

Art before science a top-glass act for artist Mel Douglas

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Touch of glass ... Mel Douglas pictured at the ANU school of arts. *Photo: Melissa Adams*

Imagine you're an artist in Canberra and you discover a world-famous musician has bought one of your works. Does this say something about your work, or about the musician? Is it something worth bragging about? Or even mentioning?

For glass artist Mel Douglas, learning that Elton John had bought one of her decorative vessels from a Sydney gallery meant little more than a familiar name strangely out of context.

"Really, it was just like a normal sale - the gallery called me and told me I had sold a work to Elton John," she says. "My mother sees it as my career highlight." Plus, it happened almost 10 years ago.



Winner ... Mel Douglas' *Camber*, for which she won the prestigious Tom Malone Prize.

Douglas has been making and selling her works and winning awards ever since, and Elton John has nothing to do with it. Or rather, he's just another enthusiast who is enriched by the work of other artists.

"The best sales are when you get to talk to the person purchasing the work, and they really love the work. Knowing that something you have made is going to make someone else happy in their daily life is exciting.

"Some of the most exciting collections of art I have encountered have all been enriched by their enthusiastic collectors, and the stories they have attached to each work of art they have purchased."



Fine balance ... Mel Douglas' *Ballast*. Photo: Stuart Hay ANU Photography

As it turns out, she never got to meet or even speak to Elton John, although she did learn that he has a huge glass collection and when in Australia makes a point of visiting Sydney's Sabbia Gallery - formerly Quadrivium Gallery. He has bought many works by Australian glass artists. It is this, rather than his mega-stardom, that impresses her.

Looking at Douglas' work, it's easy to detect what might catch the eye of someone in need of balance and stillness in life. She recently won the Art Gallery of Western Australia's Tom Malone Prize, Australia's main glass prize after the Ranamok. She won with *Camber*. Blue-black and pure, and engraved in a way that brings fluidity to its solid form, it is a typical example of her work and the sentiments behind it.

"The simplicity of my work suggests stillness and silence, a meditation on the elements and concepts of light, space and time," she has said of her objects. "I am interested in how objects balance and sit in space, holding on to that last moment of silence and stillness before they spill over."

Douglas' aesthetic manifests in her person as well - walking among the cluttered workspaces and noisy, churning rooms of the glass workshop at the ANU school of art, where she is a lecturer, she is a serene presence. Douglas, originally from Tasmania, grew up and finished school in Canberra - crucially, at Narrabundah College.

One teacher in particular, Lyn Nolan, encouraged her to enrol at art school. "It was a bit of a toss-up, maybe, between science and art, and I think there's that creative link between both of them. I was quite interested in biology and things like that, so it would have been one or the other and I think in some ways they both kind of feed into one another."

Initially she studied ceramics, but switched over to glass after two years.

"Actually, I'm a huge fan of ceramics, and most of my favourite artists are ceramicists, so I think that was a big influence and it was a really good grounding. I learnt a lot, and I still use a lot of the skills I learnt in ceramics as well now, with model-making or any kind of mould-building, and that dexterity you learn with your hands."

She finished honours and got a job at the National Gallery of Australia, where she worked in travelling exhibitions for eight years. As with many artists who work in galleries, she says being among such a wide variety of art gave her a good grounding in her own practice.

But when she found out she was pregnant in 2007, having just taken temporary leave to take up an Australia Council grant to create new works, she decided to resign.

"I think it was a lot of things happening at the one time so it was quite confronting, and I was like, 'I'm too young to have a baby!' I was 28. But you just get on with it," she says.

She gave birth to son Luka two weeks after her solo show opened, and then spent a year off.

"I would take Luka into the studio and potter around with him, which was nice, and then at the six-month mark I started going back to the studio," she says. She and partner Charlie Higgins both have family in Canberra, which made things easier to slide easily back into her practice.

Like many artists, she has found a way to make money without straying too far from her own field.

"I make a little bit of work from a lot of different avenues that I work in, but they're all involved in some way in the arts, be it teaching or be it doing a small class at the Canberra Glassworks, or making some commission work or selling your own artwork," she says.

"I think a lot of artists have to multi-task and do a bit of that. But I think I've been really lucky, too, and I've been the right person at the right time in the right situation, which has been great."

In 2009, she moved into teaching part-time at the Glass Workshop.

It is, she says, the most fulfilling of jobs.

"I think being around students there's such creative energy here, and it's really inspiring. It's really inspiring seeing people at that early stage of their career, where they're finding their own voices as an artist - I find it really quite an amazing time.

"It can be quite draining - the more you give the less you've got for yourself - but I also find it really enriching for my own artistic practice, too."

The Elton John sale all those years ago is just one accolade in a string of awards, prizes, grants and solo exhibitions over the years.

She won the Ranamok Glass Prize in 2002 and was the people's choice in 2011. That prize will wind up this year after a 20-year run, so the Tom Malone Prize might well be the last major glass art prize in Australia.

Aside from selling most of the pieces she creates through Sabbia Gallery in Sydney, Beaver Galleries in Canberra and, lately, through Lesley Kehoe Galleries in Melbourne, Douglas has works in several major public collections including the National Gallery of Australia, Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, Parliament House and the Cincinnati Art Museum Collection.

She has two works in the National Gallery, and is particularly proud that the first was purchased in memory of a staff member who had passed away, not long after she had left the institution.

"I thought that piece was a great piece to go into the collection, I felt really proud," she says.

"The second piece was acquired recently, so I think the National Gallery is trying to build or tell a story about what's happening with contemporary glass in Australia."

Her work has a definite style, but how has it changed over the years?

"I can definitely see a theme, or maybe an aesthetic, that runs through all of my work, and I think the way I work means that changes are very slow because my process is quite methodical and I try and make small changes within each piece, so I haven't seen any great leaps or changes," she says.

"But I think I've really honed in on what I'm doing and refined what I'm doing and maybe even pared back what I'm doing, which has been interesting.

"I think I'm looking for different things within the work, so at the moment I'm really interested in space and balance and how objects sit in space and hold space."

And, with so many opportunities on the horizon, she has no plans to leave Canberra any time soon.

She is off to teach for a week at the Jam Factory craft and design hub in Adelaide.

She is taking up a residency at the Tacoma Museum of Glass in Washington state, and, along with many other Australians before her, at Pilchuck Glass School in nearby Seattle.

At Tacoma she'll be creating a work with a team of four glassblowers.

"It's exciting, and I think that's why the glass community is so tight-knit as well.

"It's the nature of what we do, working together," she says.