



From left, *Air No. 3*, *Contemplation #3* and *Contemplation #2*.

# Personal narrative told in symbols

**Fragments of a Larger Picture**  
Studio glass, Maureen Williams.  
Beaver Galleries. Until May 26.  
Reviewer: Kerry-Anne Cousins

The last exhibition of Maureen Williams at Beaver Galleries was in 2010, although she has had work in several of the recent Ranamok Glass prize exhibitions at the Canberra Glassworks. Williams has long been associated with ovoid glass sculptures that contain within them miniature versions of schematic landscapes. Her exhibition at Beaver Galleries in 2010 included several of these glass sculptures that have become emblematic of her work over many years.

However, these glass forms are only a small part of her lively glass practice. In this exhibition, for example, as well as these ovoid glass forms, there are sculptured glass letters, glass panels and, in addition to the landscapes, figurative images. Many commentators have seen Williams primarily as an artist who

paints on glass but this is not strictly correct. Williams does not paint on the glass as a form of surface decoration, which is a traditional technique that has its genesis in antiquity.

Rather she encases her painted images inside the glass – a concept that gives the landscape a more dream-like existence than if it was painted on a flat surface. The layers of glass act like a lens so that the images seem to swim into view as if seen through the eye of a telescope. These works are made by blowing a hot glass cone that is cooled down and painted on by the artist in special enamel paints before being heated and encased in several layers of blown glass.

Other works are cast glass which are then cold worked.

Williams' early glass works were characterised by colourful abstract patterning or fine linear patterns as in the *Larapinta* series (shown at the Beaver Galleries in 2006). Williams notes that her works are related to a narrative concerned with human

relationships and the altered landscape.

In later works the landscape becomes a schematic design – a pattern of green wavy hills inhabited by precariously balanced grey boulders and human silhouettes of a faceless head and shoulders. Sometimes the landscape of rocks and heads is "reframed" as a small recurring symbolic motif within another larger narrative.

Williams has made this self-designed landscape of rolling hills her signature habitation.

This "altered" landscape has appeared in many of her works and obviously as seven of the 11 works on display in this exhibition testify, still fulfils the artist's need for a potent encoded image. Williams notes that she explores the path that we take throughout our lives, the land and our relationships. Both real and imaginary views of the land and ourselves within it create fragments of a sense of place and being.

There are however other works in the exhibition that take a different form, even though the element of landscape is still present. *Air No. 3* is a wall piece that is self-referential, being simultaneously the image and its subject. The beautifully sculptured individual glass letters with images of a baby blue sky and small scudding grey clouds spell out the word "air".

The artist used this format in an earlier work called *When*, a finalist in the 2013 Ranamok Glass Prize. There are other earlier versions of these glass letters. Three works are from a series in 2013 that spell out respectively Home, IF and Land. There was also a glass letter H in the wonderful *Alphabet* exhibition curated by Mel George at Craft ACT in May 2012.

However the work *Air* in this exhibition that brings together both image and subject is particularly successful. *Air* also relates to two other works in the exhibition. *Passing* by is a curving free standing glass sculpture with the same imagery of clouds and sky. This lightness of spirit is also present in the curved free-

standing glass sculpture *Passing Through #3*. Its imagery of lines of soft glass blown by the wind is beautifully realised and its colours are enhanced by the limpid quality of the glass that enfolds it.

A new element in the artist's lexicon of symbols is introduced into this exhibition. A more distinctive form of head and shoulders appears in two oval wall pieces called *Contemplation #1* and *Contemplation #3*.

Although these heads are individualised by the emphasis on their hair. They are still anonymous as they are shown from a back view, within a frame as if looking into a landscape. The head in *Contemplation #1* is also bordered by a stylised pattern of water. In an enigmatic work called *Reflections*, a female form is depicted on one side of a glass ovoid twinned with the back of a man's head on the other. Presumably they face each other only within the privacy of the glass form. It is a glance we can only imagine. It is not easy to ascertain the meaning of

**' These works are made by blowing a hot glass cone that is cooled down and painted on by the artist in special enamel paints before being heated and encased in several layers of blown glass. '**

this particular work. Its sense of intimacy gives it the feeling of a personal celebratory keepsake.

This exhibition is of work by an artist who has developed her own vocabulary of forms and symbols in order to construct her own personal narrative. If her work is at times enigmatic, then it also allows us to bring our own interpretations to these visually attractive glass forms.

Maureen Williams was born in South Australia but has largely based her art practice in Melbourne. She was a member of the Meat Market

Craft Centre in Melbourne in the late 1980s and went on to establish her own glass studio in St Kilda, Melbourne, in 1993. Her long career has involved periods of study and teaching abroad including a residency at the Pilchuck Glass School in Seattle, USA.

Williams also has had a long academic association with Monash University.

A tireless advocate for studio glass, Williams has also served on many arts boards and as director of Craft Victoria and director of Ausglass.