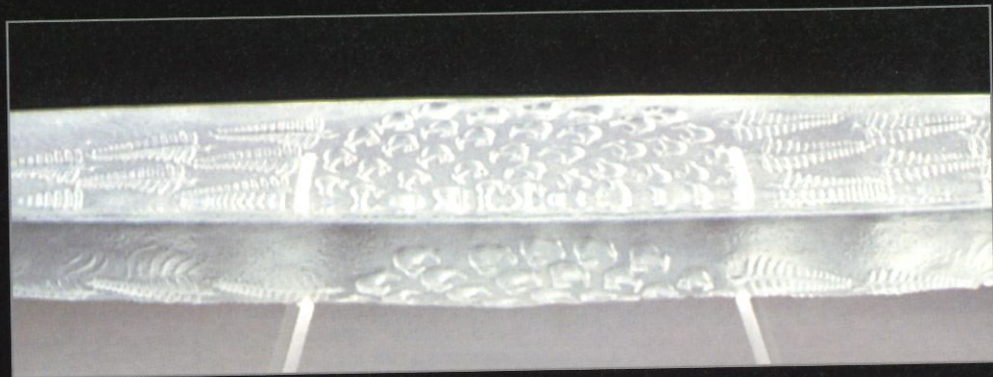
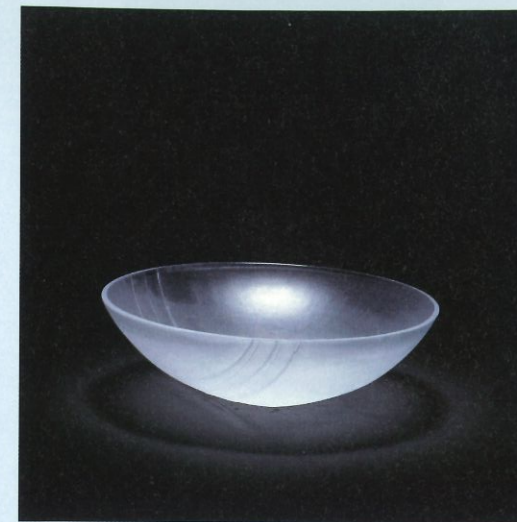


# the cast

## recent New Zealand glass



A group of glass artists have established a modest yet singular identity for themselves in a corner of the Pacific, reports **Moyra Elliott**



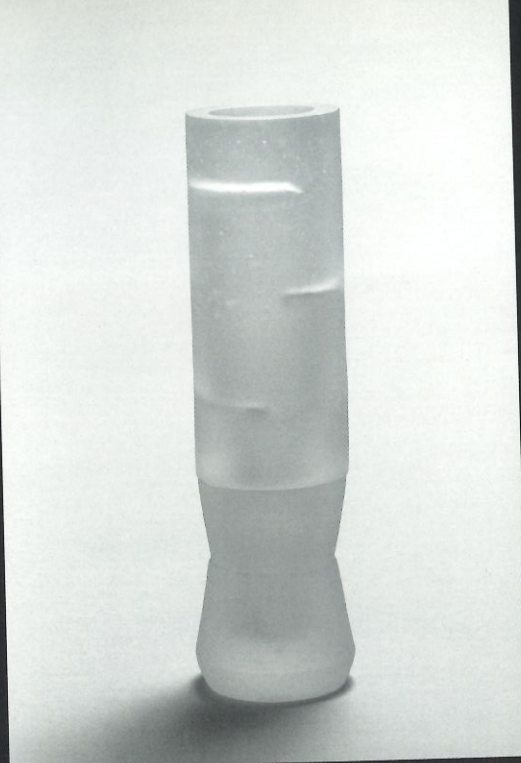
THROUGH THE NINETIES, WHILE FEW WERE LOOKING, A QUIET TRANSITION HAS TAKEN PLACE DOWN IN THE BOTTOM RIGHT-HAND CORNER OF THE MAP—THE LAST STOP BEFORE ANTARCTICA. While there was already a small New Zealand glass culture, the dominant activities were hot blowing (responding to what happened in the USA in the seventies) and flat glass for mainly architectural applications. The shift began in 1980 when a former art student, Ann Robinson, returned to art school following a fifteen-year break to complete her diploma and learn to blow glass. As course requirements required diversity she revived an earlier enthusiasm—bronze casting—and found a natural extension in testing those techniques using glass. She left art school with blowing skills and a fascination for the potential of casting glass.

The following year, with John Croucher and Garry Nash, she founded Sunbeam Glass Works and they began to teach themselves the skills attendant to running a successful hot glass studio. Living in New Zealand there was little access to the traditions of Europe or the new knowledge of the USA. Industry, in this small agriculturally based country, was also minimal. Books proved insufficient for the specifics required, but there was the occasional visiting professional artist who ventured this far. New Zealanders, however, have a short history of European settlement; pioneering roots are close and a self-sufficient attitude prevails. For these fledgling glass professionals it was a journey of discovery with obstacles gradually overcome and knowledge shared. By the time the partnership ended in 1990, they were accomplished blowers.

Opposite page: Greg Hall, *Pine Tree Paradise* (detail), 110 x 955 x 90mm.

Clockwise from far left: Greg Smith, *Killer Red*, 200 x 400 x 30mm. Robin Irwin, *Large Dipping Bowl*, 95 x 300mm. Leon Tan, *Equals*, 165 x 115 x 30mm each. Jo Nuttall, *Lamellae Vessel*, 430 x 330 x 170mm.





Above right: Christine Cathie, *De-Foron*, 200 x 1300mm.

Above far right: Keely McAlynn, *Slacking Vase*, 330 x 490mm.

During those nine years, Robinson persisted with casting experiments and the first successful piece took two years, but the failures were beautiful and intriguing. She applied the methods employed for bronze, having no knowledge of any other artists in the field until much later. Initially she used a soda-lime blowing glass and then lead crystal cullet from Europe, but this was not very successful. (The only dependable formula was a dense flint containing 45% lead oxide, but that glass was clear and colorants were difficult to introduce at the low casting temperatures.)

Another element came when John Croucher started Gaffer Coloured Glass with John Leggott (another former blower) to produce raw glass as a material to sell to other glass professionals. They had successfully made small quantities for their own use but the move to manufacturing was venturesome and bold. Glass for blowing was their first objective, but Robinson's need for a casting-glass and her willingness to test as it evolved, encouraged Gaffer's experiments. Over the following years, a viable range of casting glass matured as complexities of colour, moulds, annealing and finishing were resolved. The long associations and respect for the other's abilities and insights has led to the production of a casting glass that is now exported worldwide.

The final component was the Kiwi practice of sharing information. Robinson's roles as mentor and exemplar were crucial as a coterie of young artists, captivated by the medium, also accumulated knowledge, increased the synergy and built a momentum that enabled Gaffer to devote increasing investment to casting-glass. The result is a cluster of impassioned artists who are beginning to see themselves as a movement in concert with a small, astute, and resourceful industry. Together they are developing a singular culture far from the traditional glass centres of the world, that Croucher calls a 'Silicon Valley in casting.'

This evolution was acknowledged by a touring survey exhibition of cast glass opening late 2001. Selected to be inclusive of artists with substantial experience through to some that are still students, and with the aim of showing what is currently being produced, many artists however extended themselves into fresh territories for the show. Several addressed the vessel tradition but with exhilarating diversity. Layla Walter utilized a background in weaving native flax (*harakeke*) to imprint the interior rim of her black bowl. The human and natural elements fabricate an organic contrast to the immaculately rendered depth and exterior surfaces. Her bowl investigates domesticity, functionality, and a history of woven Pacific patterns; it addresses issues of appropriation and cultural property by the translation into a new medium of forms and textures often reserved for a traditional context.

Emma Camden's tapered vessels seem sourced in architecture based far from these shores, yet light through the enclosed ridges reveals what could be shadows from corrugated tin roofs in the clear southern light. Camden's often-biographical work engages displacement, both physical and metaphorical. Her development of the textured interior space that imparts, yet veils, intent has been a fresh direction within the casting oeuvre. Jo Nuttall comes closest to the inherent elegance of Robinson's tall forms with her distinctive inverted wedges, where the whole expresses the malleability of the original wax and the weighty solid base contains a reprise of the form like a dense echo. Nuttall's effectiveness as a teacher is demonstrated with two of her students also exhibiting.

A vessel of contrary character from Emily Siddell, a multi-media artist who knitted wire to make her *Reservoir* that holds seemingly molten glass—yet does not hold, for the glass oozes through the mesh container while shaping and



filling it. Siddell's wry wit sustains dialogue on states of glass—melting and reverting to solid, and on the nature of containment. More poignant humour is brought by Sam Ireland who, like Siddell, introduces other materials. His *Car Sets*, with their instructions for assembly and display—two-finger typed on a very old manual typewriter—raise nostalgic discourses on *Boys' Own* comics and dads who could fix anything out in a backyard tool shed; on days of Meccano and bakelite; on family holidays spent in a caravan by a sandy beach when summer stretched endlessly.

The largest exhibit was a wall work by Sharon Hall where multiple components made *Wishbones*, that layered desire for freedom from an inherited bone condition with resonances of tapa patterns from the Pacific, thus laminating regional with personal topicality. Cultural references were also addressed by Marea Timoko with her Maori words, 'Tahi, Rua, Toru, Wha', that articulated the fragility of a language nearly lost; the glass letters were set out upon the floor, where initial learning often takes place.

Phillipa Crane's *Watchtower* was a surreal scenario of unease where watcher and watched was a relationship for conjecture and the narrative possibilities a domain of provocation. Further intriguing narrative, this time suggestive of domestic transience, came from Nicole Lucas while Liz Sharek evoked watery surfaces—wondrously smooth-surfaced—broken by ripples from a

cast moon. Megan Tidmarsh's formalist concerns for contrasts between colour, texture and form within an architectural context that seemed part of some larger whole contrasted with the impressive scale and altered perspective achieved by David Murray. Pacific archetypes by Greg Hall and Shona Firman made direct reference to this part of the world while Greg Smith offered cross-cultural hybridity.

There were more—twenty-three artists with diverse issues and fresh perspectives, confident in their roles as part of what is now the dominant activity in New Zealand glass.

All art functions on a social, historical and political level because all artwork is created within a particular social setting by people who exist within its social structures. This art is from a particular time and of a particular context, and this art—this cast glass from New Zealand—has established a modest yet singular identity for itself in a corner of the Pacific.

Moyra Elliott is a writer and curator living in New Zealand.

The Cast exhibition tour: Auckland – Lopdell House Gallery, Titirangi, 30 November 2001 to 27 January 2002; Wanganui – Sarjeant Gallery, 2 February to 28 April 2002; Whangarei – Whangarei Art Museum, 6 May to 30 June 2002; Hastings – Hawkes Bay Exhibition Centre, 19 July to September 2002.

The Cast: New Zealand Contemporary Cast Glass 2001 catalogues can be obtained from: NZ Society of Glass, PO Box 68805, Newton, Auckland, New Zealand. NZ\$20 or US\$10 each. Three essays and one work from each artist are featured.

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Above: Sharon Hall, *Container*, 6 pieces, each approx. 430 x 330 x 170mm.

Below: Layla Walter, *Open bowl – woven interior*, 140 x 250mm.

