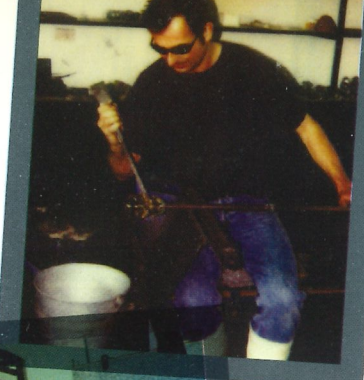


Working in teams and in shared studios is a characteristic of contemporary studio glass. Meredith Hinchliffe talks to artists from Denizen Glass Studio in Sydney and Blue Pony Studio in Adelaide about the benefits of collaboration.

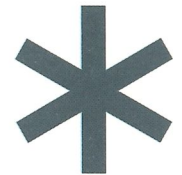
# TEAM GLASS

The current team at Denizen Glass Studio, from left: Yuri Yanai, Robert Wynne, Eliot Brand, John Skinner. Photo: Mark Donaldson



“ Glass-blowing needs a community of people to draw on and, as a studio movement, the glass community has a very willing and open attitude.

Matthew Curtis, 2006



**There is a long tradition of glass artists working in teams. Images from the mid- to late 1700s show teams of workers blowing and making glass vessels. Skilled assistants or colleagues are required at most stages through the glass-blowing process.**

away in your own studio.’ Jessica Loughlin, who works from Blue Pony Studio in Adelaide, agreed that for her the benefits are unlimited. ‘I like to work with other people around me and have a dialogue with them. It makes for a more exciting atmosphere. As an individual artist I like to work with a community of others.’ These two private studios continue to play an important role in the studio glass scene.

↗ Richard Whiteley blowing glass at Denizen Glass Studio, c.2000. Photo courtesy Denizen Glass Studio

↑ Matthew Curtis, Lydia Brichta, Kathy Elliott, Ben Edols and Bettina Viscentin (back), Robert Wynne (front), c.1997, Denizen Glass Studio. Photo: courtesy Denizen Glass Studio

← Robert Wynne, *Terrain Series*, 2006, blown and sand-blasted glass. Photo: Mark Donaldson

Collaborative links have always been important elements in the growth of studio glass-making in Australia and New Zealand, and shared studios are a feature of the glass landscape. In December 2006, the new Canberra Glassworks will open, providing top-of-the-range infrastructure for the production of high quality and innovative glass art. The facilities will also offer specialist equipment and development opportunities for glass artists.

Robert Wynne established Denizen Glass Studio in 1991, and says:

JamFactory Contemporary Craft and Design, which has operated for over 30 years, established its glass studio in 1974. Recognised as leaders in their fields, its creative directors, who manage the studios including the glass studio, pursue their own independent careers as designer-makers as well as taking responsibility for the artistic and commercial success of their studios. Associate positions are available for two-year periods; these equip craft practitioners with the skills and understanding needed to underpin a successful independent practice.

My original intention was to build a studio I could be proud of, produce my own work and create opportunities for other glass artists. The other artists provided some extra income and a lot of stimulation – I was surrounded by highly motivated, skilful and creative glass-blowers.

Both the Canberra Glassworks and the JamFactory have significant ongoing government support, while also raising some income through their own activities.

Inviting Matthew Curtis to help build the studio, Wynne offered Curtis the opportunity to learn how to blow hot glass in exchange. Curtis swapped his building skills for furnace time, saying:

The benefits of artists and craftspeople working together in such team situations are incalculable. Matthew Curtis, who began his career at Denizen Glass Studio, Sydney, says, ‘It is wonderful to be able to work alongside talented people, not locked

After a period of building the studio and the equipment, I had my first introduction to hot glass-blowing and I watched and assisted Rob. At the end of the day I would get the opportunity to play.

After two or three years, Curtis realised he needed to approach his glass work more seriously, and worked as Wynne’s assistant for two or three days a week in exchange for furnace time. After a short time Bettina Visentin joined the workshop as an assistant to Wynne, and she also paid for furnace time. Curtis found her arrival an important step in his learning process. Before long Ben Edols rented space to blow glass, while his partner Kathy Elliott undertook the coldworking in their garage-cum-studio. The space next to Denizen became available, and Wynne encouraged Elliott and Edols

to move in. 'This brought their cold working equipment into the workshop set-up, adding another dimension to the activity,' Wynne said. However, repairs and maintenance costs were high, and Wynne found the administration rather burdensome:

I was running around keeping the shop going, and it did all get a bit tight, as we were all growing our businesses. There were ups and downs, but on the whole we all had a ball.

As Curtis says, artists who share their skills and assistance with others learn not only through watching, but also as they sit around the lunch table and discuss ideas and issues. 'You can generate ideas, talk about problems and swap solutions.' Loughlin concurs: 'The input of other people into one's work can be minimal – almost subconscious – or it can be a major revelation.'

For some time, Edols, Curtis and Visentin assisted each other. 'The benefits were that we could save on the cost of assistants and we could all learn from each other,' Curtis explained. All those who spent time at Denizen found it exciting to have other professionals working around them, and all claim they benefited from each other. Wynne feels he is still benefiting, and frequently contacts his early colleagues for assistance. As Ben Edols and Kathy Elliott said:

They were heady days – we were young, and we were also carefree. We didn't have the financial burden of our own studio and we didn't think twice about going off overseas for months at a time.

Richard Whiteley, now head of the Glass Workshop at the Australian National University School of Art, also set up his practice at Denizen and was there for five years:

This was a pivotal period in my career. After I graduated from the University of Illinois, I felt my work had gone into an academic area, and when I started at Denizen I really embraced my love of the material of glass. It was an incubator, and it was a real opportunity to share teething problems while we were all getting our professional practices started.

Whiteley became so engrossed with the practice of making that he gave up his teaching job at the Sydney College of the Arts to create his glass art on a full-time basis for some time.

Occasionally there are special projects. Emma Varga, who has her work blown at Denizen and has done for several years, organised an event, *Something Different: Creative laboratory*, at her own studio in 2004, which included American artist Marvin Lipovsky. He worked at Denizen's facilities, and this gave the studio's artists an opportunity to work with Lipovsky – a rare chance to see the talents of such an artist.

The establishment of Denizen enabled Wynne to become a prolific producer. Denizen's name is now associated with production work and the creation of one-off awards. Rob Wynne, working with his partner Yuri Yanai, also makes his own exhibition work and unique pieces for galleries in Australia, Italy and the United States. Andrew Lavery, lecturer

at the Sydney College of the Arts, currently rents space at Denizen, which now works at a less frenetic pace.

A different kind of workshop, but equally influential, is Blue Pony Studio. Established in 1997, it is located in Stepney, Adelaide, near the old JamFactory premises. Adelaide has a strong community of glass artists, and several had discussed the idea of pooling resources and working together. 'After a year's consideration, we set up in the spirit of a cooperative,' one of the founders, Clare Belfrage, told me:

We function rather like a shared house, operating on a high level of trust. We have fortnightly meetings and believe the most important thing is to keep good communication between all of us.

Jessica Loughlin explained that, as the core four people have been working together for so long, there is a great deal that doesn't need to be said, such as who has cleaned more often, or who has put in a greater amount of money.

For the most part, the equipment is individually owned, and they all use it as required. The studio pays for installation and maintenance. This has led to changes in individual practices, as members have been able to explore new approaches and opportunities.

Blue Pony has 400 square-metres of space on two levels, and each participating artist has their own space. Unlike Denizen, it is not operated around a hot shop. Those who blow hot glass do so either at

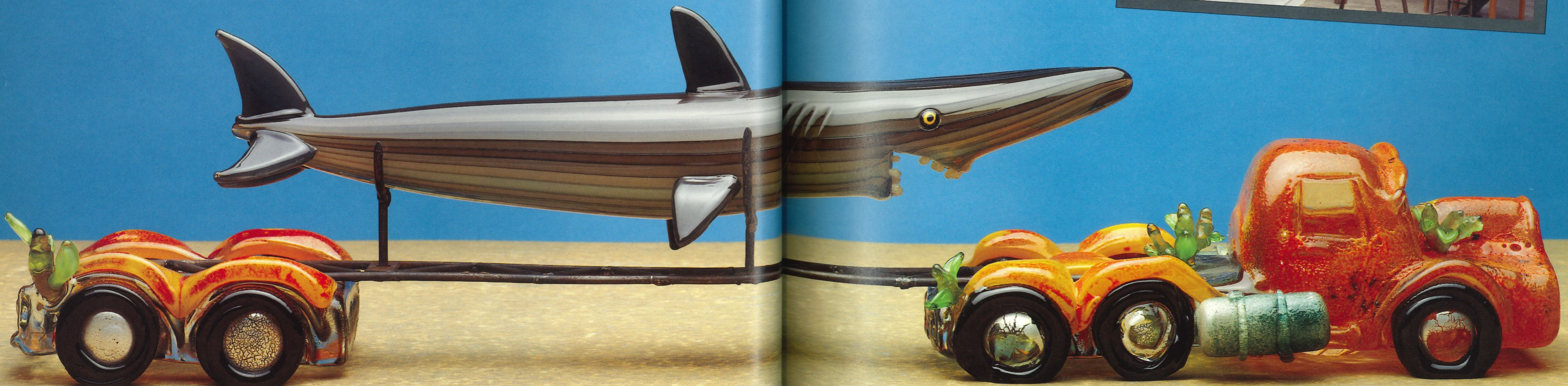
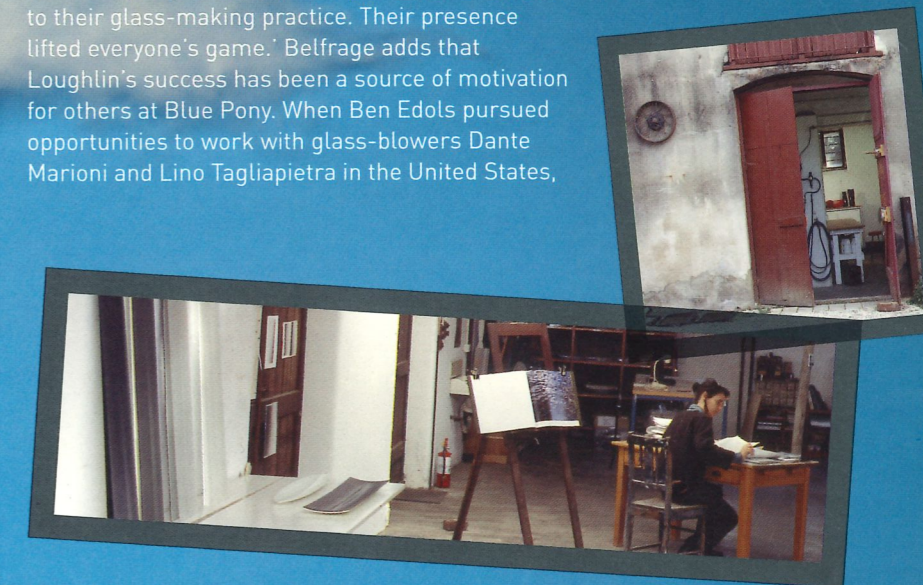
the JamFactory or the South Australian School of Art. Established initially by Belfrage, Gabriella Bisetto, Jane Cowie, Deb Jones and Matthew Larwood, Jessica Loughlin joined the studio a year later.

The studio has always offered opportunities for visiting artists – particularly emerging artists – many of whom ask to work there. Emma Peterson worked with Deb Jones under the Mentorship Program of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts. Others have included Andrew Baldwin and Aaron Robinson, and the studio has also had painters and sculptors in residence. 'This has been mutually beneficial to us all,' Belfrage said.

The success of one or two artists in the group undeniably benefits others in a studio, albeit vicariously. 'Ben and Kathy [Edols and Elliott] were a tremendous influence on me,' Curtis remembers. 'I was very impressed by their professional attitude to their glass-making practice. Their presence lifted everyone's game.' Belfrage adds that Loughlin's success has been a source of motivation for others at Blue Pony. When Ben Edols pursued opportunities to work with glass-blowers Dante Marioni and Lino Tagliapietra in the United States,

→ Blue Pony Studio. Photos: Andrew Dunbar

↙ Tom Moore, *Torpedo Shark*, 2005, glass, metal. Photo: courtesy the artist



Rob Wynne remembers that Edols brought back vitality and freshness to Denizen, with new ways of approaching their process:

We couldn't help being inspired and influenced by each other. Their presence made you strive to be as professional as possible, even when they used completely different processes.

Richard Whiteley gained from the ways his co-artists thought about glass. He found that it was a very social environment – known for the gourmet lunches they shared – and that they were all very ambitious for each other.

For Belfrage and Loughlin, the camaraderie among the group has been beneficial both creatively and artistically. Members have a range of practices and projects. Deb Jones undertakes public art commissions and works in cross-media, lighting and landscape gardening, managing quite large projects. Gabriella Bisetto is Head of Ceramics and Glass at the South Australia School of Art at the University of South Australia. Through Gabriella, others in the studio have a link with students and the teaching program. Tim Edwards and Tom Moore, who are both based at Blue Pony, also work at the JamFactory.

In the glass world, the names 'Denizen' and 'Blue Pony' quickly became identified with high quality glass, and this benefited everyone in the studios. As Kathy Elliott explained, a curator or collector visiting Sydney would automatically visit the studio and talk with several artists, while they might hesitate to visit an individual artist's studio. It saved time for everyone and was convenient. Blue Pony as an identity has been important to the members, and visitors have been drawn to the studio to see several artists' work in the one place.

The reasons for combining resources are many, not the least of which is financial. Those who established Blue Pony didn't come together for financial reasons alone, however. Their combined knowledge was considered to be a major, shared resource. For Belfrage and Loughlin, at a personal level, working at Blue Pony has offered them the support of other artists. The artists all have a great deal of respect for each other and their work. We are all very supportive of where anyone is up to in their career, and what we are doing,' they said.

The ball keeps rolling, and glass artists continue to work in a spirit of generosity and collaboration. Matthew Curtis and his partner Harriet Schwarzrock have now established a large studio in an old carpet warehouse in Queanbeyan, New South Wales. 'Sophie Emmett has a small workshop space in our studio, and five artists have been through, working with us, in the last five days,' Curtis said:

The reason for this generosity? Mostly because we enjoy working together. Glass-blowing needs a community of people to draw on and, as a studio movement, the glass community has a very willing and open attitude to what we are doing. ■■■■

[www.robertwynne.com](http://www.robertwynne.com)  
[www.edolselliott.com](http://www.edolselliott.com)  
[www.jamfactory.com.au](http://www.jamfactory.com.au)

All quotes from discussions by the author with the artists, September 2006.

Meredith Hinchliffe is a freelance writer and arts advocate based in Canberra.



Clockwise from top right:

Clare Belfrage, *Passage #5* and *#4*, 2006, blown glass with cane drawing and acid etching. Photo: courtesy the artist

Robert Wynne in conjunction with Yuri Yanai, *Woven Light* (finalist Ranamok Glass Prize), 2005, blown, iridised, sand-carved Cameo glass. Photo: courtesy Robert Wynne

Jessica Loughlin, *Becloud*, 2006, kiln-formed and cut glass. Photo: Grant Hancock

Tim Edwards, *Resound #2*, 2004, wheel-cut blown glass. Photo: courtesy the artist

