

# Heart of Glass

smh.com.au

September 1, 2014

Nick Wirdham's art draws on the tradition of carrying encoded messages in still life arrangements, writes Kerry-Anne Cousins.

*Beliefs. Nick Wirdnam. Beaver Galleries. On until September 9.*



Give me strength: Nick Wirdnam, for Speed, strength and hope in Beliefs.

Still-life compositions have always been one of the genres of painting practice. Artists like painting things that they can group in arrangements to suit their artistic purpose, it is sometimes easier than moving around uncongenial aspects of a known landscape or features on the face of a portrait.

Still-life painting has always been a test of the painter's skill – the light on a piece of fruit, the clear transparency of glass or the droplet of dew on a leaf were all challenges for a master artist.



Long life: Nick Wirdnam, Bowl of plenty (gold) No. 11 in Beliefs.

However still-life paintings were not always simply a matter of recording form and light. The objects in a still-life arrangement could sometimes carry an encoded message; for example in late 16th century Dutch still-life paintings, the inclusion of insects, skulls and full blown or dying fruit and flowers carried messages relating to the brevity of life or *carpe diem* (Seize the day).

Nick Wirdnam's work is situated within this tradition as he explores the idea of ascribing to objects symbolic meanings beyond their obvious appearance. However Wirdnam, instead of painting the objects, creates them from blown and hot sculptured glass.

In his present series of still-life sculptures, Wirdnam uses age-old superstitions as a basis for his works. As he writes: "While I accept these are irrational beliefs, I am willing to harbour them as they may possibly hold some truth and offer some hope and comfort ... It is the power of the object which interests me. "

To well-known symbols of good luck like horseshoes and wishbones, Wirdnam adds a whole vocabulary of personal meaning to the other objects he assembles. Acorns become symbols of long life, garlic for strength (and perhaps for warding off the evil eye), an apple a day for health and a pig for prosperity. Dice and wishbones are also included perhaps symbolising the necessity of good luck. However these meanings are not necessarily proscribed and tend to vary with each work.

As in a still-life painting where objects are usually arranged on a table, Wirdnam substitutes thin black limestone bases. In the work *...for health... No.1*, two large apples in glossy red and green glass provide a temptation not unlike that of Eve – there is an instinctive desire to touch their shiny surfaces and caress their full rounded forms. What is important however, in these arrangements is the space created between each object that provides the dramatic tension which unifies the work.

In other works the artist brings together disparate objects such as garlic bulbs and a wishbone, as in the work (*... for speed, strength and hope... No. 3*) that are quite different in form and in nature. They also become bound together not only by the skilful way they are balanced on the limestone base that functions as the 'table' but by their association through a symbolic language.

The work *... for youth and health... No.9* where there is only one apple, this connectedness exists between the object and the base and is provided by the textured surface of the base that catches the light and echoes the light on the shiny surface of the apple. The apple is tilted in one direction that is counterbalanced by its stalk tipping in the other direction creating a dynamic sense of tension.

Objects are also brought together in a more intimate manner. In the work *Preserved hope No. 14*, dice and wishbones are displayed in a glass specimen jar. This jar is one of an earlier series the artist has made previously in which objects such as wishbones are contained like charms in a witchdoctor's armoury. In the exhibition there is also the requisite voodoo doll (*For magic No. 13*) complete with the pins to stick in it. I always distrust the merit of works

that need props to complete their story and this work with its glass "doll" resting on a velvet cushion, wooden cotton reel and pins is unnecessarily fussy but it does add an element of fun to the exhibition.

Among works of major significance are the two glass bowls that bring together all these objects. In Bowl of Hope No. 2 the objects such as an apple, dice, acorns, horseshoes and keys are in opaque glass in a deep amber coloured bowl. The objects seem to have been tumbled artlessly in the bowl and there is a great temptation to move them around on a pleasurable voyage of discovery. In a companion piece Bowl of Plenty (gold) No.11, the objects are in a beautiful soft matt brown coloured glass rather like the brown skin of pears and are equally tactile.

All these works display the artist's great skill in modelling glass. Small details such as the roots on the bottom of the garlic bulbs and the texture on the cupule of an acorn are beautifully executed. The objects are life-like and not exact replicas. In reality the pleasure lies in the objects themselves – in the visual pleasure that comes from their sculptured forms that are delineated by the play of light over both glass and matt textures. Whether we are sceptical about their potency or ambivalent (like the artist) is not as relevant as to whether they convince us and satisfy us as sculptural objects.

Nick Wirdnam lives and works in Melbourne. He has had a long distinguished career in teaching and as a practising glass artist. He retired from teaching in 2007 to concentrate on his own studio work. In 2009 he had a residency at the Canberra Glassworks and this year he was a finalist in the 2014 Ranamok Glass Prize.