

HEART OF GLASS

It takes courage to make a living from art, but young glass artist Lisa Cahill draws confidence and inspiration from her Danish heritage to do just that. And her future is looking bright.

STORY CATHY PRYOR
PORTRAIT EVAN PAPAGEORGIU



Frozen Memories (2005),
kiln-formed glass panels,
49cm by 91cm by 0.6cm.

The memory of places left behind can leave a powerful impression, and for artist Lisa Cahill, the moment she returned home in 1995 after a two-year stint overseas still resonates. As the plane crossed the coastline of Western Australia and travelled towards the arid interior, the patchwork view from above left an indelible mark. "I remember flying over and I think the plane was just crossing the coast up north ... I was in tears," she recalls. "I just don't think I could believe I was home."

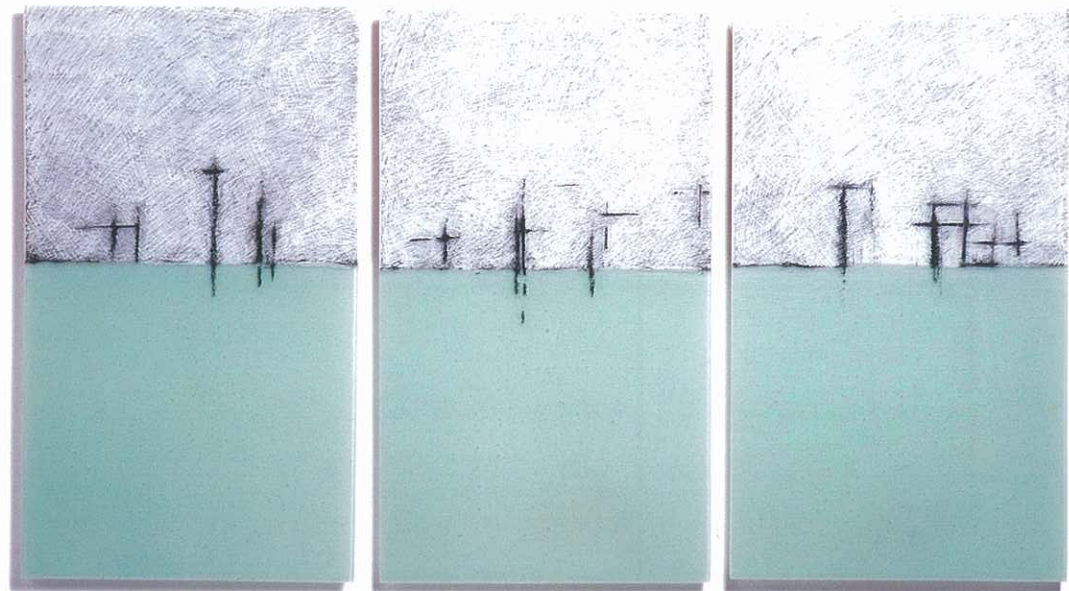
Cahill's sense of place permeates the work she has created since graduating with an arts degree in ceramic design from Melbourne's Monash University in 2000. The 30-year-old glass artist was born in the industrial heartland of Geelong, but with a father in the army, she and her family moved to Canberra when she was 10. Cahill recalls that as a teenager she was desperate to escape the planned and somewhat barren landscape of Canberra. But in more recent years, the vastness of Lake George and the pockets of Australian bush which encroach on Canberra's urban fringes have continued to inspire. Her work—delicate bowls and plates, jewellery and wall panels of abstract landscapes—embodies the viewpoint of someone who knows two countries: Australia and her mother's birthplace, Denmark.

This contrasting sense of identity and place forms the basis of Cahill's work, which is gaining recognition both here and overseas. In March, Cahill, along with fellow glass artist Emily McIntosh, held a combined exhibition, 'Entwined Space', at Craft Victoria. In May, her work will be showcased at the newly opened Sabbia Gallery in Sydney and the Jam Factory in Adelaide, to coincide with the Glass Art Society Conference, an international glass convention in Adelaide. In 2002 Cahill received an Australia Council grant for emerging new artists and she has also had her work exhibited in Hong Kong and the United States. Some of her work was recently acquired by the prestigious Ebeltoft Glass Museum in Denmark, a museum that collects and exhibits work from around the world in a country renowned for its classic glass design.

Cahill says that while she was always interested in art as a child, it was not until she left Australia to live in Denmark at 18 that she realised that art, and glass in particular, could be a career that would allow her to express herself. While working as an au pair for a family in Copenhagen, she spent time with her great-uncle, Einar Vind-Hansen, who, although a wooden boat builder by trade, was also a sculptor and painter. The two spent time together wandering through Copenhagen's galleries. One of Cahill's 2002 works, *The Old Man and the Sea*, a panel of red ochre and white paint with abstract masts scratched into its surface, is dedicated to his memory.

"When I lived in Denmark I saw the glass people had in their homes—they have very expensive

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Distant Memories (2005),
kiln-formed glass panels,
50cm by 89cm by 0.6cm.

glass bowls, beautifully designed,” Cahill says. “I had also grown up with that appreciation. We had glass and ceramics and my dad loved antiques. After I came back I realised glass was something I could actually make and design.”

Glass art is gaining popularity in Australia, with a number of galleries, such as Kirra Gallery and Axia Gallery in Melbourne, and the Glass Artists Gallery and Sabbia Gallery in Sydney, dedicated to showing new works. Brian Parkes, the associate director of Object, the Australian Centre for Craft and Design in Sydney, which has supported and promoted contemporary artists for the past 40 years, believes the popularity of glass stems from its connection to sculptural forms and a renewed interest in contemporary Australian design. In the late 1960s and 70s, Australian glass artists found themselves at the vanguard of a relatively young contemporary artform as the medium grew in popularity around the world.

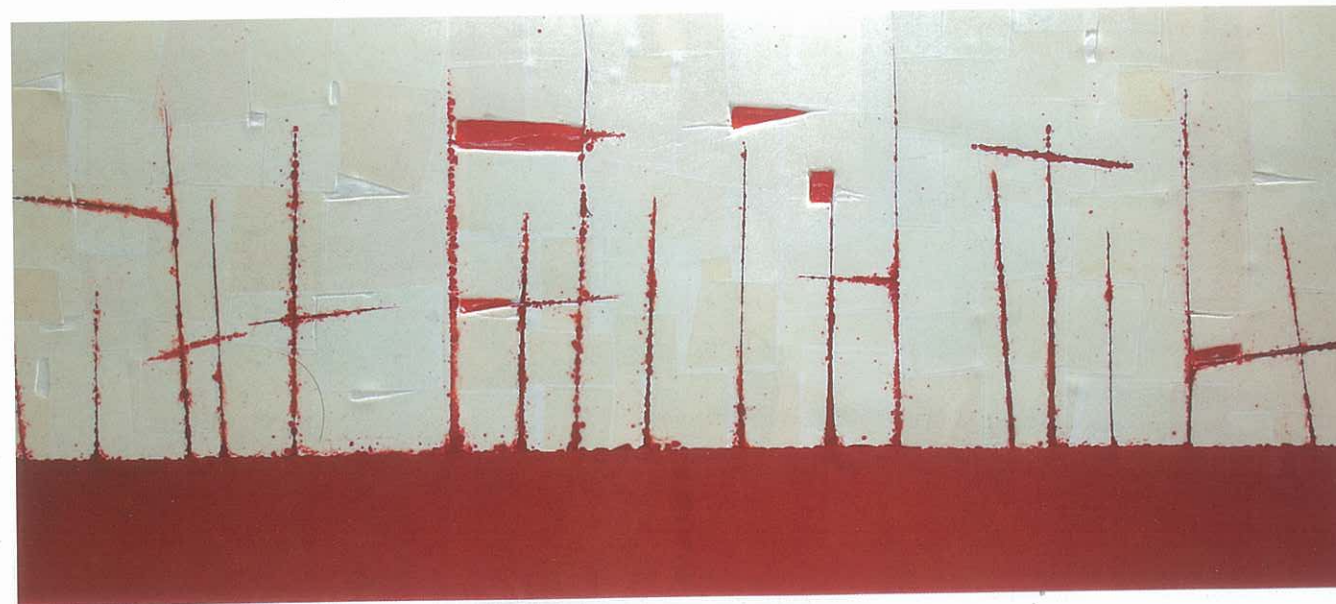
“Glass has a really seductive quality,” Parkes says. “The colour in glass is much more intense than the colour you find in paintings. You only have to look at medieval stained glass to see that it has sustaining appeal.”

Cahill has three times been a finalist in the Ranamok Prize for Contemporary Glass Art, which is now travelling Australia. According to Parkes, she is “a very highly regarded artist” whose work provides a link between glass and more traditional artforms such as painting. Many of Cahill’s works are created by transposing or fusing sheet glass together to create both opaque and translucent lines. The work is then painted or carved with a diamond wheel lathe to form textures and tones reminiscent of the Danish or Australian landscapes.

“When I first moved to Melbourne I spent a lot of time moving back and forth between the city and Canberra. I really noticed on those drives that the landscape is so sparse and stark, and that really crept into my work,” she says.

“On the Hume Highway it is the colours: just the creams, the dryness and the hot sun. Sometimes my explorations are just imaginings of what places are like or what I see on television—imagined memories or imagined space. What I sometimes try and do with textures is make them familiar, like the ground, or bricks or even the backyard fence.”

For the glass not to bubble or crack it must be fired at temperatures between 780°C and 800°C in a specialised glass kiln. To produce a matte surface, the temperature must be dropped to 650°C. While working with glass is a precise science, it is not



The Old Man and The Sea (2002), kiln-formed
glass panel, 41.5cm by 94.5cm by 0.7cm.
The piece is dedicated to the memory of
Cahill’s Danish great-uncle, Einar Vind-Hansen,
a boat builder by trade.

without experimentation and artistic licence. In her office at the Sydney College of Fine Arts, where she works as the glass studio supervisor for new students, Cahill explains what was involved in creating her latest series, ‘Dry’, inspired by the endless emptiness of Lake George.

“This one actually occurred because I fused these colours on the back and I wasn’t very happy with it,” she explains. “Sometimes you can do a small test piece and it can look good, but as soon as you do a bigger version it is just not what you expect it to be. So I put it against the white wall and just stood back and looked at it. It looked amazing because the white haze came though and even though [the glass] is brown it looks blue. So after I was done I applied a layer of white paint and lathed the surface back.”

For young artists with little capital, finding the courage to sell and market work can be testing. Cahill believes that young artists need to learn “not to be afraid” of making a living from their work and to experiment with different methods.

Her first invitation to exhibit was marked by “disaster after disaster”, she says. She had set out to exhibit a collection of vessels, but her moulds kept cracking in the kiln and, with one week to opening, she had to abandon the idea. Instead, she switched to making a series of simple sushi plates threaded with white glass, which sold successfully through Melbourne’s Kirra Gallery. Buoyed by this first break, Cahill took out a lease on a warehouse space in Richmond, where she set up her own studio and sub-let the remaining space to other artists.

After taking part in the federally funded New Enterprise Initiative Scheme in 2002, which is aimed at providing advice and support to new small businesses, Cahill came up with the idea of a three-way business: selling her plates in retail galleries and leasing studio space to other artists, which gave her the resources to create her art panels. Although the Melbourne studio is on hold for now, Cahill hopes to open her own studio space in Sydney later this year.

“Most artists are insecure and shy about their work and themselves but ... I am always telling students here: ‘Don’t be afraid,’” she says.

“I see my work as a career, and I am not afraid to make money from it. I make the work to get it out there into the world. I love making it and love the fact that it gives people joy, so selling it is just part of the process.” ■