

Art

BY DOUGLAS LLOYD JENKINS



The last bubble

Pioneers like Anne Robinson and Garry Nash remain legitimately iconic names, but elsewhere the contemporary glass movement is overpopulated and overpromoted.

With all that has happened to the economy over the past 18 months, one would hope there has at least been a good clear-out of the seriously overextended and fly-by-night. If not, investors would no doubt appreciate a warning in time to divest, or at least reposition, their investments. So here it is: overpopulated, overproducing and overpromoted (and with no apparent interest in self-regulating), the contemporary glass movement in New Zealand is in danger of imminent collapse.

The broader art and collectable objects market has generally ridden the investment storm well, and glass is for the moment still the prestige contemporary craft form: able to foot it with painting and sculpture in the auction resale market. Works by legitimately iconic names such as Anne Robinson and Garry Nash command serious prices, but is other contemporary glass really an investment?

With works by beginner and hobby artists attracting prices in the thousands,

contemporary glass occupies a territory most would consider an investment and not just a casual spend. The question then becomes: what is being done to protect those investors? And perhaps more importantly, what protects the cultural investment currently bound up in the development of contemporary glass by organisations as diverse as Wanganui District Council and Creative New Zealand?

In New Zealand, glass is not a particularly old art form. In essence, it dates from the establishment of Auckland's Sunbeam Studios by Robinson, Nash and John Croucher. The emphasis was on blowing, a technique that suited the free-form aesthetics of the 1970s.

Come the mid-1980s, glass might have found itself trapped in the same aesthetic dead-end hippy-go-round that crippled pottery and weaving – had it not been for one person. Robinson pioneered cast glass and in doing so repositioned the medium, taking glass from alternative-lifestyle delicate decorativeness to something urban, monumental, iconic and deeply desir-

able. Such was Robinson's success that a new generation of artists flocked to glass casting through the following decades, encouraged at first by polytechnic courses (the Universal College of Learning, Unitec) and more recently by community art classes (ArtStation) and the occasional summer school. The last two provided an introduction to glass technique but no critical underpinning. The generally intellectually underpowered polytechnic craft sector has proved little better at preparing students to meet the long-term expectations of contemporary art and craft environments. As it stands, tertiary glass education is looking increasingly marginal.

Yet the current fashion for glass means the inherent poverty in most of what is produced goes largely unaddressed. Buyers of glass tend to concentrate more on the properties of the medium than on its form. After all, glass is seductive – even the dullest work improves dramatically when placed in sunlight – and this is the property to which most collectors respond.



Garry Nash with two of his works.



exists primarily to “inspire our community and attract visitors to this beautiful city”. This significantly complicates the situation.

Wanganui is indeed a beautiful city, and deserves to find a distinctive draw card to attract visitors. Supported by the local council, the festival (which is part literary and this year ran from September 19-October 4) does exactly this. Yet the question needs to be asked: is becoming a showcase for indifferent craft glass the best long-term strategy to revive the flagging spirits of a provincial city?

The problem for New Zealand glass comes in the suggestion that the Wanganui Festival of Glass is a nationally important glass event. It isn't. It's a showcase for local artists, most of whom are still polytechnic students, or more established artists attracted to the city by the teaching opportunities those students provide. The exhibition of works by artists – held in shop windows along the main street – are of much the same quality as those accessible through SAG's web-based “find a glass artist near you” project. For Wanganui's investment to pay off, the city needs to strive to be a centre of excellence in glass – a goal there is little current evidence of it pursuing.

That glass escaped the fall from grace pottery suffered through the early 1980s does not immunise it from the same fate. It's not hard to recall the halcyon days of the late 1970s when doctors and lawyers could consider throwing in their jobs in favour of careers as full-time potters and expect to match, if not exceed, their previous salaries. The bonus was that the works didn't have to be good – they just had to be for sale.

The fall from grace hit the pottery community by surprise but the writing

had been on the wall for a decade. The market was being swamped with inferior products eagerly bought by an audience that couldn't tell good from bad and wasn't interested in learning the difference. Back in the early 1980s, the Society of Potters was too busy celebrating growth in membership to see the need for quality control. Lessons have surely been learnt.

It's not that there aren't good glass artists out there, but there are barely more than half a dozen established artists, beyond Robinson, Nash and Croucher, whose careers have long-term prospects of producing investments of any sort. Surprisingly few of those are New Zealand trained. There are about the same number of younger ex-polytechnic artists who have shown talent, but they have yet to prove longevity. Few of these have emerged from specialised glass courses – most come from broader art and design backgrounds. What then of the other 180-plus glass makers profiled by the SAG's website?

With some glass courses now openly promoted on the “make a quick buck” basis, one would hope the SAG would step in. Instead, as it turns 30 – a dangerous

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age for any organisation – it has opted for a glossy publication that will celebrate where it's come from, but hesitates to consider for a moment where it

might be going. Rather than highlighting a few selected artists to represent the very best in New Zealand glass, SAG feels it has a “duty to promote all New Zealand glass artists” – a sure path to sector collapse and investor heartache. ■

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For the makers of cast glass, the ease with which everyday objects can be cast as glass versions provides a ready air of familiarity that can all too often be parlayed by gallery dealers (and in artist's statements) into an illusion of conceptual depth.

There are no official numbers for those presently active in glass, but the local Society of Artists in Glass (SAG) boasts 200 members and its website offers the opportunity to “find a glass artist near you”. The search results illustrate, more succinctly than words can do, that contemporary glass is overpopulated with artists creating works without long-term cultural significance, or a viable future as any sort of investment. Most New Zealand glass artists are dedicating themselves to the production of the “bizarre cult object” that Croucher once warned against.

Right or wrong, these issues should come to a head and be thrashed out in spirited debates at the annual Wanganui Festival of Glass – except that the festival