

Intensely coloured bowls stand out in glass showing

Tom Rowney, Studio Glass,
Beaver Galleries, Until March 3

Reviewed by: Kerry-Anne Cousins

Tom Rowney is well known for his glassmaking skills, in particular his ability in working with hot glass and his mastery of Venetian style cane working techniques. Rowney, however, is not only concerned with the technical process of producing glass but also with exploring its qualities or, what he has noted as its inherent "glassiness", characterised by its brightness of colour and shiny surfaces. All these aspects of Rowney's art practice come together in this exhibition at Beaver Galleries.

Rowney initially trained at the Budgeree Glass Factory in Adelaide before completing his studies at the ANU Canberra School of Art in 1995. As well as his own glass practice, Rowney has worked as a technical assistant and gaffer for other glass artists and since 2006, has been technical manager at the Canberra Glassworks.

Venetian glass working techniques have influenced many contemporary glass artists. The city of Venice and the island of Murano have been famous for glassmaking since the 13th century. Venetian glassmakers are known for their hot glass blowing

and the use of glass canes or rods to make intricate patterns in glass. Venetian style cane working is a highly skilled process. Glassmakers pull and twist glass canes using a variety of different techniques to make the characteristic intricate patterns. The canes are laid down between layers of clear glass before the hot glass is blown into its desired form.

Glass artists can achieve many wonderful visual effects by employing these glass canes in different configurations. This can result in trails of linear patterned decoration through the whole glass body or patterns made by using coloured cross sections of the canes to create patterned effects such as flowers (millefiori). Practical objects such as drinking glasses and bowls as well as intricate and highly decorative objets d'art have always been made by the Venetian glass makers to demonstrate their skill. A Venetian glass candlestick I once owned had as its stem a golden dolphin supported on a golden sphere with cane-work decoration.

Rowney has used sea motifs like these in his own work – most notably in 2003-04 where a series of beautiful cane-work "lolly" bowls and wine glasses are supported by sea horses. Rowney is also known for his series of



Tom Rowney's *Red and green bowl*, blown glass with cane work.

oval glass forms decorated by elegant cane work. In 2005 Rowney held an exhibition of these forms at the former gallery in the Kamberra Wine Centre in Watson ACT. These early ovoid glass vessels are notable for their layers of coloured glass-like onion skins peeling back to provide an intensity of quite complex

patterning and ambiguous interior space.

Rowney's early mentor was Nick Mount. Mount's glass elements assembled in sculptural still life arrangements may have influenced Rowney's movement away from the traditional glass object. He has conceived his own forms as abstract



Open black bowl with spheres, blown and hot-formed glass with cane work, by Tom Rowney.

arrangements of cubes, cylinders and spheres that include several glass totem-like forms, spinning tops and open glass bowls.

The works in the present exhibition are visually attractive because of the sleek, intense glossiness of the glass and the intensity of colour as well as

the beautiful cane-work decoration. There are no optical shifting layers as in Rowney's previous oval forms. This is particularly true of two outstanding works – the *Red and green bowl No. 2* and the *Yellow and purple bowl No. 3*. The red and green blown glass bowl perhaps sums up Rowney's fascination with the glossiness of the glass surface. The intense red of its exterior is matched with an acid green interior which is decorated by a beautiful flowing cane-work pattern. The other example, *Yellow and purple bowl*, is an open bowl with a red and purple cane-work pattern. Its interior is an acid yellow which, matched with the exterior colours, has an intense visual impact. Another work, *Black, white and grey merletto bowl No. 9* is more subtle in its colourings. The merletto technique of cane working involves glass canes being twisted and pulled by hand so that they form delicate web-like patterns. This more subdued colouring is also reflected in the beautiful and elegant style of the *Lavender cane bowl No. 13* and the *Lavender bowl with crossed canes No. 14*.

Rowney's other forms are more adventurous. *Red bamboo No. 4* is a tall cylindrical form in an intense glossy red glass and is divided into two halves by a black sphere

ornamented by cane work. *Open red cones with spheres No. 10* and *Open white cylinder with spheres No. 8*, which also are bisected with spheres, are very attractive, successful pieces.

More problematic is *Aventurine green golden orb holder No. 16* and *Open golden pill with spheres No. 15* that do not have the same appeal because of the duller colour of the glass and the fact the small spheres do not seem such an integral part of the work. This is also the case in one of the bigger works, *Golden twenty four No. 1* where the form of the work is bizarre in the sense of it being quite eccentric.

Small glass spheres are attached as ornaments to a larger central glass mound. This work and *Aventurine green golden orb holder* seem to be part of a 2014 series based on regalia such as orbs, crowns and sceptres. Where these spheres are part of the body of the glass form they are convincing as they are integral to the perception of the form as a complete entity. Where I feel they fail to convince is where they appear as if they have been added onto an already existing form.

There is much to admire in this exhibition. For me, the *Red and green bowl* and *Red bamboo*, two very accomplished and successful works, are among its highlights.