

'Some Reserves', 2011 (from the 'Crate Series'), kiln-formed and assembled glass, 50.8 x 19 x 19 cm



'A Place to Rest', 2010 (from the 'Crate Series'), kiln-formed and assembled glass, 38 x 20.5 x 17.5 cm

PHOTO: ROB LITTLE

PHOTO: NEIL MCCrackEN

Nostalgia of Transition

KILN-FORMED GLASS BY JEREMY LEPISTO

In 2009, Jeremy Lepisto and his partner Mel George decided to pack up in Portland, Oregon and shift to Australia, bringing with them, according to Glass Central blog, the 'sharp end of the glass business'. Profile by Dr Sharon Peoples

WHILE waiting to interview Lepisto at the Glass Workshop of the Australian National University's School of Art, I observed this young man deftly giving technical instruction to a group of students. The detailed information was transcribed into notebooks, questions asked and answered. Lepisto's calm responses and quick smile allayed fears of new knowledge. He has been developing new knowledge and techniques in glass for all of his professional life.

When we retired to one of the back rooms of the workshop, the conversation started with the usual questions of why glass, background, mentors, intentions and his move from the US to Australia. He quietly mentioned engineering as a possibility of the direction he might have set out on. However, Lepisto began his studies in 1993 at the New York College of Ceramics at Alfred University in the US. He took graphic design in the early years and although he majored in metals and glass, Lepisto did not touch glass until after his first year. In 1996, he was awarded a student scholarship and headed to Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood.

During a five-year stint at Bullseye Glass Company in Portland, Oregon, Lepisto did not focus on making any of his own work. His time was spent in glass production and as a technician on various art and architectural projects. Learning by osmosis – observing fellow workers, artists and clients, all making critical decisions – he spent his sometimes 16-hour days watching and absorbing the

process of people making art. He was totally involved in all facets of Bullseye from fabrication to the research and education centre. The mystique of glass dissipated but his appreciation of the material was much enhanced. Although he witnessed the building of magnificent and complex projects and was enmeshed in their realisation, Lepisto also saw spectacular failures. For him, it was the "grace" with which artists accepted such disasters. Pushing glass to the technical and aesthetic edge comes with a price, and sometimes it does not work out. Lepisto likens glass, as a medium, to a cat: 'It comes to you on its own terms, and when it is ready'. Whereas, he suggests, metal is more like a dog: 'You can approach it, leave it and come back to when you are ready, and it is happy for you to be in charge'.

It was at Bullseye where Lepisto first met many of his mentors, such as Dan Clayman from Rhode Island, as well as Australians Klaus Moje, Kirstie Rea and Scott Chaseling. It was there that he also met his wife and partner, Mel George, another Australian glass artist.

In 2001, he co-founded the successful Studio Ramp LLC in Portland with Mel George. This glass fabrication studio took on many commissions – again working to clients' commissions, leaving little room for personal art projects. In 2009, George and Lepisto made the decision to pack up and shift to Australia. As Glass Central blog stated: bringing the 'sharp end of the glass business', managerial experience and strong technical skills to a glass



PHOTO: ROB LITTLE

'Two Deliver Tomorrow', 2011 (from the 'Shipment Series'), kiln-formed and assembled glass with fabricated steel, 65.2 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm



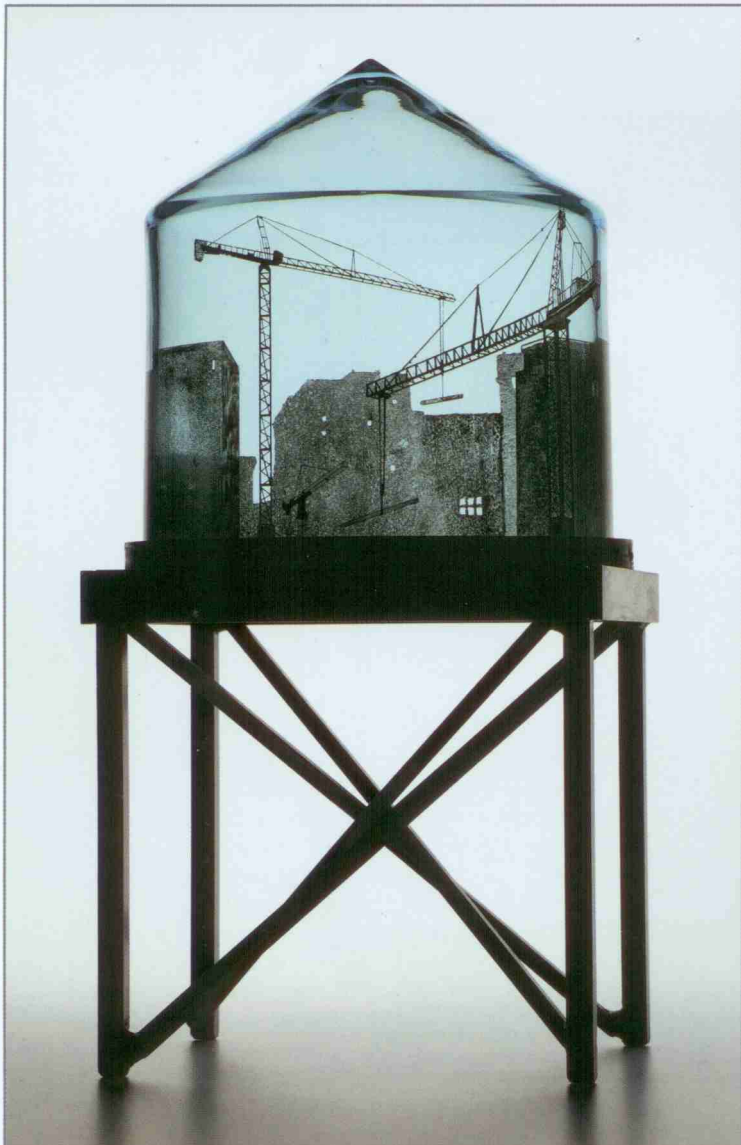
'SQ. FT. 06', 2008, kiln-formed glass, 30.5 x 30.5 x 6.3 cm

PHOTO: PAUL FOSTER



'All the Stories', 2010, kiln-formed glass, 38.1 x 20.3 x 20.3 cm

PHOTO: NEIL MCCrackEN



'Filling In', 2009 (from the 'Watertower Series'), blown and enamelled glass with fabricated steel, 35.6 x 19 x 19 cm

PHOTO: PAUL FOSTER

community that appreciated their vocational generosity.

It is in this packing up and making the transition across the world that Lepisto's recent and highly reflective work centres upon. Integrating the emotions associated with losing a sense of place in the landscape into his forms can be seen as nostalgia, perhaps tinged with a slight sense of melancholia. His more recent pieces express this, yet also embody a sense of optimism.¹

Lepisto mentioned that he is cautious about appropriating imagery of his presence in Australia, at least just yet. His narration of stories from home through graphic imagery embedded into the glass seems to articulate the dislocation and transition. Our conversation returns back to one of his mentors, Kirstie Rea. Living and working in the same region, Canberra, he has come to see Rea, not so much as his antithesis, but as his counterpoint. He regards her imagery and form as the essence of the country itself. It is this authenticity that he strives for in his own work.

Figuring out how he fits into the landscape, both visually and culturally, is no doubt part of his journey. For now, it literally contains discrete synopses of his life on "palettes" and the sides of empty glass "crates" – not unlike those plastic crates with handles, containing infrequently used objects, that we store away in and on top of cupboards. He describes these works as metaphors for the "unshippable", "unopenable" and the "undeliverable".

His skills in hand drawing are used in his narratives. He developed what he calls a "ghetto" technique for transferring his images onto the glass. He teaches this low-cost method of using contact paper and printing techniques to his students. He appears to be very inventive in order to cajole the "cat" into co-operating.

Using kiln-formed glass methods, these pieces take up to four firings to achieve the desired "grainy memory". He does this through the use of rubbing in black powder, then sand blasting and finishing the surfaces to obtain a burnished sheen. He explained that optimally all the work is made at the one time. Each series is laid out and processed together. When parts have to be redone, to his eye it is noticeable and a lot of work is required in matching up. He claims not to be a perfectionist but the years of tech-

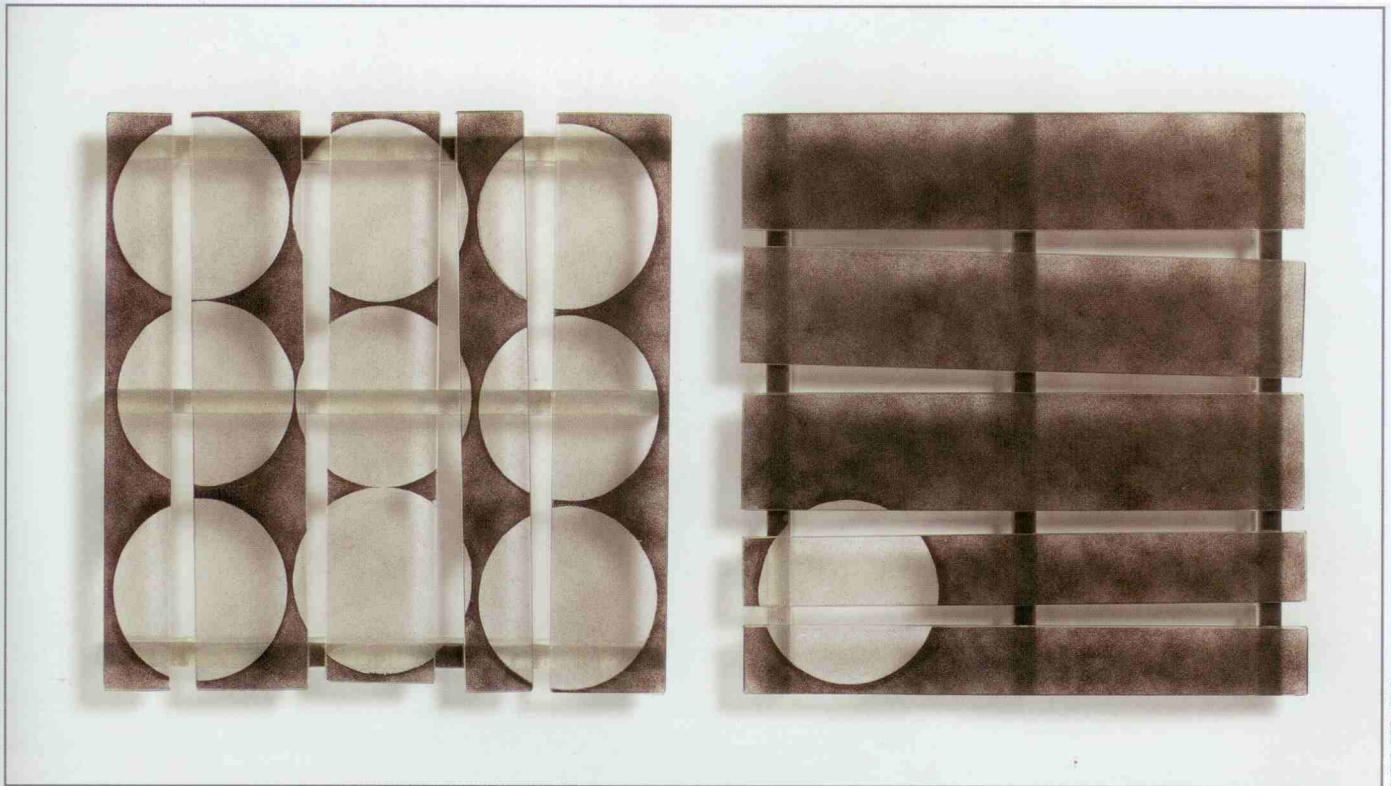


PHOTO: ROB LITTLE

'Even Number', 2011 (from the 'Pallet Series'), two pieces, kiln-formed and assembled glass, total 61 x 130 x 3.8 cm



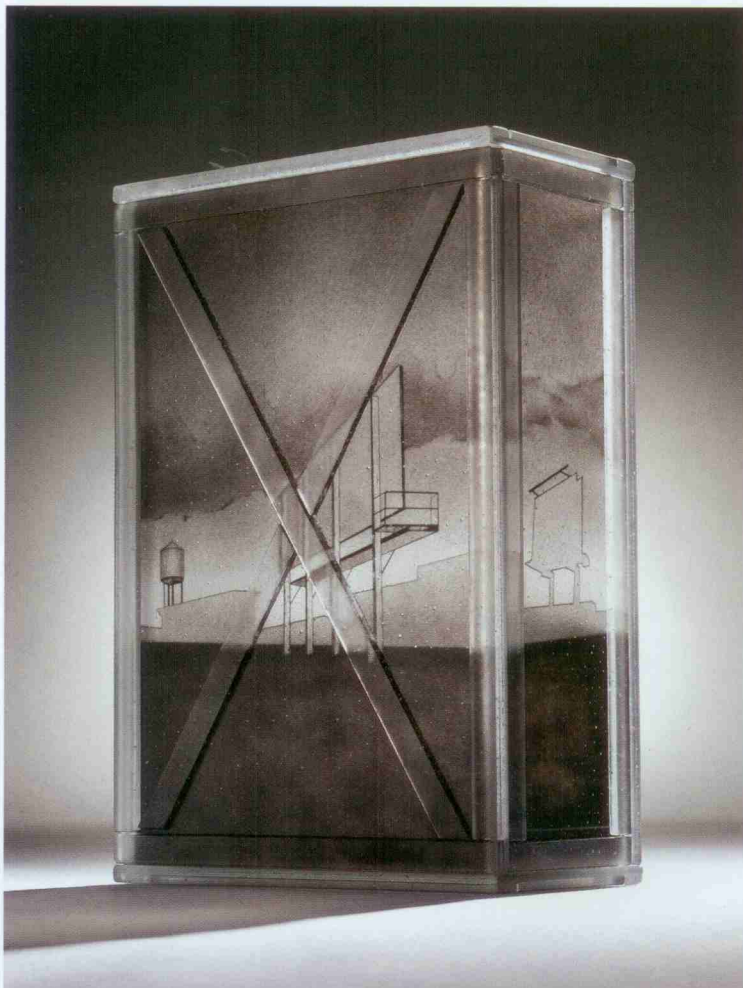
PHOTO: ROB LITTLE

'Central Supply', 2011 (from the 'Shipment Series'), kiln-formed and assembled glass with fabricated steel, 29.8 x 31.7 x 31.7 cm



'The Last Shipment', 2011 (from the 'Shipment Series'), kiln-formed, assembled glass with fabricated steel, 53.3 x 51 x 51 cm

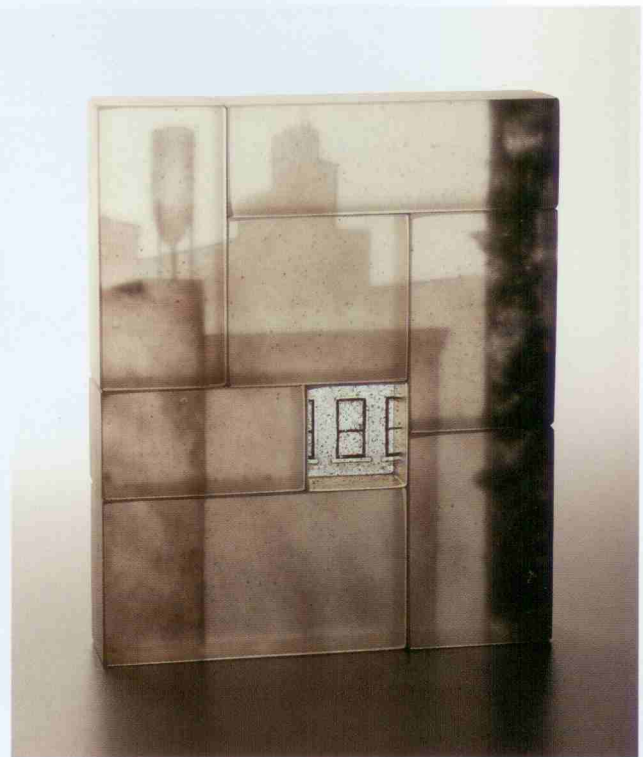
nical training, fabrication and inquiry do not leave much room for anything else but the highest level in workmanship. Producing commissioned works during the Studio Ramp days, from architects, designers and artists with the likes of Dale Chihuly, come with a price tag of precision. Although he uses industrial methods in the formation of



'Familiar Setting', 2011, kiln-formed and assembled glass, 45.7 x 30.7 x 15.2 cm

PHOTO: ROB LITTLE

PHOTO: ROB LITTLE



'A Bit of Clarity', 2007, kiln-formed glass, 24 x 21.5 x 5 cm

PHOTO: PAUL FOSTER

the objects, it's the hand finishing of each stage that produces the intense atmosphere that is elicited in each piece. The mark of the hand is evident; through the hazy translucency we glimpse small vignettes of moments in time and place. This work is, after all, only such a moment in time – it could dissolve in an instant. Are those tiny bubbles within the layers of glass trapped in the hard glass or is the work in the process of liquefying and disintegrating?

In moving half way around the world, like many migrants, Lepisto has become aware of the opportunity to reassess and to perhaps change direction, leaving his well-earned and comfortable career, home, milieu and reputation unpacked within his containers. He was grateful for the prospect to make new work for a solo exhibition that did not directly build on his previous oeuvre. Gallery owners, Susie and Martin Beaver, were happy for Lepisto to embark on something entirely new. Transitional works can be such a gamble, but it seems that this artist is on the brink of significant change.



PHOTO: MEL GEORG

Jeremy Lepisto

I initially asked why glass, and his response was something to do with engineering. Our conversation picked up on engineering again. Not wishing to be pigeonholed, he sees the present scale of his work expanding. This will come about both intellectually and physically through taking up a PhD in the sculpture workshop of the Australian National University's School of Art. He admits that his glass practice could be upscaled through the use of modular components but it seems he had already considered why glass indeed. The final part of the conversation began to sound like Jeremy Lepisto was on the verge of engineering and entering into his lexicon of making – a really exciting phase to watch.

Dr Sharon Peoples

Dr Sharon Peoples is an artist and academic at the Research School of Humanities, The Australian National University, Canberra.

Jeremy Lepisto is represented by Beaver Galleries, Deakin, Canberra.

1. This body of work was the subject of the artist's solo exhibition "Of Import" at Beaver Galleries on 24 March, 2011.