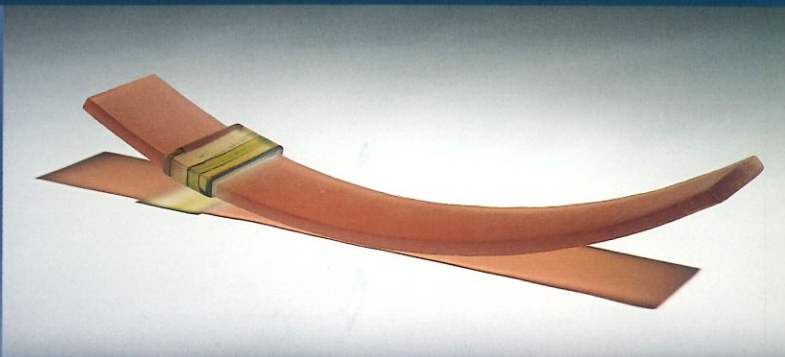
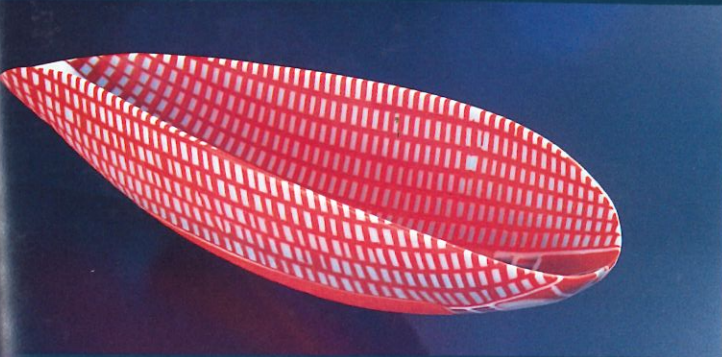


# Rare Earth



Scott Chaseling and Kirstie Rea: context and conversation



Previous page (left to right): Scott Chaseling, *Water bowl*, 2001, fused, blown glass, roll-up, 120 x 450mm. Photo: the artist.

Kirstie Rea, *Copperline*, kiln formed glass, wheel cut, 105 x 635 x 107mm. Photo: David Paterson.

Facing page: Kirstie Rea and Scott Chaseling at work at Bullseye Glass, Portland, 2000. Photo: Russell Johnson.

WITH INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL ON THE HORIZON AND ESTABLISHED TEACHING LINKS AT THE INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS, AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY—LIFE IS GOOD FOR CANBERRA-BASED GLASS ARTISTS, SCOTT CHASELING AND KIRSTIE REA. THEY RECENTLY FOUND TIME TO TAKE STOCK AND TALK ABOUT THEIR WORK TO MARK BAYLY.

SPRING IN THE NATIONAL CAPITAL IS BEGUILING AND THE FUGITIVE BEAUTY OF THE SEASON OFTEN CATCHES VISITORS BY SURPRISE. Skies are low and winds bringing light rain to the city often leave the surrounding ranges dusted with snow, producing mornings that hover around zero through chilling fog. The mists evaporate by midday as the atmosphere opens to a celebration of new growth.

Around the shores of Lake Burley Griffin, scores of exotic trees have broken into bloom—a wedding feast palette of white and pink decorates and disrupts the regulated solemnity of the Parliamentary Triangle—candied almonds and tulle appear to be on every avenue. This is all about light and the play of light on the material world. This is illumination and consciousness at once—a window onto understanding—transparent entry to the source of creative juices. Something's up and the sap are rising.

As kids, we must all have ignored adult warnings to never look at the sun—and didn't we? You looked for a moment, scorching a short vision and then closed your eyes, keeping the memory of that solar flare burning on the inside of your eyelids—a white hot spot—almost an x-ray.

Scott Chaseling and Kirstie Rea maintain this distinctive solar flare in their individual glass practices—constructing mental conduits from furnace to concept and replacing this process with actual connections between the sketched image and the kiln. In all this, the

hand follows the eye and these are two pairs of eyes that have been trained for attention to detail. While both artists articulate disparate concerns regarding the source of germination for their work, a collegiate harmony pervades their shared studio facilities.

Camouflaged from passing traffic, a well-patched corrugated iron shed has been developed into an airy and thoroughly contemporary studio complex backing onto an accumulation of weathered buildings, a reminder that the property was once a working farm. This is exactly the type of vernacular structure that appears to have influenced architect Glen Murcutt's contemporary rendering of the Australian house on stilts. Indeed, the structure has a strong sense of belonging solely to this very place—in dialogue somehow, with its tangled grass and gnarled old fruit tree out front.

The strands of thought evoked by this location—of a particular, regional geography and scattered memories of the cultural landscape—materialise in different ways and to different degrees in Chaseling and Rea's work. Kirstie Rea grew up in Canberra as the daughter of a journalist and has strong memories of experiencing landscape through aimless, pleasurable rambles over the slopes of nearby Red Hill and family day-trips to the Brindabella Ranges. Bush-walking became a series of lessons in the discovery of light and texture—the effect of afternoon sun filtered through tall grasses after rain and the varying surface qualities of eucalypts at different times of the year. These sensory experiences etched their complex patterns on the intellect of the developing artist—scorched visions of how the world appeared to her and how it has appeared to so many before her—reaching back into time.

This vision appears now in Rea's mature pieces, which she identifies as recalling geography through form and the recollection of landscape through transparency. If you like, this is a metaphor for the material world and





...scorched visions of how the world appeared to her  
and how it has appeared to so many before her...

Above: Kirstie Rea,  
*Flash*, kiln formed glass,  
wheel cut, 70 x 575 x  
115mm. Photo: the  
artist.

Facing page:  
Kirstie Rea at work at  
Bullseye Glass,  
Portland, 2000. Photo:  
Russell Johnson.

the way she experiences it. As Rea admits, "I feel more at home in the middle of a paddock than in the middle of the City...", and this sense of faint discomfort with urban life suffuses the artist's work, with its low-slung, horizontal emphasis and self-conscious quotation of machine forms. That such an unequivocal statement can be made and be totally credible is an indication of Kirstie Rea's gentle but up-front personal style.

The emergence of strong agrarian influences in her work comes as no surprise given that from 1976 she lived on an Australian Capital Territory rural leaseholding and farmed the property for twenty years. Immersed equally in both nature and art Rea confides that she has been highly influenced by painting and by aspects of Australian art history in particular. The impulse to search for appropriate visual links between Rea's work and images that have been sufficiently iconic to be readily identifiable as potential influences is compelling.

Her spare, elegant pieces display tine-like blades of glass (*Flash*) often connected by separate bands of material—either indented, as though outer appearances had been cut away to reveal an essential core (*Grounded*), or wrapped around or strapped over the other (*Copperline*). These connections are composed of subtle tints that bleed into one another in a manner recalling watercolour effects (*Heartland*). The result is a translucent patchwork that catches and plays with light—now in shadow, now in high noon glare. Arthur Streeton's watercolour, *The Valley of the Nepean*, 1892 (National Gallery of Australia) displays similar formal characteristics in its dissolution of outlines between horizon and sky—an oily seam of mid-summer eucalypt haze. The valley depicted in the foreground is a corresponding patchwork of smallholdings, with atmospheric effects and rising columns of smoke smudging discrete boundaries.

Rea advises that this ambiguity of spatial definition is in fact inherent in her process, as a requirement for the viewer to respond flexibly to the work, and that she "...likes the object to project a sense of it moving beyond its material form...". Curiously, there is also an unmistakable sense of weaponry about these objects, albeit a benign one—of the sword in its scabbard or the tool in its sheath. The astute observer will perhaps draw parallels with armour and self-protection or connect with the possibility that these abstract slivers are more exactly talismans against a loss of hope—Salomé's bejewelled dagger employed against an oblique adversary—the environmentalist's revenge perhaps.

The connection between inner and outer layers—between personal identity and public persona—also surfaces in Scott Chaseling's work. The immediate appeal of his illustrated vessels lies as much in their pictorial content as in their vivid, tessellated surfaces. Skilfully constructed from fragments of coloured glass, sourced from the specialist American supplier, Bullseye Glass Co, the work is self-reflective in as much as their painted panels appear like shattered narratives—fragments of stories—snapshots or animation cells. The artist describes the origins of this work in his purported early choice of career, "I was always drawing cartoons as a kid..." and this spirit of summarising information into compelling, if truncated passages continues to inform Chaseling's practice.

Some of these works have been hot-worked as conventional vessels—almost vase-like in form, including such illustrations from the artist's omnibus of short(er) stories (*Bringing on Autumn*). Chaseling describes himself as having nomadic tendencies and this condition appears to manifest itself, magically, in his work. Images are scattered brilliantly over the surface of his forms, forming a compendium of travel experiences and contrasting the sublime with the ridiculous. While the exterior illustrations depict scenes







Above:  
Scott Chaseling, *All around the world*, 2001, fused, blown glass, roll-up. Ht: 310mm. Photo: the artist.

Facing page:  
Scott Chaseling, *Bringing on Autumn*, 2001, fused, blown glass, roll-up. Ht: 540mm. Photo: the artist.

...by way of that spontaneity you work through serendipity...

from the material, or everyday world and project a pronounced sense of ennui, the inner walls of the vessels suggest a nether realm where shadows of the self muse on the subconscious (*All around the world*).

Some of these vessels are then cut open in the studio and their top edges ground down to reveal gourd-like containers withholding internalised stories from prying eyes (*Water bowl*). This visual connection to tribal artefacts relates the work to the origins of Modernism and yet their distinctly post-modern appearance suggests that these cocoon-like vessels owe as many creative debts to Mondrian as they might to the designer of a cocktail/video bar in Tokyo's Ginza district. Chaseling's 'Haircut' series of smaller vessels drives this aesthetic to more adventurous ground (*Orange pigtails*) by employing fluorescent colour and an all-over pattern of small, juvenile heads with a variety of 'new looks'—updating this sensibility to visual links with the twin-turbo funk of 21st Century Japanese popular culture. The 'Haircuts' are then arranged as groupings under the 'Salon' title and the impact of these assemblages combines a visceral immediacy with twisted, wry humour (*Haircut group*).

Noting that his working method "...is almost like collage... almost like jazz... and by way of that spontaneity you work through serendipity...", he naturally gravitates to an appropriation of images and ideas towards the formulation of a multi-layered identity for the work. This is glass that at times appears to wilfully negate its own material properties—but then acquaints itself again with elements of tradition, if not with convention.

Whereas Kirstie Rea finds the source for the germination of her ideas in the topographical and historical phenomena of the Canberra and Monaro

landscapes, Scott Chaseling's creative juices seem to rise in the digitally enhanced, fibre-optic arena of the global present. This apparent duality in the pair's philosophical approaches to their work sustains rigorous unearthing of some mutually held beliefs regarding influence and the evolution of creative inspiration. Both artists suggest that while they enjoy assimilating a variety of cultural influences into their work, it is the proximity of Australia to Asian cultures that provides at times a virtually subliminal vehicle for the continuing inventiveness of their approaches.

Interpreting this situation, Scott suggested that "...we're not bound by strong traditions and as a result, we're more able to improvise..." While Kirstie advised "Our (tertiary) education system is really important in that there is an incredible awareness to make us aware (as teachers and practising artists) of what's happening internationally... and I think that awareness has been critical to our work becoming mature..." "I think there are two big influences on the work—one is a sense of place—and that's firmly located here and the other is decidedly international... I think it's because we're (Australians) travellers... because of where we are... and how our culture developed... we need to go looking for who we are..."

In looking for who we are as a creative nation—our artists, designers and makers are often thinking and producing at the vanguard of intellectual and practical endeavour. In searching for new methods of glass production, Scott Chaseling and Kirstie Rea have become truly international in outlook and expertise, and in doing so, have become more confident in the use of a highly personal language in their individual practices. The continuing definition of their work as bearing distinct and articulate Australian voices augurs well for the development of a refined contemporary glass lexicon—both here and overseas. This is a rare earth indeed.







Scott Chaseling and  
Kirstie Rea in front  
of their Canberra  
studio. Photo:  
David Paterson,  
commissioned  
by Object.

**Mark Bayly** is Manager of Exhibitions (International Art) Access Services Program, National Gallery of Australia.

#### endnotes

- Scott Chaseling and Kirstie Rea are represented in Australia by the following galleries: Axia Modern Art, Melbourne, Tel: +61 (0)3 95001144, [www.axiamodernart.com.au](http://www.axiamodernart.com.au)
- Quadrivium, Queen Victoria Building, Sydney, Tel: +61 (0)2 9264 8222, [www.quadrivium.com.au](http://www.quadrivium.com.au)
- Beaver Galleries, Canberra, Tel: +61 (0)2 6282 5294. Chaseling and Rea are exhibiting at Beaver from 7 – 25 February 2002.
- In the United States Scott Chaseling and Kirstie Rea are represented by the Bullseye Connection Gallery, Portland, Oregon, Tel: +1 503 227 0222, fax: +1 503 227 0008, email: [galler@bullseye-glass.com](mailto:galler@bullseye-glass.com) [www.bullseyeconnectiongallery.com](http://www.bullseyeconnectiongallery.com)
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