

Looking to the landscape

For her latest exhibition glass artist Mel Douglas drew inspiration from nature, **Arne Sjostedt** writes

Nineteenth-century French Romantic writer George Sand said, "One is happy as a result of one's own efforts once one knows the necessary ingredients of happiness: simple tastes, a certain degree of courage, self-denial and to a point, love of work."

An avid Radio National consumer, international glass artist Mel Douglas says she will quite happily lose herself at work with a diamond-tipped etching tool, listening to the radio.

Douglas says she is interested in geometry, and with that comes the suggestion of modernism and in some ways, minimalism. "I guess some of my ideas would fit within that area," Douglas says. Though the pieces she creates are uniquely her own. For her exhibition *Half-*

light now on at Beaver Gallery, she has been inspired by the Earth's gentle nod towards the horizon. Her pieces – lovingly sculpted, fired or blown – are handed to her by nature.

Douglas has pieces in the National Gallery of Australia's collection, the Parliament House Art Collection and the Cincinnati Art Museum in the United States, among others. In 2002 she was awarded the coveted Ranamok Prize for Contemporary Glass. For *Half-light*, on now at Beaver Galleries, she is showing works inspired by light, space and time.

"But not necessarily space as in outer space. It's about spaces between things, or spaces around things. Or the space between the landscape and the sky."

Today Douglas exhibits more often in the US than she does in Canberra, but she is grateful when her work is shown here.

Up until the global financial crisis the US had a really good market for glass, Douglas says. "They have a lot of large collecting groups. Organisations of people that are very interested in glass, and very organised collecting bodies.

Another aspect of Douglas being represented by Beaver Galleries is that they will take her work to an annual international art fair in the US.

Even so, "it's quite important" that Douglas

exhibits in Canberra. She has lived here for 15 years and works at the Australian National University School of Art. "So it is very nice and rare to have an exhibition here."

The pieces on show at Beaver are for the most part products of a residency she took in northern Scotland.

"I had a three-month residency there where I developed some new ideas, made some prototypes. And this body of work eventuated from some of those ideas and some of the new working methods."

During this residency, after noticing the beautiful landscapes around her, Douglas began thinking about how that could inform her work.

"This body of work was from that experience in northern Scotland and that expanse of landscape up there. And in a way it was very similar to the Canberra landscape – large skies, big expanses of land. Which was quite interesting, almost being able to see the end curves of the land as it stretched on," she says.

"I guess one of the other ideas I was looking at in my head was the way the landscape changes with light as well, that period just before the sunset. There is almost something renewing at the end of the day when everything becomes lustrous. More of an expanse."

Douglas says her practice before "the last two years" was mainly with blown and engraved vessels. So this exhibition denotes a "two-fold development" of new ideas as well as of new processes. The blown

works are more sculptural, and those in this exhibition originate from gentle curves taken from shapes in the landscapes "and that kind of juxtaposition between an object and space."

The second technique she has used for wall-mounted works that are almost playful in her use of engraving and soft curving forms. These involve cutting and stacking glass, which then is fired in a kiln. "Whenever glass comes out of a kiln it's very shiny. Then I remove the surfaces and I sand them back," says Douglas, for whom one of the most pleasurable aspects of her work is creating small markings that make the surface treatment of the pieces.

"It is very slow. And most of the mark-making techniques I use are all done by hand and are very repetitious. The making process isn't hugely time consuming."

Instead of a chore, this is something Douglas looks forward to – part of the pull that creating art has on many that practise it. "The mark-making and the time that it takes is part of what the work is about," she says. "Those moments that draw you in and take you somewhere else. I think they balance quite nicely with one another."

■ *Half-light* runs at Beaver Galleries until May 24. Open Tuesday-Friday, 10am-5pm and Saturday-Sunday, 9am-5pm. 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Ph: 6282 5294.



Mel Douglas with her glass vessel *Low Tide*, part of her *Half-light* exhibition at Beaver Galleries.
Photo: Kate Leith