

Wagga is sweltering through an unseasonable heatwave when I visit Into the Fourth Decade, the Gerry King retrospective at the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery. It is a timely reminder of the necessary role played by heat in the creation of the glass objects I am coming to see.

Gerry King was introduced to the medium of glass whilst studying in the USA in the early 1970s and is recognised as one of the pioneers of the art glass movement in Australia. As an artist and a teacher, his influence has been widespread. King has a longstanding association with the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery and the current exhibition comprises works from the National Art Glass Collection and from the artist's own collection.

It is a tough ask to condense almost forty years of art practice into an exhibition comprising just thirty three objects. As one would expect in a show that surveys the career of a pioneer of the glass art movement in Australia, the exhibition is a display of technical virtuosity: exuberant decoration meeting disciplined form. King is clearly a master of his art: blown, kiln-formed and cold worked glass are all represented. Nevertheless, the only object in the exhibition where process appears primary is also one of the earliest. *Adrenalin Bottle*, from 1979, is a pale lavender glass bubble from which extends a coiled glass tube. It was created by swinging the hot glass form above the maker's head before wrapping it around a mould: the text panel warns "don't do this at home".

The other pieces dating from the same year, *Reclining Bottle 1* and *Reclining Bottle 2*, are early statements of intent. With their anthropomorphic forms and narrow openings they are vessels which cannot contain. Non-functionality is a recurring theme in King's work. There are garments that cannot be worn, blades that will not cut, and shields that offer no physical protection. From the outset, ideas were the important thing for King and, although there is a group of beautifully formed and richly coloured *Musketeer Bowls*, the emphasis in this exhibition, as in King's oeuvre, is on conceptual rather than functional work.

Despite its apparent diversity, the show highlights how certain themes and ideas have appeared and re-appeared in the course of King's career. Presence and absence is one theme that appears in different guises. It is evident in his garment forms, the earliest of which is *Yukata Form* from 1982. Similarly, *Semblance GS* and *Semblance No 5* reference the shapes of Japanese clothing, whereas the pieces in the '*and all things nice*' series are evocative of western garments. All are empty, but the human body is suggested by the curve of a collar, the nip of a waist, or the swell of a hip.

King's miniature rooms, perhaps the most overtly socio-political works in the exhibition, also speak of absence – and loss. *No Entry, No Exit* appears at first glance like an architect's model, or a doll's house, but on closer inspection chips and cracks become evident. There are steps that lead nowhere; a blank door. This work, part of King's PhD research, was surely influenced by the post-modern, post-colonial theory that prevailed at the University of Wollongong in the early 1990s. It is a bleak commentary on European incursions into the Australian landscape. King refers to the impact of colonization on the indigenous population, but those who've driven past abandoned and crumbling homesteads will perhaps be reminded of the early settlers who attempted to tame this harsh and unforgiving land, and lost.

An interest in cultural colonisation, in the way in which humans appropriate, reconstruct and transform fragments from other times and other place, is another recurring theme. In King's *Cicatrix* series his sculptural objects reference indigenous culture, both in terms of form and patterning, but transform them into something else. Similarly, there are pieces that draw from history and archaeology. Tartessos, the lost city of the Iberian peninsular, gives its names to a series of vases; sumptuous amalgamations of colour and pattern. *Toledo Blade 1/05* also has a Spanish connection. Unlike the fearsome weapons forged by the blacksmiths of ancient Toledo, the sharp edge of King's blade is an illusion. His blade will not cut. Nevertheless, it reminds us that the blade is both a blessing and a curse to humanity.

As someone whose own work, both practical and scholarly, is centred on textiles I am struck by the recurring references in King's work to Japanese textiles. There are the garments, of course, but it doesn't stop there. In *Angela's Other Scarf* a formal problem King had set for himself was finally resolved by studying the woven structure of Japanese cloth. The patterns on *Fragment Bowl No 3* are reminiscent of *boro*, the Japanese coats which are made by piecing and patching worn textiles to

create something new. The patterns on *Cicatrix Shadow*, part of the series about cultural colonisation, also have a Japanese flavour.

I'm interested too in the way in which the relationship between technique and idea in King's work has shifted over time. When you work with glass you have to master the techniques and you have to understand the material, for this is the language with which you speak. Although ideas have been important to King from the outset, in the early pieces you can see him coming to terms with his chosen medium. Then the pendulum swings. In the architectural assemblages, there is great technical skill but it is subsumed by the idea. In the later work, however, technical virtuosity and a delight in the material melds with King's desire to imbue meaning, reaching a point of balance which I find very satisfying. *Pharaoh's Treasure* is perhaps my favourite piece.

In King's words, the exhibition contains 'cornerstones of the journey' and works which are 'hot off the press'. It is a retrospective show, but not one which dwells on the past. It charts King's career, drawing our attention to key points along the way; it also indicates that the journey is not yet ended. As King approaches the fifth decade, the work continues.

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