Mind and Matter curated by Margot Osborne features glass works by Australian artists Masahiro Asaka, Gabriella Bisetto, Brian Corr, Mel Douglas, Deb Jones, Jessica Loughlin, Janice Vitkovsky and Richard Whiteley who share a minimalist and abstract sensibility.

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Mind and Matter: Meditations on Immateriality features eight Australian glass artists who share a minimalist and abstract sensibility. Glass works by Masahiro Asaka, Gabriella Bisetto, Brian Corr, Mel Douglas, Deb Jones, Jessica Loughlin, Janice Vitkovsky and Richard Whiteley evince the artists' concerns with discipline, restraint and understatement in handling the sensuality of the medium. This formal minimalism goes hand in hand with a desire to imbue material form with an immaterial, poetic dimension.

Minimalist abstract tendencies have run through contemporary Australian glass for some time as a quiet undercurrent. Formal austerity is a means of shifting the viewer's focus from passive looking to a more reflective encounter with the work. Reducing colour to quiet, subdued monotones and focussing on the interplay of light with refined, simplified forms, these artists are intent on attuning the viewer's perceptions to a more prolonged, intense and meditative way of looking. Their works have a quiet presence that rewards the contemplative gaze, rather than offering the instant gratification of spectacle. There is beauty here, and a sense of wonder.

Perhaps more than any other artistic medium glass, through its luminescence, has an inherent proclivity towards an immaterial, numinous dimension. In learning how to paint and sculpt with light, by controlling its refraction and diffusion within the glass, the artists imbue their work with an intangible poetic resonance.

Japanese/Australian artist Masahiro Asaka's cast glass sculptures have a breathtaking, otherworldly beauty. His aesthetic philosophy is based on finding the chance or random beauty of the firing process, by letting go of the will to totally control an outcome and allowing the unpredictable effects of firing to play a role in forming the finished work. He states:

"Uncertainty - my piece is about the balance of chance and control, or inevitability. The process is very important. It is all about the interaction of my mind and matter, which is glass... I am partly guessing and partly controlling what is going to happen, to capture the frozen moment that embodies the trace of fierce energy."

While she works with glass in a very different way, Gabriella Bisetto's body of work has been driven by a similar urge to give tangible form to the intangible, to give substance to the insubstantial. Her installation, The Ocean Within (60% of body weight is water) gives concrete poetic form to an abstract idea, namely the transience of the human body as a container for the self. Using the furnace casting process, she has filled each of the forty small blown glass bowls with molten glass and then allowed these to cool in random fluid patterns, with each bowl having its own unrepeatable variation. Here Bisetto is employing a familiar device in minimalist art practice where repetitive units have subtle diversity within a unifying sameness. Her approach, though, is metaphorical rather than formal. She states:

"Aiming to give substance and shape to the ubiquitous and visceral elements of our bodies, I have used the volumetric measurement and shape of exhaled breath, the circulation of water content in my body, and the enduring permanence of hair as symbols and allegorical time capsules of the indelible and momentary qualities from which we live."

Brian Corr, who moved to Australia from the United States in 2005, chose the title Of silence and light for his first solo exhibition, held in February 2010 at Canberra Glassworks. This title encapsulates the numinous aura of the ineffable that pervades his glass forms. They convey a seamless cohesion of materiality and the immaterial. In his two wall-hung works in Mind and Matter Corr employs the archetypal form of a circle -...
one in white and one in silver - kiln-formed in relief within a square of clear glass that has been sandblasted and hand finished. Light is diffused through the frosted veil of the sandblasted glass case, so that when looked at closely with focussed attention the orb seems to emit a penumbra of vibrating white light. He states:

Working with glass and the elements of volume and void, light and shadow, I create sculpture and large-scale installations which serve as reflections and interpretations of my own experience. My hope is that these works offer an opportunity for contemplation or meditation, a brief moment of heightened awareness of the nature and wonder of ourselves and the world in which we exist.

Mel Douglas is similarly interested in the resonance of silence and in making glass forms that induce a state of meditative calm. The fine calibrations of linear engraving, circling and intersecting across each form, transform the black glass into grayscale patterns that trick the eye in their minute irregularities so that they seem to hover on the surface. She states:

The simplicity of my works suggests stillness and silence, a meditation on the elements and concepts of light, space and time that I am inspired by. ...I aim to concentrate the viewer's attention on the proportion and linear relationships of the work.

In engraving her blown vessel, Incline, 2010, and wall panel, Outline, 2010 in Mind and Matter Douglas has marked the glass with a variety of techniques that have been carefully thought through to create an illusion of instability. She has used the vessel as an opportunity to explore the resonance of engraved marks which follow the profile of the vessel to accentuate its form and create a sense of depth. Another new work, Delinate, 2010, is a triptych of sand-blasted and fused glass panels. Using laser-cutting to reveal minute glimpses of the underlying layer of coloured glass, Douglas manipulates optical effects to create both a crisply defined silhouette and wondrously delicate diffusions of tone which emanate as a shadow or penumbra. The overlaid glass holds the light within itself, enabling her to paint with the light as a constituent of the glass. The material and immaterial dimensions are entwined.

Deb Jones's adoption of the minimalist 'less in more' philosophy is a conceptual rather than stylistic approach that is reflected in work ranging across public art, her one-off studio pieces and production work. In her latest body of work for this exhibition Jones' rigorous reductive aesthetic involves paring back form to achieve total focus on the effect of light on colour saturation. Her simplified cast glass disc and slab forms have a calm, unassuming presence and quiet energy. Jones eschews anything more than minimal intervention after the glass emerges from the kiln, preferring to retain minor imperfections as evidence of a transparent process. Working habitually with a muted tonal range of grey green glass, she creates subtle gradations of colour in response to light penetrating the varying thickness in the glass. Ultimately her work is about eliciting a response in the viewer. It is about generating a mood of calm and emotional equilibrium.

Jessica Loughlin has created a suite of serene wall panels which encapsulate a merging of mind and landscape. For this new body of work she has developed a method of painting with powdered glass to create tonal gradations of cloudy greys and whites. These are layered in abstract minimalist bands that evoke elemental cloudscapes of salt, air and water. In her mind's eye there were memories of evaporating patterns of salt lakes in the continent's interior. Grinding glass to a fine powder, she mixes it with water to create a suspension of glass particles for painting her 'canvas' of kiln-formed glass. The water evaporates, leaving water marks and residue which are then fused onto the panel in a subsequent firing. Her aesthetic involves attaining a balance between controlling the outcome and retaining an element of chance so that random effects are left as marks of evaporative process.

Loughlin's work evinces a silence that is visual as much as aural. This synaesthetic fusion of absence (a lack of visual noise, irrelevant detail) and presence is at the heart of the cerebral dimension of her minimalist approach to glass. Loughlin states:

Evaporating into air, solidifying at altitude into dark opaqueness on the horizon. Here, I pause in the distance, my attention drawn to how the vapour lifts, expands and floats. All is effortless, noiseless.

Janice Vitkovsky's wall panels of kiln formed murrine glass are infused with a warm emotive timbre. She creates resonant monochromatic diffusions of colour, seemingly suspended within her sculpted glass panels. Her restrained and minimalist abstract forms belie the fabulously intricate fusions of tiny glass murrine tiles that are the basis for the panels. Vitkovsky is interested in encapsulating in glass the insubstantial and ephemeral nature of fleeting experiences and impressions. Her work reveals a fascination with the way that light, interacting with the complex structure of the murrine, generates ephemeral optical vibrations visible only to the moving eye as the viewer walks past the work. In some works she creates fluid, wave-like patterns and bleeds of colour that evoke sonic resonance or light vibrations. Another illusion that may be read into this work is to the oscillating pattern of medical graphs that register the body's neural and emotional fibrillations. She emphasises the balance between material and immaterial dimensions:

My work is concerned with perceptual experience... I like to work in the realm of the abstract as it relates to the intangible aspects of our experiences, the unseen but felt, describing the ephemeral quality of a thought or an emotion.

Richard Whiteley works with a refined consciousness of the interplay of three elements - glass form, light and space. In the rigorous pared-back geometry of his cast glass there is a strong sense of a balanced tension between opposites - between light and dark, positive and negative space, solid mass and air. More so than any other works in this exhibition, Whiteley's cast and carved glass have a palpable physical presence as minimalist abstract sculpture. They occupy and interrogate space in an almost architectural manner. Yet they rely for their...
impact on the immateriality of light.

On a formal level Whiteley's sculpture has always evinced masterly control of his medium, a sense of balance and rational order. In his latest work he has experimented with imparting a less controlled, more organic sensibility. The void, which has been a recurring motif in his work, shifts from operating on a formal, spatial level to becoming a metaphorical portal to the unknown, or the unknowable. He states:

There is a sense of portal with the elliptical aperture. It makes you aware of the threshold and beyond is another (state of) being. A slide that I often use in my artist presentations is an MRI scan of the human body. You can see the voids - the lungs and the other spaces within. The image conveys the idea of this space, a space that you will never really know, but you can sense it. You can be aware of it but never actually see or touch it.

In conclusion, Mind and Matter highlights a minimalist, poetic and cerebral tendency in contemporary glass that will be a revelation to those who typecast glass as bright, spectacular or merely decorative. Glass has an intrinsic propensity towards ineffable beauty, resonance and metaphor. The artists in Mind and Matter create tensions between this inherent beauty and the discipline of restraint, understatement, and austerity.

Margot Osborne

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