

## **A Tribute to Klaus Moje by Richard Whiteley**

**The following is an edited version of Richard Whiteley's opening night speech made at Object Gallery, Friday 10 November 2006, for the exhibition *Klaus Moje: Glass*.**

'Klaus is one of the most visible and recognisable artists in the world for glass, craft and education. Through the examples of his work and teaching, Klaus has assisted the sector to realise new possibilities for the medium. In his studio during the 1970s Klaus began to develop a body of work that offered a very different approach to what was happening in the studio glass movement.

Through his work, Klaus inspired a generation of makers in kiln-formed glass at a time when studio glass was myopically focused on the furnace and hot-shop. The collective energy around kiln-forming took hold in the mid 1980s when Klaus was teaching in Canberra, and his work gained recognition on the international stage.

Others became inspired by what he had begun – of note were Daniel Schwehorer and Boyce Lundstrum, who propelled a small company called Bullseye Glass to become the most significant manufacturer of art glass in the world – today employing over 120 people and almost solely dedicated to the manufacture of glass for kiln-forming.

Klaus has continued to be an innovator in kiln-forming, as in 1998 when he, along with Kirstie Rea and Scott Chaseling, developed the 'roll-up' technique that combined areas of kiln work with hot, furnace glass techniques. Despite these significant leaps they have always been dwarfed by the outcomes of his work. And looking at the work here tonight, it's clear that what he has accomplished would have been impossible to achieve in any other medium.

Klaus' work is unashamedly about the dialogue between artist and material, and his work has an energy and vitality that transcends historical links. What has been a clear influence on his work has been Australia. The imagery and energy of this land has, over the past 24 years, had a profound effect on the aesthetic development of his contemporary palette, and the loose explosive structure of his glass has been influenced by the raw and intense nature of the Australian bush.

The composition of his contemporary work still has a structure that was apparent in his early work. However, the formality of lines is more abstracted by his pushing of the material to its limits – only able to be controlled because of his absolute understanding of viscosity and heat. His contemporary work has been compared to abstract expressionist painting, and Klaus has repeatedly resisted this need for contextualisation because his work does not need support, interpretation or validation through the canons of mainstream art.

He has remained true to his vision for glass for over 50 years, and Klaus' achievements have been widely recognised throughout his long career in Australia and overseas:

- In 1995 he was the recipient of an Australian Creative Fellowship, known as the Keating Award.

- He received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Glass Arts Society in 2000 and to date remains the only Australian artist to have received this prestigious international award.
- In 2001 he received the Australia Conical Emeritus Award.
- Urban Glass in New York also honoured Klaus with their Lifetime Achievement Award in 2004 and earlier this year he became an Honorary Officer of the Order of Australia.

These are, of course, highlights, of the recognition bestowed upon him.

One of Klaus' significant achievements is his contribution to education. In 1982 he was invited by then director of the School of Art in Canberra, Udo Sellback, to begin a program in the education of glass. Klaus moved from Germany, with his wife Brigitte, to accept this offer as he wanted to make a contribution to teaching. His goal was to start a program from scratch and to establish an approach to education in glass that was different. Klaus had visited Pilchuck in the USA and become endeared to the US glass movement artists and emergent university and summer school programs, but he had fundamentally different ideas about education. Klaus built a program that, from its first graduates, became recognised as one of the most successful in the world.

Klaus is a strong leader in education but he is also part maverick. He has a clear vision and high regard for innovative thought, while also maintaining a healthy disregard for bureaucracy and established ways of thinking and doing. This may seem a contrast for a master craftsman but it is precisely this mix of personal qualities that has shaped him. In his approach to teaching, Klaus understood the importance of material awareness as distinct from the sole teaching of craft practice. He taught through example – a confident and informed approach that was an extension of one's thinking, making and being.

He saw the medium of glass as integral to the crafts but never felt that the sector was endangered and needed to be bolstered or paraded around for public understanding and recognition. He laughed at the craft/art debate, resisted the bulldozing of crafts ideology into a post-modern dialogue and also resisted the conflating of glass, or any crafts, into being just another material for sculpture. But he did also welcome reforms to the sector, as when the Australia Council combined the Crafts Board and the Visual Arts board because, as he said, 'Good practitioners and their practices in any field go beyond classification'.

I remember being the skinny kid, rocking up for an interview to try seeking entry to the program, Klaus asked me, 'What do you want to do and what do you want to be ...?'

I had little idea how exactly to answer, but must have mumbled enough to convince him I was worth a punt. At the end of the interview, I indicated that I had brought all my official transcripts and references and did he want to see these. Klaus laughed and said, 'I am sure they say you're a good boy, but that I am not interested in those things.'

He was interested in what his students thought and what they had to say.

A similar approach was taken with the course structure ... there wasn't one! Students needed to bring their own. It was the individual ideas that were important to driving the bus of discovery.

I have clear fond memories of Klaus' first years of teaching in Canberra. He conducted the Workshop as if it were a community of professional working artists. Constant contact and exploration of glass was the philosophy, and the main focus was to work and work and work; to discover within the material what lay inside us.

While this introspection was an important part of the development of the artist, Klaus also turned the attention of his students towards the international community. His teaching environment was always populated by visiting artists because he believed of paramount importance was the experience of different perspectives. Often these visiting artists were funded out of his own salary.

Despite leaving the education building over 15 years ago, his contribution can still be felt.

Klaus was the architect of a program that has had a considerable effect on glass all over the world. Today his former students are the visiting artists within educational programs around the planet. Over 70% of all his graduates continue as makers and the vast majority have internationally recognised careers. This percentage of success is still achieved by the School of Art Glass Workshop today.

With all these achievements Klaus is quick to point out the support he has had along the way. And to quickly acknowledge a couple: Professor David Williams, who, as former Director of the School of Art for many of the years Klaus was Head, championed the vision Klaus had for the glass program. And at home, Klaus has had unwavering support from his family through his wife, Brigitte, and his two sons Amos and Danilo. Brigitte, who in her own right is a highly regarded ceramic artist and designer, has been a constant force and together with Klaus they have enjoyed an adventurous life from urban Germany to rural south coast Australia.

Tonight is an opportunity to look back on Klaus' great achievements over the past 50 years, but it is also an opportunity to look forward. For the past nine years a group of artists has worked collaboratively in Canberra on the development of a glass access facility for artists. The project has been supported by many glass artists and one of the strongest advocates has been Klaus Moje.

He was involved in the early planning of the facility and played a key role lobbying local government on the merits of this project. In March next year, Canberra Glassworks will open its doors to artists and the public. This \$11 million dollar facility is a landmark project for the ACT government who have been so impressed by the talent of artists emerging from the Australian National University.

This facility is just the latest contribution Klaus has made in assisting to build the Australian and international glass movement. A movement that has been inerasably strengthened by the efforts, energy and work of a man we call Papa.'

Richard Whiteley  
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