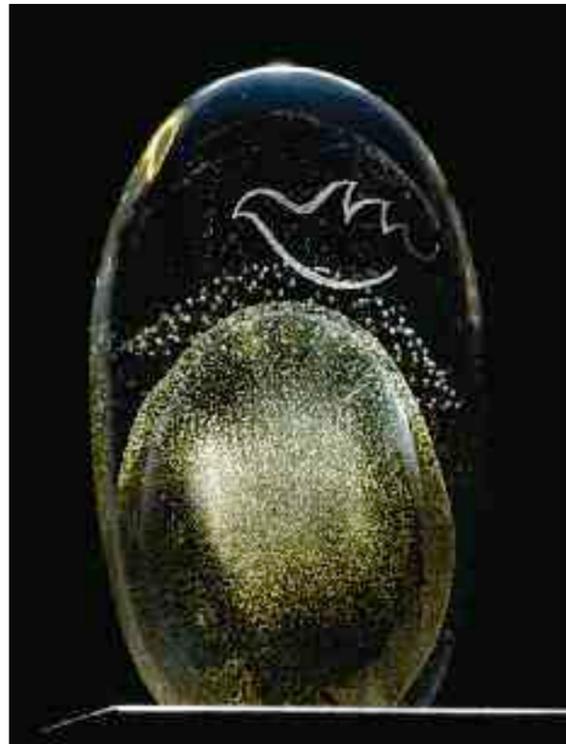
**I**N the pairing of glass vessels and engraved panels Brian Hirst creates a visual dialogue which poses questions about "art making", its meaning and our role as the viewer. Does the engraved steel platform merely provide a "stage" for the vessel? Or is the engraved portrait of the vessel the real work of "art"?

Why did I think it was so fitting to see Hirst's work exhibited alongside that of internationally recognised artist William Kentridge at Annandale Galleries in 2007? In his art practice Hirst has eschewed many of the traditions of decorative and functional glass. His blown and cast

glass vessels and engraved panels are more closely aligned to drawing and sculpture. This is reflected in the scale, strength and complexity of the vessel forms. As Nola Anderson wrote in 1987, when Hirst was just 30 years old, his work falls in the space described by Rauschenberg as 'the gap between art and life'. For Hirst, this means creating a contemporary language of his own that references, but does not imitate, the past and reflects his individual values and interests. For him, these interests are broadly cultural and encompass objects that mark rites of passage and those used in the rituals of daily life.



'Platinum Guardian', 2002, blown/cast glass, engraved, platinum, 39 x 26 x 16 cm



'Sydney Peace Prize', designed and made 2004 onwards, blown glass with gold foil



'Platinum Offering Bowl', 2009, blown/cast glass, engraved, platinum, 26 x 41 x 43 cm



'Shadow Guardian', 2007, engraved glass and stainless steel, 56 x 70 x 35 cm



'Votive Bowl & Shadow', 2002, engraved glass and platinum, 30 x 38 x 36 cm



'Offering Bowl 2', 2005, blown/cast glass, engraved, platinum, 20 x 40 x 40 cm

There is also a theatrical element to Hirst's work, with the engraved panels providing a "stage" for the vessels and a place for dialogue between the vessel, its portrait, and its shadows. The metal base or "stage" emphasises the three-dimensionality and textural qualities of the vessel. At the same time, it reminds us that the vessel is an object that has been made: "drawn" and made in glass and precious metal.

In the catalogue for "Transformations: the language of craft", Robert Bell commented on this element in Hirst's work: 'As a collector of historic and early contemporary glass, Hirst has an interest in the disposition and reception of the displayed object – theatrical conversations that inform the arrangement of real and reflected elements in his work.'

Hirst embarked on his artistic journey in 1977 at the Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education (now a campus of Monash University) where he studied drawing, photography, printmaking and sculpture. It was at this time that the studio glass movement in Australia was being established. Hirst worked informally with Nick Mount in his first studio, which was set up in a disused shed at Yinnar South. For the first time, opportunities were also available to work with overseas glass artists, such as Eva Almeberg from Sweden, who was artist-in-residence for the State of Victoria in 1978. Almeberg introduced Hirst to the aesthetics of Scandinavian glass, providing him with a different approach to his work.

It is understandable that Hirst may never have become a glass artist after he successfully wiped out most of the china and glass section of a store with an eight-foot ladder in his first after-school job. 'Entire shelves of glassware and dinner sets came crashing to the floor' as he clipped the top display shelf with the ladder, resulting in 'an almighty roar that could be heard out on the street'. He obviously recovered to become an accomplished practitioner and in 2008 was awarded Master of Crafts title by Craft Australia and Object: Australian Centre for Craft and Design.

Hirst has always been interested in developing his skills and contributing to the growth of glass art in Australia. While still a student he built the glass facilities at the college and, when he moved to Sydney in 1980, established the Glebe Glass Studio and taught glassblowing and bronze casting at the Sydney College of the Arts. In 1987–88, he was co-head of the Glass Workshop at Canberra School of Art with fellow artist Klaus Moje. He has taught and lectured in Australia and overseas.

For over 30 years, Hirst has continued to develop two major series of work. The first is the *Guardians* vessel series which are flat vessel forms based on Cycladic stone sculptures from 3000–2000 BC. The second, begun in the 1980s, are the *Offering Bowls* and three-legged *Votive Bowls*. Hirst has developed his own style of working with glass that is a combination of cast and blown glass. For the *Guardian* vessels, for example, the glass is blown and cast into specially engineered steel forms and the *Votive* bowls developed from using bronze casting sand. This allows him to create the characteristic fluidity in the rims and bodies of his vessels which could not be achieved with casting alone.

In the 1980s he also developed autonomous panels and prints from engraved sheet glass. His prints on paper were aided by working with Canberra printmaker, Jörg Schmeisser at Canberra School of the Arts in 1986 when he was artist-in-residence. Hirst went on to develop large engraved autonomous glass panels from the works on paper that were exhibited at Blaxland Gallery, Sydney in the 1990s.

A turning point came in 1991 when Hirst took part in



'Offering Bowl', 2002, engraved glass, platinum, 40 x 36 x 36 cm

the Novy Bor Symposium in the Czech Republic as a visiting artist. It was here that he first experimented with carving and engraving a "portrait" of the blown vessel on sheet glass and pairing it with a blown vessel. This experiment, in which both object and image were made of glass, proved hugely successful. In 1994, *Votive Bowl 1/94*, a work from his *Object and Image* series, won the prestigious Grand Prize at the "World Glass Now '94" exhibition at the Hokkaido Museum of Modern



'Shadow Offering Bowl', 2007, engraved glass and stainless steel, 38 x 59 x 51 cm

Art in Japan. This was the first time an international glass prize had been won by an Australian.

The ideas employed by Hirst to make the vessels have changed, becoming more confident and assured. Most recently, he has chosen to use stainless steel as the material for his vessel images and is engraving both the surface of the vessels and the stainless steel shadow. His colour palette is also moving closer to that of metal, with the surfaces of the vessels coated with a platinum and



'Scarlet Votive Bowl', 2009, bowl/cast glass, engraved, enamel and platinum, 32 x 42 x 42 cm



'Shadow Offering Bowl', 2007, engraved glass and stainless steel, 50 x 59 x 51 cm

black enamel instead of the printing ink. In the current work I can see a strong visual link with Hirst's underlying interest in drawing and printmaking and the use of glass as a medium to express ideas.

Ivana Jirasek, former Glass Project curator at Wagga Wagga Regional Art Gallery and now Coordinator of Artsupport Australia, remarked in 2002: 'Over time, the forms, motifs and processes of Hirst's work have become more distilled and sophisticated. The recent addition of platinum lustre to his use of gold and silver is as much a metaphor for Hirst's refinement of perception as it is of materials and aesthetic. The shifts are subtle but the meanings have become more resolute. His work has the confidence of an established maker who has evolved an aesthetic that is distinctly his.'

The uniqueness of Hirst's work was underscored when the director of Annandale Galleries, Bill Gregory, chose to exhibit his work alongside that of William Kentridge in 2007. Viewed together you could see both are interested in the "fiction" of art, how art is created and "read".



'Shadow Votive Bowl', 2004, blown/cast glass, engraved, stainless steel, enamels, 49 x 69 x 65 cm. National Gallery of Australia

Like Hirst, Kentridge's art practice crosses art forms, both working in print, drawing and sculpture. Both also emphasise the drawn form and their work shares a rich tradition of mark making.

Hirst's work is included in numerous private and public collections, including the Corning Museum in the US and the National Gallery of Australia. He has had over 20 solo shows in Australia, Japan, the US and Germany, the most recent at Galerie B in Baden-Baden.

He is currently preparing work for an exhibition to be held at Australian Galleries, Melbourne in March, 2010. This exhibition marks an important milestone in Australian glass, as one of Australia's top fine art galleries shows the work of 10 leading glass artists. Next year he will also hold a new exhibition in the US.

Hirst also maintains a strong commitment to his studio practice that includes a production range sold at galleries and retail outlets throughout Australia and commissions. The production work also reflects his interest in the history of vessels, particularly how they are used and their value as objects we encounter in our daily lives. This attitude is influenced by his familiarity with glass and other homewares from Scandinavia and Japan, and the aesthetics and philosophies that underpin them. His commission work includes the high profile Sydney Peace Prize awarded to Hans Blix (2007) and Patrick Dodson (2008).

Over the past 30 plus years Brian Hirst has maintained a constant commitment to his broad art practice and developed as a maker with his own unique style. The sculptures, the panels and their shadows work together to create a conversation that requires our attention.

#### Sarah Evans

Sarah Evans is studying at the College of Fine Arts in Sydney and is a freelance writer and curator.

#### REFERENCES

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Brian Hirst working hot glass in his Sydney studio