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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT CRAFT

Kirstie goes solo in Japan

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Kirstie Rea... freedom allows stillness and stillness offers opportunity. Photo: Rebecca Olsen

By craft writer **MEREDITH HINCHLIFFE**

A CHANCE visit by the director of the Toyama Glass Art Museum to Canberra Museum and Gallery in May, 2017, led to an invitation in 2018 to Kirstie Rea to have a solo exhibition at the Toyama Glass Art Museum. The show he saw was Rea’s “The Land, a 20 Year Survey”.

The invitation was a magnificent recognition of Rea’s career in glass, which began in 1986 when she graduated from the Canberra School of Art.

The Toyama Glass Art Museum is situated in Toyama, equidistant from Tokyo and Kyoto. The museum opened in 2015 inside Toyama Kirari as part of the “Glass Art City, Toyama” project that has continued for more than 30 years. Since opening, the museum has held exhibitions focusing on contemporary glass art works since the 1950s to promote the development of contemporary glass art.

In 1981, Rea visited an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and saw an exhibition, “New Glass Now” – and was blown away by what could be done with glass. She also visited other glass workshops and was intrigued with hot-blown glass.

She enrolled at the then Canberra School of Art and in 1983 was among the first five students in the Glass Workshop. Klaus Moje was head, and Neil Roberts the only staff member. The hot-shop furnace was not established until the fourth year, and by that time Rea had followed in Moje’s footsteps and became fascinated in working in slumped and cast glass.

Kilnworking involves sheet glass, and this has provided her with endless possibilities. The heat, the glass, and gravity can be manipulated, but Rea does not have to climb into the kiln and touch it. She states glass has a freedom of its own.

Rea grew up in the Canberra region, has always had a deep love and respect for the country she lives in. She finds release in stillness and in being able to experience that on her own. Rea still spends a great deal of time walking around the urban edges of Canberra and Queanbeyan, in the local bush. She explains that when she stops, “transparency emerges and behind this the landscape opens, unfolds and there is clarity in distance“. This is the ongoing source of her inspiration.

Rea has taken up many offers of artist residencies. In Tasmania, stillness was forced upon her on one residency due to illness and she had to lie on the lounge for a couple of weeks. When gazing on the gorge she was longing to walk in, the overcast day was reflected on the shiny surface of glass door panes.

“Stillness and contemplation enabled my eyes to stitch together the reflected view with the view through the glass. Two views of place overlaid by the simple glass pane”, she explains in the artist’s essay in the catalogue accompanying the Japanese exhibition, “Kirstie Rea – The Breadth of Stillness”.

This led to a new way of working. She views the scenes in front of her when walking, through a piece of glass. The path she has followed is reflected in the glass, and the effect is like a double-exposed image.

The invitation to exhibit was for works that span the 35 years of her career since graduation, and 10 new pieces. Ultimately, she created nine panels 150cm high that show the bush of her walks, shown together as one installation. They capture her journey – going forward and looking back.

She says it is as though the bush is wrapping around her, a complete immersion. The exhibition is spread over two floors of the gallery and the panels are installed in one of the two galleries. At one end the panels stand free, and invite viewers in, as if to experience the bush themselves. I am sure they can almost smell the trees and ground cover and hear the noises.

For Rea, freedom allows stillness and stillness offers opportunity.

We can only hope that we will have an opportunity to see this new work, upon its return to Australia. Congratulations, Kirstie Rea, on the great honour of a solo show at this prestigious Japanese museum until June 26.

Toyama Glass Art Museum is at Toyama-glass-art-museum.jp/en/ and a nine-minute YouTube official trailer on the site is helpful in gaining an insight into the exhibition.

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Ian Meikle, editor

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