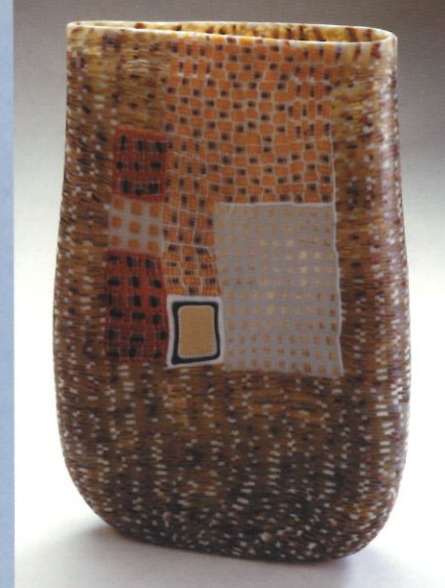
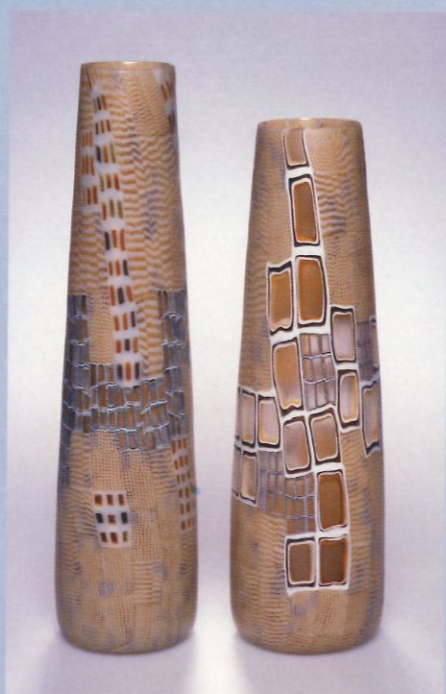


# glass works

inside Giles Bettison's crystal kingdom





At this point in time, working alone in his studio, Giles Bettison is keeping all doors open for the future, an outlook consistent with a practical dreamer, David McFadden reports

## practical dreamer

IN ONLY SEVEN YEARS, CANBERRA GLASS ARTIST GILES BETTISON HAS ESTABLISHED AN IMPRESSIVE REPUTATION AMONG COLLECTORS AND CURATORS IN THE DENSELY POPULATED FIELD OF AMERICAN STUDIO GLASS. Bettison's work has been profiled by such art historians as Geoffrey Edwards<sup>1</sup>, has been collected by major museums in the United States (including the American Craft Museum), and has appeared in solo exhibitions at Sanske Galerie in Zurich (1998) and Barry Friedman, Ltd., in New York (2000). Bettison's work is admired for the meticulous attention given to composition and color achieved with the venerable Venetian murrine technique. From the outset, Bettison has distinguished himself as a modern master of the technique, which he learned as a participant in the *Latitudes* glass workshops sponsored by Bullseye Glass of Portland, Oregon, held in Canberra in the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup>

Most often, Bettison's designs, composed of hundreds of individual canes of colored glass, are compared to the complex puzzle-like terrain of landscape viewed from the air, or to woven or printed textiles. Bettison's constructions, like fabric or architecture, result from careful and conscientious planning in the choice, assembly, and

arrangement of the individual glass elements. Bettison says, "Mapping and planning is important to the success of my work before I even begin working with the glass itself. I give intuition a place in my process, but I want to know where the work will end up before I start."

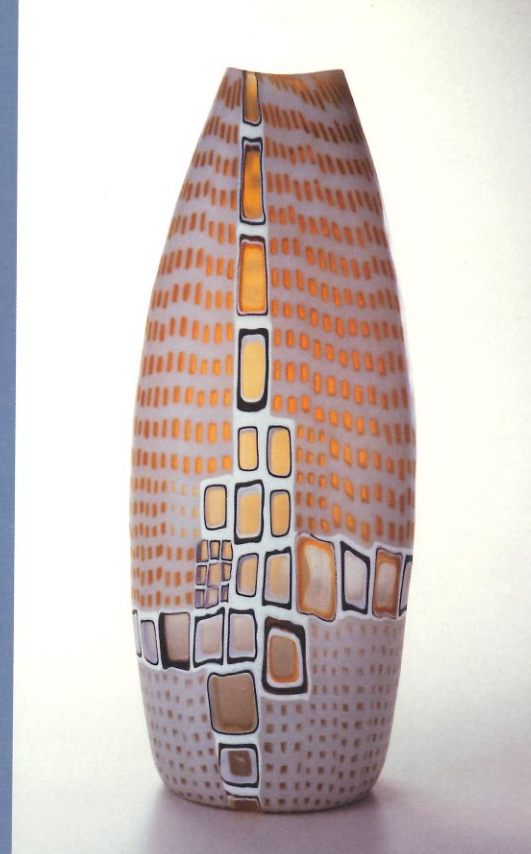
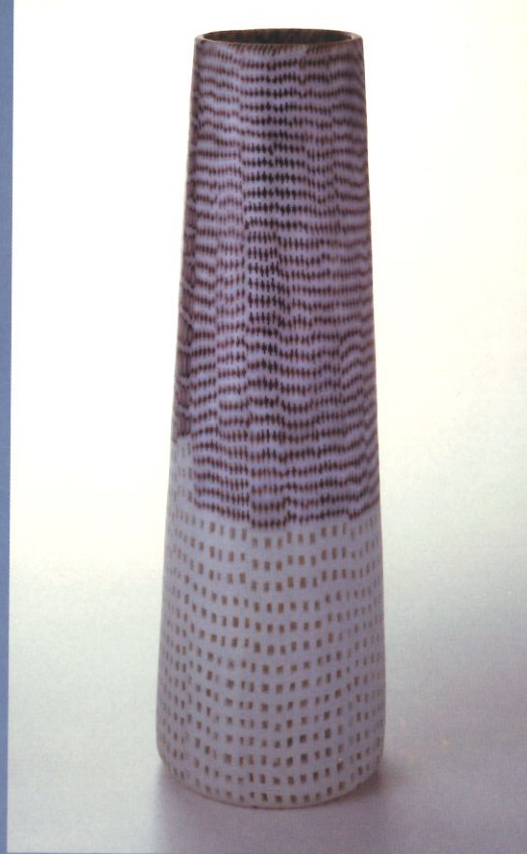
Bettison's logical and methodical approach is not based solely on his artistic vision, but also on the artist's recognition of the realities of the marketplace. "Streamlining and planning for efficiency and cost is important for me. Works sitting around in the studio half-finished does not make sense for me. I would rather take risks, make errors, learn from them, and begin something new than to rework pieces. My approach is to be as prolific as possible and to survive as an artist in the real world by selling work. Culture and commerce are not antagonists in my own world view."

The intricacy of Bettison's work, rich in color juxtapositions and detailed patterning, demands a special relationship with the viewer. While the works can be viewed like abstract painted canvases, their true nature is only revealed when the work is examined closely. The intricacy of the murrine technique, so adeptly handled in

Lead page: Giles Bettison, *South East*, 2001 panel (detail), 100x50x1cm.

Opposite page, clockwise from far left: *Great Sandy Desert*, 2001, 75x30cm. *Vista Series*, 2000, 27cm (h). *Cell Series*, 2000, 34cm (h). *Vista Series*, 2000, 26cm (h).

Above: *Vista NY No. 25*, 2002.



This page, clockwise from below: *Vista NY Series*, 2002; *Cell Series*, 2000, 41cm (h); *Cell Series*, 2000, 40cm (h).

Far right: *Cell Series*, 2000, 29cm (h).

forms ranging from tall cylindrical vessels to large rectangular panels, is seductively intimate, and best appreciated at close range. The work, however, is not only about technical virtuosity. "Time itself is embedded in my work. My chosen technique is time-consuming. Probably the question most frequently asked is 'how long did it take you to make this piece?' The work makes a connection between the physical process and the artistic goal. For me, time equals care, care equals dedication, and dedication equals thought." Bettison freely admits that his chosen path in the world of studio glass is hard work; due to the materials and equipment needed to cut and fuse glass canes into tangible forms there is elements of risk and physical hazard. For Bettison "mastering these materials and techniques is totally enjoyable. Doing this work full time is tough."



In the past few years 'craft' techniques have been privileged among artists and critics. Exemplary of this shift in attitude is a recent commentary in the interdisciplinary journal *Frame*, in which author Louise Showenbergl writes "Terms like 'old' and 'new' have become relative... The craftsmanship that shouted reliability to a certain segment of the population, while others saw it as a sign of frumpiness and hopeless obsolescence, is now judged solely on its quality. Presented in the right way, an old-fashioned art like embroidery can be the hippest thing in town."<sup>3</sup> It is this growing awareness of the artist's engagement with materials that Bettison taps into at this moment in time, reminding us of the usefulness of beauty in our lives. Bettison is committed to creating beauty in his objects: "I think that the perception of beauty is a positive thing. When people experience beauty it brings the physical and the emotional worlds together." Bettison's work offers routes of access for the pleasures that can be derived from color, pattern, decoration, and ornament. It is the special (dare one say humanistic) quality of ornamentation, decoration, and beauty that has returned with delightful vengeance in the world of arts.<sup>4</sup>

Bettison freely admits to his pursuit of pleasure in both his glass and his music, played on the traditional Irish bagpipe. There is a curious and provocative liaison between the music and art in his approach. Bettison learned music in the same way that he learned how to make glass—by direct experience rather than through theory or notation. Music, in fact, rivals vision as a source of pleasure and fulfillment for the artist: "In our development as a species, seeing became dependent upon logic, while music goes directly to the heart. I need both in my life."

"The people I work with are often prepared to go that little bit further, that helps a lot."

What does the future hold for an artist like Giles Bettison? While not abandoning his dreams as an artist, Bettison is also exploring new avenues for his work, including proposals for architectural installations, the ultimate extension of the artist's 'landscape' work into a three-dimensional space articulated and defined by elements of glass. And, in the tradition of Italian architect-artist-designers like the legendary Carlo Scarpa, Bettison is open to the possibility of designing for production. At this point in time, working alone in his studio, Bettison is keeping all doors open for the future, an outlook consistent with a practical dreamer.

David Revere McFadden is Chief Curator at the American Craft Museum, New York City. See [www.americancraftmuseum.org](http://www.americancraftmuseum.org)

#### endnotes

1. Geoffrey Edwards, "Raising Cane," *Glass*, no. 78 (Spring 2000): 32-37.

2. Lani McGregor of Bullseye Glass vividly recalls seeing Bettison's work for the first time when it appeared in an exhibition in Portland as part of the *Latitudes* project: "I will always remember my first look at his small red dish done in a method reminiscent of Carlo Scarpa. It was tightly made, beautifully crafted and—although at first glance a little closer than I usually like to an obviously Muranese tradition—it had a very special textile quality that set it apart from Venetian murrine work." [Email correspondence with author March 26, 2002.]

3. Louise Schouwenberg "New Nostalgia," *Frame*, no. 25 (2002); 109

4. Art historian and critic James Trilling posits, "...ornament is the only visual art whose primary if not exclusive purpose is pleasure. In functional terms, that makes it superfluous by definition, but our definition of function is unfairly restricted to the mechanical." In *The Language of Ornament* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 2000): 14.



## Giles Bettison talks about juggling a normal day in his studio, how he sees himself and his work in the world... and his irish bagpipes

"My most treasured objects are my two sets of Uilleann Pipes (Irish Bagpipes) and my Italian glass blowing hand tools."

"My greatest extravagance is going to Ireland in August the last couple of years to play music with friends, great fun!"

### A typical day in my studio?

"When I am making things I start early—coffee, then I check the electric kilns that are programmed to come on early in the morning, light the gas equipment and check messages and email. When my assistant arrives I do glasswork, either making murrini canes or blowing vessels. Then in the afternoon I prepare for the next day, cut glass, load kilns, cold work vessels or panels, prepare panels for firing, cleaning/maintenance, and I conduct business. The usual day of making things finishes at about 8pm."

### My most recent and memorable purchase of contemporary design?

"It's a toss up between my Apple I Book—its good looking and it does loads of good things—and some Italian shoes I bought recently, they are good looking but do only one thing... I also have some good things from Fink design..."

"My advice to aspiring designers and makers is to know your history and the history of your field and how it all fits together, and keep finding out about it... Imagine you were nearing the end of your life and imagine where you would like to be at that time and what you would like to look back on, your own achievements/history... and do it. Never give up."

### How do I juggle designing, manufacturing, distribution and marketing?

"I've become good at picking up the balls on the first bounce, sometimes even before they hit the floor. Sometimes I put in days or weeks of long hours preparing for an event, usually an exhibition or a proposal... I have a lot of great people who have helped and are helping me with all the steps of my work, from the making to the galleries/exhibitions."

"At uni in Canberra there were so many people that were open with information and assistance and that really set

the tone for me. Coming in contact with Steven Procter and Klaus Moje, among others, and the genuine concern that they showed had a big influence on me. I try to bring this to my practice and I find that generally it works."

"Bullseye Glass has been of inestimable value to my work and progress. I have worked with them on many different things and the relationship is broadening. The glass and the opportunity to work closely with them on that, whether it be making specific colours I want or more broad technical issues has been great... and of course the representation of my work that they do is great."

"The people I work with are often prepared to go that little bit further, that helps a lot."

### How do I see my products responding to the demands of every day life?

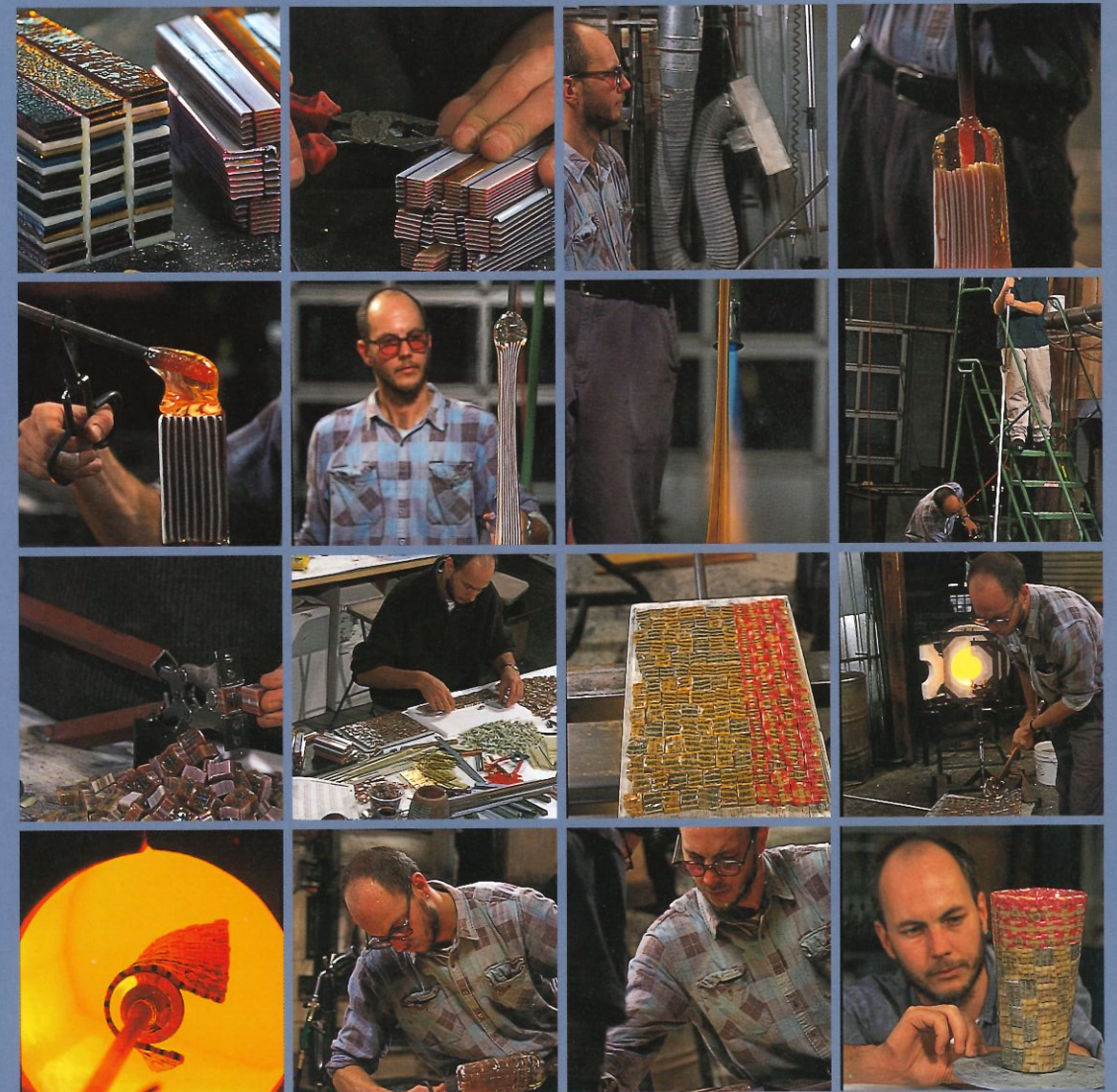
"The things I make are functional in a very broad sense of the word. I think that they mainly work on a more contemplative level. I try to put different points of association into my work. Sometimes there are strong textile references and often landscape references and of course the vessel thing. These are things that people can easily relate to—things that they find attractive or beautiful on different levels and in different ways... Often handmade things offer a sense of connectedness that symbolises peoples need to connect with their surroundings, other people and their history."

"I am very interested in continuing to work on the idea of larger installations of coloured glass. I have been looking at different applications for coloured glass in architecture and different techniques for bringing it up to code for installation in public spaces. I am aiming at having completed a number of installations in 5 years."

"The only dreams that don't get realised are the ones you give up on (within reason). What could possibly go wrong!"

Bettison was interviewed by *Object* in March 2002.

"The only dreams that don't get realised are the ones you give up on (within reason)  
What could possibly go wrong!"



Giles Bettison working at Bullseye Glass, Portland, Oregon.



Mid North (detail), 2001, 100x50x1cm.

#### endnotes

Giles Bettison's recent exhibitions (2001) include: Land at Bullseye Connection Gallery, Portland USA; Sanke Galerie, Zurich; Glass State at Jam Factory, Adelaide; Glass Art in Australia at Quadrivium, Sydney; Australian Glass: The Cutting Edge at Axia Modern Art, Melbourne; Meister der Moderne at the International Crafts Fair, Munich. Awards include: Bavarian State Prize, Gold Medal, Handwerkskammer für München und Oberbayern, Germany. **Email:** gilesbettison@hotmail.com  
**tel:** +1 (212) 475 1507

Giles Bettison is 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)  
Bettison is exhibiting at Axia from 20 June – 9 July 2002.  
Quadrivium, Queen Victoria Building, Sydney,  
**tel:** +61 (0)2 9264 8222, **Web:** [www.quadrivium.com.au](http://www.quadrivium.com.au)  
Beaver Galleries, Canberra, **tel:** +61 (0)2 6282 5294.

In the United States Bettison is represented by the Bullseye Connection Gallery, Portland, Oregon,  
**Tel:** +1 503 227 0222, **fax:** +1 503 227 0008,  
**email:** [gallery@bullseye-glass.com](mailto:gallery@bullseye-glass.com)

*Object* magazine gratefully acknowledges support from the Bullseye Connection to enable it to research and publish this feature. **Tel:** +1 503 227 2797,  
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