



PHOTO: SILVAIN DELEU

'The morning will come when your composure returns', 2014, hotshop, coldshop, kilnformed glass, 30 x 18 x 18 cm



PHOTO: SILVAIN DELEU

'You liberated the one I never rated', 2014, hotshop, coldshop, kilnformed glass, 29 x 15 x 16 cm

Moments in Time

The smooth, dark surfaces of Dan Bowran's sculptural forms glow with refracted light and possess the enigmatic grace of Kubrick's monolith and the erotic contours of Giger's bio-mechanics. Profile by Ray Grewal.

IT'S the dead of night in the Australian bush, just four hours' drive from Melbourne and there's something invigoratingly primordial about the wilderness – both the star-strewn sky and the expansive desert feel brutally infinite. A rare B-side of *Buffalo Gals* by Malcolm McLaren is pulsating out of a sound system, the dirty vinyl scratchy from years of neglect. Dan Bowran hikes the volume up even higher because Malcolm is competing with the roar from a 1200°C furnace. Then Bowran returns to the inferno.

'Watching those patties twist and crack on the marver was beautiful. Molten balls dropping off the ladles onto a steel slab. Self-annealing glass, never knew it was possible – well in theory it's not, but there it was in front of me, buckets of the stuff, freshly made glass. This is the way I'm meant to find it, this is a good introduction.'

It's 2008 and Dan Bowran has just won the Blackwood Crystal Glass Prize and the "prize" is all the glass he can carry smelted by the alchemist of glass James Thompson in the Australian outback.

There's a glint in Bowran's eye as he tells the story: it's an amalgamation of his twin passions: glass and music. His love for music began in childhood listening to Mel-

bourne radio stations 3PBS and 3RRR, both independent non-commercial channels that play alternative music. His passion for glass had a longer gestation: 2002 in the East End of London Bowran was struggling with French lessons. To alleviate the stultifying misery of trying to learn "la langue de Molière" (a concession to his then wife), he sought a creative outlet. Glass, Bowran told me with a hint of reverence, existed for many eons before it was discovered by early humans. And just as they were bewitched by its beauty, so it was for Bowran when he enrolled in a stained glass evening class. Suddenly, after 20 years working with audiovisual equipment, mixing sound and manipulating light, he found something that had tactile immediacy. Over the next three years, holding down an office job during the days and taking classes in the evenings, he went from cutting stained glass and creating basic panels to casting and fusing inclusions at the Arts Academy. It was there that Bowran first had the opportunity to work with a glass kiln.

'The excitement was long and protracted: creating the models, making the moulds, loading the kilns, planning the firing schedules for five days to a week and then taking out the mould and cracking it open. It was like



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'It's not like we'll never know love (white)', 2014, kilnformed glass, 30 x 17 x 14 cm

'We could be one', 2013, kilnformed glass, 27 x 13 x 15 cm

'I don't love anyone (live)', 2014, kilnformed glass, 23 x 19 x 20 cm



PHOTO: SYLVAIN DELEU

opening a long awaited present and not knowing what you were going to get.'

Returning to his native home town Melbourne, Bowran became the final honours student to study for the BA in Fine Arts majoring in glass at Monash University. It was there that he learned to tame the uncertainty of process. 'Some of my early kilnformed work was made through an intriguing number of firings. The firing schedules became very specific, both for the kilns and the work, and they needed to be incredibly accurate. Incorporated into the schedules was an unconventional technique that relied on "crashing the kilns" (rapid cooling) at various stages. This "freezes" the glass while in a liquid state. I have developed this technique extensively and am able to steer the glass in a direction that appears to be natural, but there is in fact nothing "natural" about it; everything is carefully controlled and developed through months of research.'

Bowran's glass flows, coils and explodes; it twists, spills and cracks in ways that intrigue and confound but also comfort and amaze: 'It's easy on the eye, approachable, even innocent,' he says with a wistful smile. Over a cup of coffee in the British Library he explains how he created one of his final pieces in Melbourne: *Love on the rocks with no ice*. He told me about a separator he devised to stop the glass from sticking to the rock, of super slow and low slumping and of crashing the kiln. And the final product? A fluid sweep of thick blue glass which tumbles over an iron-rich orange rock. The resulting cascade tapers to clear endings that refract light, distort images and throughout there are swirls of excited bubbles frozen in ecstasy. Various shades of blue, from aqua

'I know that you saved me', 2014, kilnformed glass, 22 x 17 x 16 cm

to indigo, ripple through the glass capturing the oceans and the sky with elegant ease.

It was also in Melbourne that Bowran discovered new ways to fuse his passion for music with his love for glass. 'I've taken to appropriating song titles and lyrics and using them as titles. This occurred naturally, after all, words are the medium of writers, poets and lyricists who are better skilled at articulating emotions, expressing feelings and creating emotive spaces in words. Titles also function as diary notes for me, reminding me of what I was listening to while making the piece, what mood I was in, how I was thinking. It reminds me of who I was when I made the piece.'

After graduating with honours Bowran moved back to London and a Master in Arts specialising in Glass at the Royal College of Art. And so commenced an intensive two-year period of exploration and experimentation as he developed a new body of work. Long days spent in the coldshop, cutting and grinding, were followed by longer evenings of planning and organising the hotshop for the next day. As he worked at the lathe and with the diamond saw, he discovered a way to assimilate his years of lighting design into his work. In pieces such as *The morning will come when your composure returns* and *You liberated the one I never rated*, he discovered that when he encased a black core in layers of thick clear glass and then fire-polished the finished piece, the light would become trapped, refracting off the inner surfaces, making the piece radiate and glow.

That his past is influencing his present is an organic aspect of the creative process, but when asked which artists inspired him his answer surprises me: "pre-humans". 'I am regularly on the lookout for knapped prehistoric tools. Such artefacts seem to have been my most direct artistic influence over the past year or two. I'm not interested in replicating these objects, but rather finding an



PHOTO: ESTER SEGARRA

'There's no other way', 2013, kilnformed glass, 18 x 14 x 17 cm



PHOTO: ANDREW BARCHAM

'The right honourable Super Hans', 2011, hotshop, coldshop, glass, 19 x 15 x 13 cm



PHOTO: ANDREW BARCHAM



PHOTO: ANDREW BARCHAM

'You're one of my kind', 2012, hotshop, coldshop, ceramic and glass, 21 x 19 x 16 cm

'Love on the rocks with no ice', 2012, rock and glass, 46 x 25 x 38 cm

empathy with the skills and techniques used in making them. Some really fascinating developments occurred when tool-making crossed-over into making something more ornamental and skills migrated to other materials to express new desires. It's an intriguing idea to consider materials and technology as characters in history, living in cohabitation with humans, and then to trace their evolution through the development of techniques.'

Many hours spent in the British and the Victoria & Albert Museums looking at hand axes, knives and other tools, crafted by our nameless and long gone ancestors, is how Bowran finds much of his inspiration. While the smooth surfaces of most of his work make it hard to see how the jagged contours of a knapped arrowhead

or spear have influenced him, it isn't the look he aspires to mimic but rather an in-depth knowledge of materials and their innate qualities. It is the spirit of partnership with glass that Bowran shares with the "pre-humans".

'I look upon working with glass as a collaboration. To me materials aren't inert and glass is not a passive medium waiting for me to imprint my artistic will upon it. It is not something I aspire to dominate or make submissive.'

After graduating from the Royal College of Art he was awarded a residency at Corning, New York.

'It's an amazing place ... the studio, library, museum and the people', enthused Bowran. 'It really is a world class wonderland of glass. Many of us from Corning ended up meeting again a few weeks later for the Libensky Award in Prague. I'm really proud to be part of the exhibition and to be represented in the permanent collection of the Prague Glass Gallery.'

Returning to London Bowran took part in the "Young Masters" exhibition (February 2015) at London Glassblowing. Situated in a newly gentrified part of South East London, a stone's throw away from the Material and Textile Museum and the White Cube art gallery, Peter Layton's Glassblowing Studio and Gallery is the epicentre of contemporary glass in London. Displayed alongside his immediate contemporaries Bowran's pieces reveal themselves in a new light: 'There's something very sci-fi about them,' says Rushka Gray, the gallery's sales officer. It's easy to see what she means; with their smooth, dark surfaces they have the enigmatic grace of Kubrick's monolith and the erotic contours of Giger's biomechanics.

And they all perfectly encapsulate Dan Bowran's underlying philosophy: glass has existed for many thousands of years and will continue for many thousands more, and in this time and place it has assumed these forms – a perfect synergy of material, technique and imagination. What meaning we assign to them is mesmerisingly transient and lusciously mutable.

Ray Grewal



PHOTO: ANDREW BARCHAM

'RedCore', 2010, coldshop, kilnformed glass, 40 x 58 x 38 cm