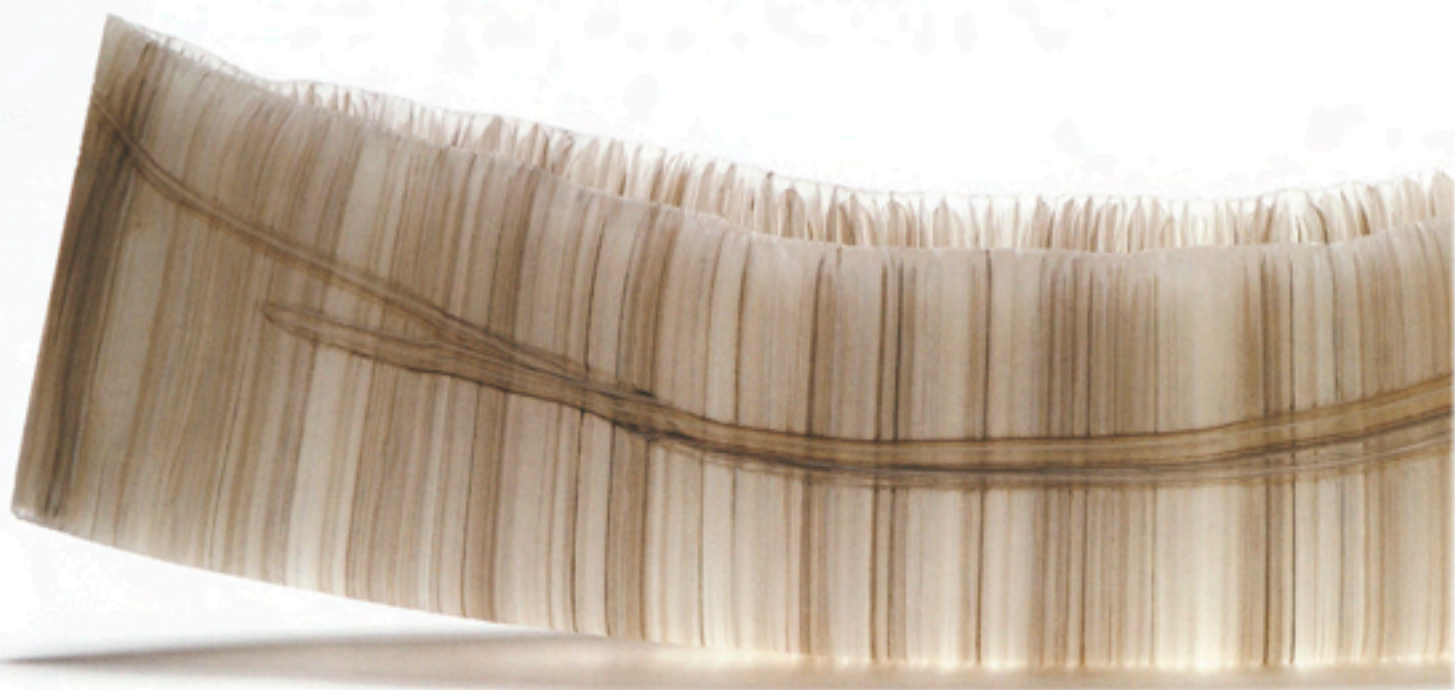




'Seeding Phalaris', 2006, fused and slumped glass, 15 x 93 x 12 cm and 14 x 74 x 11 cm

LEAVES OF GLASS NEW WORK BY COBI COCKBURN

Inspired by the traditional techniques of indigenous Australian basketmakers and the native grasses they employ, Cobi Cockburn creates vessels containing narratives about the world's oldest landscape. Profile by Catrina Vignando. Photography by Greg Piper.



'Swathe', 2006, fused and slumped glass, 15 x 56 x 8 cm

WE all love a good story, and the art of a good yarn is in the telling. We have come to rely on artists, regardless of the medium they work in, to tell stories through their artwork. So it is with this new body of glasswork by Cobi Cockburn which draws its inspiration from indigenous basketry traditions and the Australian landscape. Her works contain narratives about the land and our link to it.

At first viewing these pieces are striking in their simplicity and minimalist attraction. Cockburn draws on native grasses for her colour palette and literal link to the land. It is impressive to see how a material like grass, which is so dramatically different from glass, can be such a relevant influence in Cockburn's new work. However, here lies the crux of the story and the journey that is the narrative of this work.

In Cockburn's work grasses are about the landscape. The arid Australian landscape is valued according to its ability to grow feed for stock. The plentiful supply of grass for feed or lack thereof has been the substance of many good Australian yarns. These stories form the canons of literature that have shaped the nation's culture. Drawing on the grand narrative of the landscape, Cockburn focuses on the grasses that grow on the land as the foundation for her story. Specifically she has been struck by the colour of the phalaris grass that is plentiful on the plains around Canberra. This is a landscape that is an arid contrast to the verdant hills of the south coast in NSW where she lived before moving to the ANU Canberra School of Art to complete her Honours Degree in visual art.

This micro focus on the grass that grows on the land places Cockburn in a very different dialogue with the art landscape tradition. She is not depicting the heroic landscape narrative. Her story draws on this connection and gives us a new interpretation of an old tale. She has used the grasses for inspiration owing to their colour, but also because grass is the raw material for making baskets. Baskets have a history as utilitarian

'Winter Grasses', 2005, fused and slumped glass, 48 x 9 x 9 cm





'Bale', 2006, fused and slumped glass, 16.5 x 51 x 8 cm



objects. They have a tradition in every culture known to humanity and are inextricably linked to the land both in their source of materials for their construction and the purposes for which they are made.

Used as objects with which to gather food and contain precious goods, baskets are associated with harvest, abundance and nurture. They communicate a feminine link to the land, and it is this association which has drawn Cockburn to the work of leading Australian indigenous basketmakers for the inspiration in her work. Tribal Aboriginal women play a key role in their communities as keepers and custodians of culture. These stories of their connection to country are told through the making of their baskets, their colours, structures, materials used and decoration. These stories of the cultural connection to land are woven into each basket.

Being influenced by indigenous basketry, Cockburn is layering yet another complex storyline to her work. It is one about the intricate connection to the ancient Australian land as understood by its indigenous inhabitants, interwoven with the British and European settler tradition



Left: 'Gathering', 2005, fused and slumped glass, 42 x 9.5 x 9.5 cm



'Folding Phalaris', 2006, fused and slumped glass, 17 x 70 x 9 cm

of land use and in parallel with her personal view of the land as a young white woman who has a passionate interest in the environment and its responsible conservation. The contemporary issues of global warming and climate change have a direct impact on each of us. Cockburn is responding to this in a personal way by drawing on her immediate environment for inspiration and motivation. As the mother of two young children, she is acutely aware of the environmental legacy we leave for future generations. Cockburn expresses this concern and passion for the environment through her work which is connected to the land by her inspiration from the stories of both a settler culture and an indigenous tradition.

The Aboriginal baskets are also the source of inspiration for the forms that define the shape of Cockburn's pieces. Their utilitarian role as containers to hold, protect and shield from the outside world, is ascribed new meaning when configured in the medium of glass. Made from a non-porous membrane, unlike grass baskets, there is a very clear inside/outside demarcation which is far more fluid in fibre baskets. Cockburn's vessels are defined as much



Detail of 'Shifting Seasons' and 'Shifting Fields', 2006



'Shifting Fields', 2006, fused and slumped glass, 15 x 93 x 12 cm



'Spring Grass', 2006, fused and slumped glass, 14.5 x 74 x 11 cm and 14 x 56 x 9 cm



by their internal volume as by the appearance of their external form. She acknowledges this intellectually and strives to give strength to her designs by emphasising this aesthetic differentiation.

Cockburn worked with Virginia Kaiser, one of Australia's leading contemporary artists in the field of fibre art and basketry, to gain relevant technical understanding about basketmaking. The direct manipulation of organic fibres to weave baskets has had a clear outcome in the development of Cockburn's glasswork.

'I have developed a formula of cane pulling which, when compiled, reflects intricate, soft and fibrous patterns characteristic of woven baskets. In addition, owing to the dual states of glass being both a malleable and stable material, its warm malleable state enables me to hand manipulate my forms. As the material cools, this form stabilizes, freezing the memory of the maker's touch,' says Cockburn.

The contrast of materials, fibre and glass juggles with the binary codes of soft and hard, permanent and impermanent. It also defines the intentional desire of the artist to reflect a more accessible formalism in her work which blends these binaries through a dialogue rather than in opposition to one another. There is an aspiration for harmony and Cockburn achieves a balance in her work by the inferences she draws from basketry processes. Gaining an understanding of basketry techniques and interpreting that knowledge in glass has also given Cockburn a new language of expression. The result is seen in the way she handles the glass, the immediate tactility of working with organic fibres is translated through time-consuming glass processes of cane pulling, laying out canes, fusing, slumping and annealing. Despite the interventionist working processes associated with making these works, the artist maintains a freshness and delicate tactility to her work.

Detail of 'Swathe', 2006, fused and slumped glass, ht 15 cm

Colour is a critical component in Cockburn's pieces, and subtle shade variations are used to convey the complexity of the landscape that she is referencing. Her palette is enhanced by a complex colour-mixing process that creates a visual shimmering effect, evoking the windswept grassy plains that dominate the Canberra region. This optical colour mixing is inherent in the canes of glass which are used to make up each piece. They create a linear quality in the final works that physically reference the look of grass, but also allude to the strands of fibres that make up woven basket forms. In Cockburn's practised hands, this referencing is paired down to a minimal patterning creating a visual oscillation as the eye adapts to the colours. She maintains an expressionist quality, through her interventionist manipulation of colour and forms, which gives her work a personal and engaging quality.

Cockburn began her professional career as a glass artist in 2000 after completing her first degree in visual arts at the Sydney College of Arts. She is one of the new generation of rising glass stars. In her relatively short but eventful career she has already achieved some very significant milestones. In 2005 she won the Vicki Torr Memorial Prize at the Ausglass international conference in Adelaide. The following year she was the recipient of the prestigious Ranamok Glass Prize with the piece titled *Shifting Fields*. Also in 2006, she visited America with renowned Australian glass artist Kirstie Rea to assist in conducting workshops at Portland, Oregon. While in the US she was the recipient of the coveted Bullseye Glass E-merge Award, winning first prize for non-functional glasswork with a piece titled *Spring Grass*.

She juggles her career as a glass artist with her responsibilities as a mother of two young children. Together with



Cobi Cockburn

her partner, glass artist Charles Butcher, they share the complexities of managing their respective dual art/life roles. Surprisingly, by drawing on the personal events that shape her every day, Cockburn gains impetus for her artwork. In her Honours thesis she wrote openly about the beneficial influence which caring for young children has had on the conceptual development of her current practice.

Cockburn's work recounts a very personal journey through the landscape which is both physical and spiritual in nature. It takes us on a similar journey concerning our connectedness to the environment which is personal and public. Communicating her story through her work, she is inspired by baskets because of the familiarity and ease with which viewers approach such objects. From this platform of the known, she introduces her audiences to new concepts and begins to unfold narratives which challenge and question the medium. She is innovative in this approach and cleverly combines familiar stories with new outcomes. Cobi Cockburn presents us a contemporary tale of our link to an ancient environment and questions our role as nurturers and custodians of the landscape we are interdependent upon for our own and future generations' survival.

Catrina Vignando

Catrina Vignando is General Manager of Craft Australia and has been involved in the cultural sector for over 20 years. www.craftaustralia.com.au Cobi Cockburn is represented in Australia by Sabbia Gallery, Surry Hills, Sydney. An exhibition of her new work, titled "Whispers", will be held at Sabbia from 14 June - 7 July, 2007. All enquiries: anna@sabbiagallery.com

'Autumn', 2005, fused and slumped glass, 45 x 8.5 x 8.5 cm

