

# What do we fear and want?

Glass sculptor Nick Wirdnam's latest theme is superstition, **Kerry-Anne Cousins** writes

**N**ick Wirdnam has been involved with the Australian glass scene for many years. A finalist in the prestigious Ranamok Glass Prize in 2000, 2002 and 2004, he has also lectured in glass studies at Monash University and at various overseas institutions. Wirdnam is probably best-known for his hot glass sculptured fish either suspended from or mounted on metal stands as if they are floating through metaphorical space.

There has always been another dimension to Wirdnam's work as he has been concerned with using his glass sculptures to open a wider dialogue between himself and the viewer. In his past work, notably the 2007 exhibition at Beaver Galleries, the artist was engaged in a more introspective conversation with objects that were part of a symbolic personal language.

In this exhibition, the conceptual nature of the work is more obvious, not only because the glass objects have a surreal quality but because they come with their own cultural baggage. These associations of cultural significance demand that the viewer interact with the works on a more meaningful level.

Wirdnam has created beautifully crafted glass objects associated with ritual and superstition. There are objects like playing dice, acorns, a small pig, wishbones, lingams, keys and human hands. In present and past societies amulets and charms have been venerated in order to bring good luck and ward off the evil eye or the malevolent fates. These charms act as repositories for the aspirations of the human heart. What do you wish for asks Wirdnam – good luck, prosperity,

## Nick Wirdnam - Superstition - Studio Glass

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin.  
Hours: Tuesday-Friday, 10am-5pm;  
Saturday-Sunday, 9am-5pm.  
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youth, spiritual power, wisdom or knowledge?

These objects are presented either on a slate slab like an offertory or as a ritual object on a red velvet cushion. Exceptions to this are the red glass dice and the little blue pig as well as the realistically modelled collection of glass twigs. The three red dice (12cm square) have a pleasing matt surface which is cut away to reveal the white dots beneath. Each of the dice stands alone so they could be arranged as if they have been rolled to reveal propitious numbers. The little blue pig, a traditional symbol of prosperity, stands perkily on its four feet. It is made from deep rich blue glass with softer blue highlights.

In the work called ... *for prosperity, youthfulness and power*, two acorns are balanced on a slate slab. They are beautifully modelled and realistically coloured. Nevertheless, because of their larger-than-life scale, they have a certain monumental simplicity. There are several versions of works that contain collections of wishbones. These glass objects very skilfully sculptured from hot glass have a surface like old ivory. They are shown in groups perhaps to increase their potency. In a work called ... *for wishing*, one of the wishbones is broken to represent a wish already made. In *Three wishes*, the broken wishbones are arranged almost like the ritual casting of bones by a witch doctor.

Decorative glass keys, rather like the symbolic keys to a city, are presented on red velvet cushions. These keys are made either from



Two acorns balanced on a slate slab in Wirdnam's work titled *for prosperity, youthfulness and power*, below. Wirdnam's glass sculpture of human hands, which have many associations, below.



translucent glass or ivory-coloured glass that seems stained with the patina of age. On several of the keys, little ivory modelled hands (with crossed fingers for luck) form the blade of the locking mechanism. Their exquisite modelling is an example of the artist's great skill in working with hot glass. These hands have many associations. In many parts of Europe, there is an old tradition of using human hands made from metal to form the knockers of entrance doors. In Muslim countries the hand of Fatima, a daughter of Muhammad, is used on doors to bring prosperity. In Brazil the "figa" or sculptured clenched fist in carved wood or metal is used as an amulet against the evil eye. Likewise in a religious context, sculptured hand reliquaries held

the relics of saints and were thought to have the ability to grant prayers.

All these associations give Wirdnam's exhibition the power to intrigue and involve the viewer. In some ways the work sits rather incongruously in the contemporary space of the gallery. More atmospheric lighting to enhance its other-world appeal would have heightened its dramatic impact. However, perhaps we need to see these superstitions in the cold light of intellectual rationalism. What do you wish for?