

Drama and discovery in glass



KERRY-ANNE COUSINS

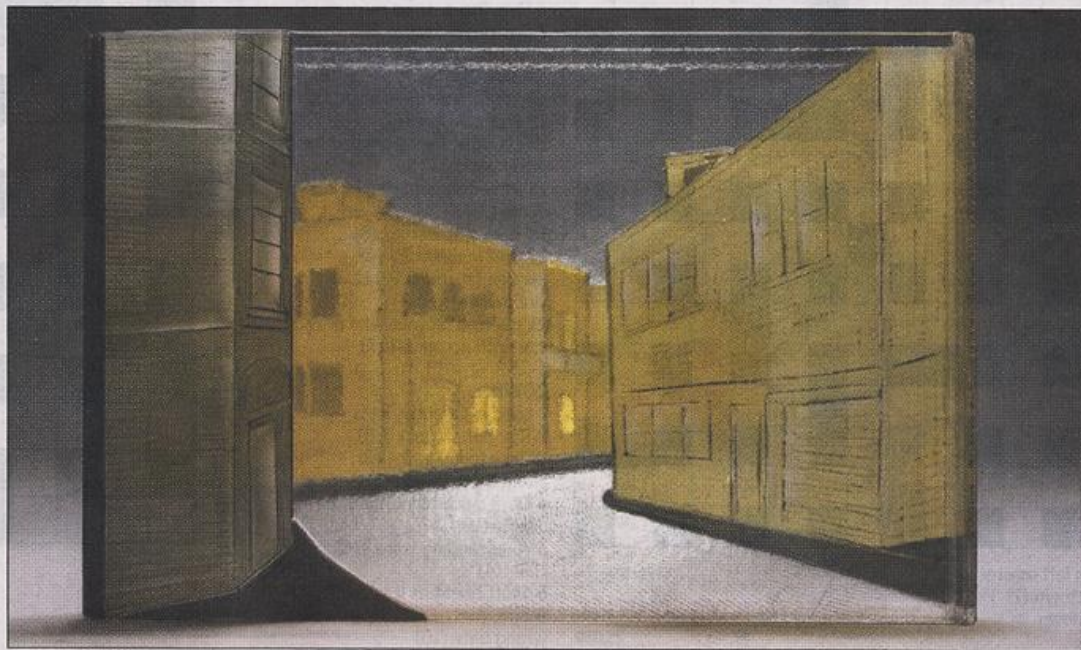
Ruth Oliphant - Studio Glass.

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin.
Hours Tuesday-Friday 10am-5pm, Saturday
and Sunday 9am-5pm.
On until September 22.

If you are interested in contemporary studio glass, it is likely you will have seen Ruth Oliphant's work in several recent exhibitions in Canberra. The current exhibition at Beaver Galleries forms part of a prize awarded to her by Beaver Galleries at the Ausglass 2008 conference.

Ruth Oliphant's background is relevant as it obviously has had an influence on her most recent work. She initially studied architecture at the University of Canberra and lead lighting and stained glass at Holmesglen TAFE in Melbourne before majoring in glass at the Canberra School of Art.

The artist's interest in architecture is reflected in her current work, which is based on drawings of buildings and terrace houses around Paddington in Sydney.



One can also see the influence of her training in lead lighting by the way she uses the technique of "painting" in colour on glass.

Oliphant constructs light boxes of two or three panels of glass that range from 16 to 40cm in height. These function like traditional stage sets with side wings at the front and the "stage" receding into an unknowable space in the distance. Images of streetscapes are carved and moulded onto the

layers of glass to form a visual panorama. One also thinks of Victorian peep shows where glass slides provided a three dimensional illusion of space. Yet Oliphant goes beyond the merely pictorial to create landscapes of the mind where imaginary dramas can be played out in the empty streets. These works hint at a mystery, a sense that a drama is about to take place. Half the works use coloured images in warm

tones of browns, greys and oranges and the rest of the works are in monochrome. In the monochromatic group the black lines are slight and only suggestively sketch in outlines of buildings. They are like brass rubbings where only a slight suggestion of the image is retained. This may be what the artist intends as she is interested in the embedded images of memory left by former inhabitants, which linger in archi-



Ruth Oliphant - *Reservoir*, above;
Oliphant - *Glenmore*, left.

tectural sites. However, as visual works they lack the impact and warm ambience of the group of works that deploy colour.

Among this latter group, the work titled *Suffolk* stands out because the artist has successfully created a brooding sense of drama. However, it is two of the smaller works, titled respectively *Riley* and *Alma*, that I felt were the most successful. Although they were also the most minimal in their design, they communicated a sense of a cityscape without being too descriptive. They worked visually as abstract images from a distance making the reading of their landscapes in close-up more of an interesting discovery.