

# glass prize & corporate support

PAMILLE BERG EXPLORES THE RFC GLASS PRIZE AND THE "WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO GET A 'REAL' JOB" SYNDROME.

The setting in late August 1996 was the elegant American Express Foundation Hall on the ground floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Inside the Hall's open doors was the work of seventeen contemporary glass artists from New Zealand and Australia; finalists selected from a field of fifty-five entries in the second annual Resource Finance Corporation Glass Prize. The prize is organised and sponsored jointly by the Corporation and the Glass Artists' Gallery in Sydney. It was a private event attended by invited corporate colleagues and guests, the artists, and the judging panel. The winner of the Prize was announced: emerging glass artist Susan Hill, a recent graduate of the Glass Workshop at Canberra School of Art, now working and exhibiting in Western Australia (see inside front cover of this issue).

The RFC Glass Prize is described by the Corporation as: "...an acquisitive award which seeks to foster artistic creativity, skill and innovation using glass as the primary medium in a contemporary manner. The work presented for consideration for the RFC Glass Prize is expected to be a major effort in the artist's personal body of work, and should display excellence and imagination in quality of idea and execution."

The Judging Panel for the 1996 Award consisted of Mr Robert Bell, Curator of Craft and Design, Art Gallery of Western Australia; Ms Karilyn Brown, Manager, Cultural Olympiad; Mr Andrew Plummer, Director, Resource Finance Corporation Ltd.; and myself.

It was an evening of bright lights, glasses of wine, corporate guests, delighted gatherings and discussions around individual glass works placed on high plinths. It was the right moment to speak, in my brief talk at the time, of the *real* facts behind what all the invited

guests saw before them: the dire financial reality in which professional artists and craftspeople pursue their practices in Australia.

As most readers of *Object* know, the Australia Council publication *When Are You Going to Get a Real Job? An Economic Study of Australian Artists* (David Throsby and Devon Mills, The Australia Council 1989/1992) states the case in clear and stark terms: in the year 1986-87, the data collected suggested that about two-thirds of all professional artists earned less than \$10,000 from their primary creative work, and the mean income of artists in that year's sample was \$11,000 from primary creativity before subtraction of required arts-related expenses such as purchase of materials and equipment, hire of studio space, and other essentials.

When those necessary production expenses were subtracted, the actual income of these professional artists, equivalent to annual 'salary' in the professional and corporate world, was roughly \$4000 per year for two-thirds of all professional artists, and roughly \$5000 as the mean income for artists in the sample for that year. The statistics in Throsby/Thompson's second study covering artist income sampling in 1993 (*But What Do You Do For a Living?*, The Australia Council, 1994) bear out the same mean income range.

Whenever those statistics are stated to guests in the proximity of the work they have just been admiring, the crowd always becomes silent and focussed, and the ever-present words 'But *why* does this continue to occur?' are written on their faces.

Again, Throsby and Mills put the answer simply and succinctly, without drama or polemic:

"...questions of demand, supply and price in this context should be judged in broad social

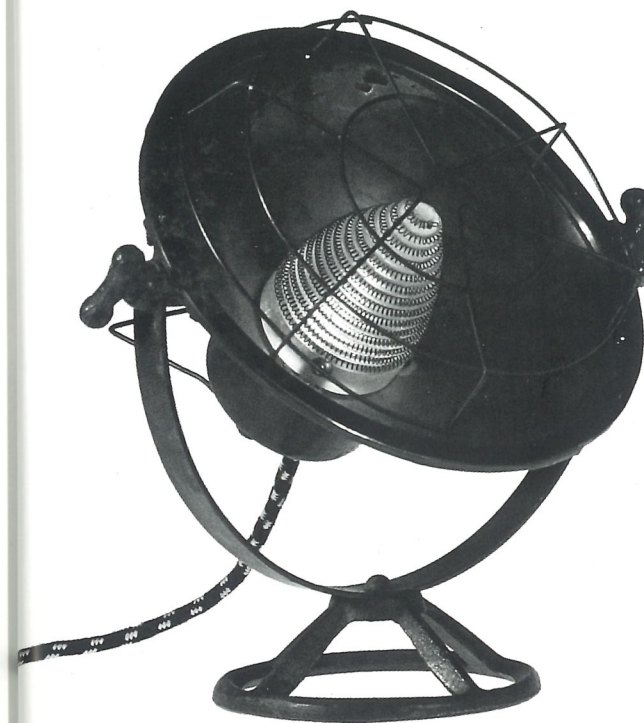
terms rather than against narrow financial criteria.... Artists' labour or the products of their labour are sold on private markets that do not reflect the social valuation of art, and as a result artists as a group are obliged to accept lower rewards for their work than would be socially ideal... For initial creative artists, a return from the sale of their work that more closely reflected its broad social value would enable more work to be produced..." (ibid).

What is that broad social value of works of art which is not being adequately recompensed in this country? Fij Miller, in *Art, Culture and Context: Examining the Evolution of an Australian Cultural Framework and its Relationship to the Arts* (Adelaide, 1991) says it well:

"... Art itself is an active concept. Although it takes on the role of illustrating our culture, it is also part of a continuing process in defining, commenting, questioning and ultimately changing our national (and international) identity.

"Of course, that does not mean that each artwork (necessarily) fulfils this role. (One Australian critic) says that art is divided into two broad categories. The first is static and works towards social affirmation. It does not rock the boat. It challenges nothing. It is well supported by the rich and powerful, those who have already established the status quo.

"He says that this kind of art does not need support from the public coffers or the policy makers: 'We shall not run short of images of [rivers] at sunset, or of Royal portraits, for lack of public patronage.' But ironically this is the type that often enjoys the best promotion through public as well as private sponsorship. In contrast (he) cites the kind of art that questions the world, that 'interrogates vested interests, arouses uneasiness, does not match the curtains, does not turn an investment profit



Shaelene Murray, *Cold Hands*, *Warm Heart*, cast glass, mixed media, H 30cm x W 30cm x D 25cm; and *It's a Warm Love*, blown glass, mixed media, H 20cm x W 20cm x D 25cm

## ART THAT QUESTIONS THE WORLD, THAT INTERROGATES VESTED INTERESTS, AROUSES UNEASINESS, DOES NOT MATCH THE CURTAINS

until too long after the event.

"He says that this is the kind that requires deliberate support from a public arts policy. Without help, it would 'wither down to that level of action that the passion of the artists themselves sustains. And this is not sufficient for a vigorous society in which models for change, with a critical superstructure, represent our only hope for the intelligent control of explosive social forces.

"So what's all this got to do with intervention in the arts? (His) point is that a society that is truly alive and exciting is one that reflects the involvement of all its people in its culture..."

Several years ago, Robyn Archer identified the essential 'social value' of artists' primary creative production in an equally compelling way:

"... the muscle of the alternative, the poor, the radical, is developed out of conflict with the conservative, the opulent and the static.

Eventually the old gives way to the new which in turn becomes the conservative of the new

day. It is this vast network of push and pull, high and low, which must be taken into account when we speak of the arts. And all of it is absolutely necessary." (*Arts Action Update* No. 1, 1991).

The point of Miller and Archer is that our 'culture' is our collective 'making', and that Miller's 'truly alive and exciting society' for which we all implicitly yearn, whether as corporate heads of business or industrial workers or suburban residents, will happen only to the degree that we recompense and sustain our change-makers.

The private-sponsorship intervention in the arts implicitly advocated by Miller is currently opposed by strong forces within the international corporate world. American, Albert J. Dunlap, or 'Chainsaw Al' as he is nicknamed in corporate boardrooms, advocates forcefully in his new book *Mean Business* (recently released by Random House Australia) that there should be no corporate support to the arts. In an interview with Alan Attwood

published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in September of this year, Dunlap clearly stated the basis of the razor-edged concept of corporate cost-cutting and profit-taking which he preaches to the international corporate world who employ him:

"I am loyal to people who I believe are doing meritorious work. I give loyalty to people I respect. To get that respect in business you must be doing something that has real value. If you are doing something that isn't helping me, then my company can't be loyal to you".

Attwood quotes the dean of a Washington (D.C.) business school as saying, "This scorched-earth policy benefits no-one but Al Dunlap and a handful of shareholders." In other interviews, Dunlap replies that he is merely putting the profits from corporations into the hands of shareholders where it belongs, who can then be as philanthropic or socially concerned as they wish on a personal basis.

Active sponsorship of the arts on a personal



basis obviously occurs in Australia and produces significant results. For example, the *Primavera* Exhibition, which opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in the same week as the RFC Prize event, is an annual exhibition of the work of emerging contemporary artists endowed by the Jackson Family in memory of young artist Belinda Jackson.

But the Dunlap approach, where 'real value' is defined as 'something which helps me', misses the point of the original Rousseau-ian social contract, in which we *all* figuratively agreed to give up some of our individual absolute freedoms in order to become a collective or a community, thereby gaining new benefits and freedoms guaranteed by the group. Because of that social contract, the 'I' is in fact 'we', and the 'something which helps me', in Dunlap's language, is in fact 'the thing which helps all of us'.

The Resource Finance Corporation understands. In the spirit of Fij Miller and Robyn Archer, RFC are demonstrating that they know that the continuous, quiet, annual supporting of primary creative work by artists and craftspeople is about supporting the models and superstructure of change in society. They also understand that healthier models for change can only be of benefit to the vitality of their own work and the longevity of their Corporation.

Andrew Plummer, the RFC Director whose passion for contemporary glass and its technical production has been the internal generator for the Prize, notes that the very genesis of the Resource Finance Corporation



Deb Cocks, *Pond*, blown glass form (by Ben Edols), silver stained, enamelled and engraved, H 52cm x W 24cm x D 10cm

In the end, though, what does their Prize really do? Returning to the statistics of Throsby and Mills, the RFC Prize: provides one artist per year with a cash prize exceeding the annual salary of two-thirds of the professional artists in this country; places that artist's work in a corporate collection which is seen daily by individuals with ample money to

fact considerably greater than that represented by the Prize to the selected winner. On the evening of the announcement at the MCA, at least four other acquisitions took place, and additional work from artists was solicited for consideration of purchase.

But is there a significant down-side to all of this? Are corporate prizes really about art, or are they about many, many things other than art, as suggested when we look at waiters with silver trays of wine glasses and canapes and corporate guests at impressive opening functions? I have thought long and hard, and regardless of my own personal comforts and discomforts about the social connotations of prize-giving, sales, and marketing, I believe that ultimately all of this is still about the art. It is about the works which have burnt themselves into the minds of those who clustered around the objects and struggled to comprehend. Often enough the work in prize exhibitions is not about comfort and 'matching the curtains', to use Miller's quote. Artist Susan Hill's description of her winning RFC submission, *ripening II*, states:

"My work is dedicated to the strength of the human spirit. (This) piece is from a larger body of work that explores the journey that victims of child sexual abuse travel, on the way to becoming survivors. I chose the seed to represent children and their potential for growth, while the peach represents the development of a maturer, healthier sexuality."

This is not the stuff of corporate ease. We all need to work actively towards the institution this year of more of these corporate art awards, strategically placed among media and

## PASSION AND EXCITEMENT MUST BE THE DRIVING ELEMENT IN THEIR CORPORATE EXISTENCE

in the financing of mining operations occurred through taking an entirely different approach to that traditionally taken by merchant banks and other institutions. Plummer and his colleagues are not seeking a slick marketable image of a corporation 'doing it differently' through their sponsorship of the annual Prize, but rather appear to comprehend that passion and excitement must be the driving element in their corporate existence, just as it provides the electric current of Australia's cultural mapping.

acquire art on a regular basis; ensures that the new work of over seventeen Australian and New Zealand professional glass artists is toured and exhibited annually in major national venues and in the Glass Artists' Gallery; and introduces the medium and tradition of contemporary glass at a personal level to a significant range of members of the community who would otherwise encounter it only occasionally, if at all.

The financial rewards for the finalists whose work is included in the Prize exhibition are in

practices where they are desperately needed. Awards which will implicitly affirm edginess, change, and the natural process of the dislodging of the status quo.

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