

# watching glass grow

Tom Moore



**28 February - 15 May 2016**

Santos Museum of Economic Botany





## 20/20 vision

Growing “things” under glass has been part of the Adelaide Botanic Garden’s history since its inception. Some of the Botanic Garden’s first exotic plants arrived in transportable glass boxes — Wardian cases — the only way plants could survive the long difficult journey. Once the plants were located in their garden beds, the Wardian cases were placed along the main walk and used for specimens that required protection.

The story of glass in the Adelaide Botanic Garden spans three centuries and is told through the Palm House (19<sup>th</sup> Century), Bicentennial Conservatory (20<sup>th</sup> Century) and Amazon Waterlily Pavilion (21<sup>st</sup> Century). And now, Tom Moore tells us an important story with glass, in glass and through glass.

The link between glass and botanic gardens takes us to the same time and place — Renaissance Italy. The first Botanic Gardens were those of Pisa, Padua and Florence. Padua is the oldest botanic garden (on its original site) established in 1545 by the Most Serene Republic of Venice.<sup>1</sup>

The story begins in Veneto ...

During the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, the glassmakers of Venice, discovered that plant ash (primarily that of the coastal plant species *Salsoa* and *Salicornia*) produced the clearest glass. Clear, transparent glass was so desirable that the Venetian authorities outlawed the use of any other plants in glassmaking.<sup>11</sup> Fittingly these species are now referred to as glassworts.

This inconspicuous advance in glassmaking had huge ramifications on science and technology. Based on the quality of Venetian glass, Galileo insisted on Murano glassmakers creating and grinding the lens of his telescope. On August 25, 1609 Galileo showcased his invention to the Venetian senate in the Plaza San Marco. Galileo looked at the stars and a scientific revolution was born.

A much smaller lens, in the form of reading glasses, had earlier drastically changed the world and its appetite for books and learning — with the associated surge of literacy it’s of no surprise that the Renaissance was born in Italy. Similarly another manifestation of this clear glass was the Venetian perfection of the “looking glass” or mirror. While mirrors of sorts have been in use since

ancient times they became so common that one wonders of the impact on the collective psychology of identity — from that of community to that of individuality.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Joseph Paxton, inspired by the architecture of the giant Amazon waterlily, created the magnificent Crystal Palace — home of the 1851 Great Exhibition. The massive glasshouse (well over 500 metres in length) was erected in Hyde Park, London and at the close of the exhibition was dismantled and re-erected in Sydenham, South London. This building is the precursor to the glass and steel architecture of our modern cities.

Between 1887 and 1936 Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka (father and son) spent nearly half a century producing the most detailed and accurate glass models of plants and flowers for Harvard University’s Botanical Museum. The Blaschka’s produced more than four thousand models and the Harvard Glass Flowers are now famous. It is less known that the Blaschka’s original business was the manufacture of glass eyes and their first foray into natural history was not flowers but models of marine invertebrates.



In more recent times, glass is used in fibre optics and has had a huge impact on current communication technology. It is not high-tech satellites but fibre optic cables laying on the ocean floor that deliver most of our internet data.

In this digital age, Moore's methods are something of an anachronism paying homage to Venetian and Ancient Roman glassblowing traditions, he says,

“ *Many of these techniques were taught only recently outside of Venice by Muranese Maestros who believe that the only way the processes will survive and grow is if they are shared.*

While Moore has developed some innovative variations, he is now part of an ancient lineage that represents a history of innovation.

The Santos Museum of Economic Botany in the Adelaide Botanic Garden is the perfect place to examine the plant world through the artist's lens. While Galileo looked outward at the world and the stars, we started looking inward at ourselves – the results speak for themselves. Tom Moore looks at and creates another world, one that ignores scientific classification and taxonomy.

His world is at once playful, humorous and enjoyable but also alarming and prophetic of the radical human change to this planet.

“ *Human activity is making life impossible for many species and may well lead to conditions that are inhospitable for ourselves, however ... it will go on turning and creatures will continue to evolve.*

Moore's world is a place of evolutionary chaos – what might the world be like once the people are gone – a nonsensical plant-animal-machine population which is beautiful and fun but on further contemplation may incite bleaker thoughts. What do these freaky illogical creatures eat? Do they eat each other?

When we look at Tom Moore's work, the title of this exhibition **watching glass grow** also seems absurd. It is only Moore and his assistants (and other glass blowers) who witness anything close to resembling growth during the process of making and creating his creatures.

With **watching glass grow**, Moore looks at the world, creates an alternate civilisation of plant-animal-machines that tells us a story that is both cautionary and

optimistic. People have damaged the planet. Nature has the answers. When we question what we see in **watching glass grow**, we don't need our eyes checked – Tom Moore has 20/20 vision.

#### **Tony Kanellos**

Curator of the Santos Museum of Economic Botany - Botanic Gardens of South Australia

i Padua is the oldest Botanic Garden still on its original site. Pisa was established in 1544 but was relocated twice before finding a permanent site in 1591. Florence was established in December 1545.

ii Marco Verità (2014) "Secrets and Innovations of Venetian Glass Between the 15th and the 17th Centuries: Raw Materials, Glass Melting and Artefacts" in Rosa Barovier & Cristina Tonini (eds) *Study Days on Venetian Glass, Approximately 1600's*. ATTI vol. 172 pp 53-68.





## Beasticles and Birdlings

Just fifty metres north-west of the Santos Museum of Economic Botany rests a stand of plane trees. These trees mark the site of a former zoological garden, established by the Botanic Garden's first director, George William Francis. Appointed in 1855, Francis was an avid botanist who accumulated a menagerie within the gardens to lure new audiences.<sup>i</sup>

An early inventory written by Francis and published in the local press, itemises his extensive animal acquisitions with the following enthusiasm,

“*At present we are content with one pair of animals of each species, except water fowl, parrots, and small birds, of which we desire more. We have now a sufficiency of eagles, owls, emus, hawks, cape barren geese, wallabies, plovers, native pheasants, native cats, opossums, magpies, doves, and common pigeons. Shall be glad of a male kangaroo rat, a female wombat, and any animals not mentioned above, particularly birds.*

Francis' menagerie has an after-life in contemporary Adelaide. Corralled within the Santos Museum of Economic Botany is a glass menagerie produced and assembled by Adelaide based artist Tom Moore.

Like Francis, Moore treasures both the botanical and the zoological, particularly birds — in fact, in his fertile practice the plant and animal works frequently miscegenate, with the art of zoomorphism employed to endow animal characteristics upon the non-animal world, and anthropomorphism exercised to ordain the plant world with human traits. Plants sprouting eyes, sentient pickles, cars shooting flames and fish all play a role in Moore's world where nature and culture are caught in an endless duel.

While Moore's characters owe their psychedelic patterning and bold colour to the ancient and largely clandestine craft of glass blowing (a craft honed by Moore over two decades), his charming and often satirical transformations are indebted to the sharp

observational wit of literary absurdists such as Edward Lear and even Dr Seuss. Moore cites Lear's comical commentaries and caricatures as an abiding influence, and his beasticles and birdlings, like those of Lear, charm us. But they are also portents — harbingers of a future that we may well have already destroyed. He says,

“*Though my work is amusing on the surface, it is driven by a great sense of unease and is very clearly able to be read in environmental terms. I am concerned that humans have messed-up huge portions of the planet and we have broken the weather. My awareness that glass blowing is not the most environmentally friendly creative endeavour compels me to make objects that promote greater care of the environment.*

Moore's menagerie and its ecological hope is well placed in this museum, the last of its kind in the world, dedicated to sound environmental management.



Glass and plants are both, for this Adelaide artist, potential salves for an uncertain future and according to Moore, 'glass wants to be a certain kind of plant'.

### Lisa Slade

Curator of the 2016 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art - Art Gallery of South Australia

<sup>i</sup> The zoo remained within the gardens until 1883 when the Adelaide Zoological Gardens opened on a section of Botanic Park. <http://adelaide.sa.gov.au/places/adelaide-botanic-garden>

## Artist's statement



The expression "watching grass grow" is akin to "watching paint dry" — metaphors for almost absolute tedium. However, some kinds of bamboo grow so rapidly that the change is nearly perceptible. I am certain some people may find the patience of plants more interesting than a lifetime dedicated to the assimilation of an ancient, esoteric craft tradition.

While glass blowing is popularly regarded as an exciting spectacle and one of the more spontaneous of traditional crafts, a lot of time is spent keeping it turning and waiting for it to either cool down or heat up. The objects in this exhibition show evidence of hundreds of hours of technical practice, at times unquestionably tedious but ultimately highly satisfying to make.

The idea of watching glass grow is nonsensical. In certain specialised circumstances it does move: a glass bubble can grow bigger as it is inflated, hot glass will stretch when it is hung or swung. However

under normal conditions it is inert, it will not grow, bloom, or fade.

Glass will not rot, a good reason for its employment as a material for making botanical specimens. "The Harvard Flowers" is an encyclopaedic collection made over 5 decades by Rudolph and Leopold Blaschka that remain some of the most astonishing objects made in glass.

Unlike the Blaschkas, I am not interested in attempting to accurately replicate nature. I am looking for inventions, something truly surprising — a jolt!

The first time I noticed line-marking spray-paint inadvertently blasted onto dirt and plants, it kind of blew my mind. I got a similar feeling when I glued dirt all over my brand new bicycle. There is something so very wrong about fake nature that is simultaneously also intensely compelling.

Watching the glass grow ... a funny title.

Humour is becoming a more precisely defined element of the intent of my art practice. I had been warned that reading the philosophy of laughter and humour theory would be a sure-fire way of killing my appreciation of comedy forevermore. Thankfully, I have found it to be quite fascinating.

One of the earliest to propose the incongruity theory of humour was James Beattie, suggesting in 1779 that "laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage."<sup>i</sup> Contemporary philosopher John Morreall contends that the humorous is one of seven aesthetic categories, including the bizarre, the fantastic and the grotesques that are capable of producing pleasant cognitive shifts in the viewer.<sup>ii</sup>

If you are looking for a pleasant cognitive shift, the fanciful illustrations of Edward Lear have retained an uncanny freshness. These were first produced as after-

hours entertainment while Lear worked as a zoological illustrator in the 1830's. The nonsense botany of 1872 contains some rare delights that are relevant here.<sup>iii</sup> Lear belongs to a proud lineage of venerable buffoons — artists working throughout time and across cultures, busy imagining absurd combinations of people plants animals and machines. I aspire to inclusion within this company.

There is something deeply otherworldly about the Museum of Economic Botany. Certainly the quality of light is a stark contrast with the outside world. This may contribute to the palpable sense that time moves differently in there. I am almost certain that everything I have seen in there occurred within a dream.

The anomaly of showing these fictional visions of mutant plant creatures amongst so many intriguing facts is particularly pleasing. The Museum helps us to grasp that human associations with plants are very complicated.

We live in a time of unprecedented awareness of the relationships between life forms and global systems. Smart people are trying to understand what is going on. At this juncture it is pretty clear that there is trouble in paradise. Consequently, I am not interested in presenting depictions of nature that are simply beautiful.

I like the idea of sentient plants and rocks. I stick eyes all over plants because I want to feel like they are watching us — perhaps they are holding us accountable for the stuff we do that messes up the planet. Perhaps while they live in the environment of the Museum of Economic Botany, they will surprise us all by actually growing — but possibly only if we don't watch them.

### Tom Moore

<sup>i</sup> Beattie, J. 1779, *Essays. On poetry and music, as they affect the Mind. On laughter, and Ludicrous Composition. On the utility of classical learning*, E. & Co. Dilly.

<sup>ii</sup> Morreall, J. 2009, *Comic Relief A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, Wiley, Hoboken.

<sup>iii</sup> Lear, E. 1871, *More nonsense, pictures, rhymes botany, etc.* Robert Bush, London.



# List of works

1. **Pickle Cultivator** 2016  
hot joined solid glass, mixed media (84 x 33 x 14cm)
2. **Blooming Ladder Legs** 2014  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (45 x 17 x 10 cm)
3. **Big Brother Carrot** 2012  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (26 x 44 x 14cm)
4. **Branching Barracuda** 2015  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (52 x 16 x 16cm)
5. **Blue Ute** 2007  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (9.5 x 26 x 12cm)
6. **Desert-Island Potato Car** 2008  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (34 x 24 x 16cm)
7. **Sprouting Bird Stack** 2009  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (22 x 39 x 11cm)
8. **Growth Medium** 2011  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (52 x 32 x 14cm)
9. **Sprouting Dollbird** 2008  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (24 x 38 x 8cm)
10. **New Kitty Bottle** 2016  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (92 x 27 x 31cm)
11. **The Orphan** 2008  
hot Joined, blown and solid glass, mixed media (10 x 19 x 20cm)
12. **Pom-Pom** 2011  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (25 x 22 x 20cm)
13. **The Reclining Sprouter** 2008  
hot joined solid glass (13 x 32 x 15cm)
14. **Usual Suspectmobeel** 2009  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (25 x 17 x 15cm)
15. **Sapling Spine** 2014  
hot joined blown and solid glass, wooden base (50 x 36 x 25cm)
16. **Tree Feet** 2009  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (33 x 23 x 13cm)
17. **Spook** 2013  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (51 x 30 x 15cm)
18. **Liquid Fertiliser** 2016  
hot joined, blown and solid glass with wooden base (44 x 18 x 18cm)
19. **Mr Uglyhead** 2007  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (19 x 15 x 12cm)
20. **Actual Triceratops** 2013  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (26 x 46 x 14cm)
21. **Mycelium** 2015  
hot joined, blown and solid glass (22 x 11 x 8cm)









14



15



18



19



16



17



20



21

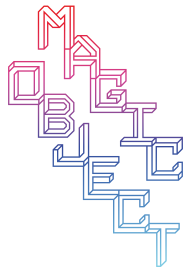




**watching glass grow** is presented as part of the *2016 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Magic Object*

Catalogue: Tony Kanellos  
Words: Tony Kanellos,  
Lisa Slade and Tom Moore  
Photos: Grant Hancock, courtesy  
the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY +  
Dianne Tanzer Gallery  
Graphic design: Tom Chladek

Published in 2016 by the Board  
of the Botanic Gardens and State  
Herbarium  
Adelaide Botanic Garden  
North Terrace, Adelaide  
South Australia 5000  
ISBN 978-1-921876-03-5



## 2016 ADELAIDE BIENNIAL OF AUSTRALIAN ART



**Santos**  
We have the energy.

The Museum of Economic Botany  
and its exhibition program are  
proudly supported by Santos.