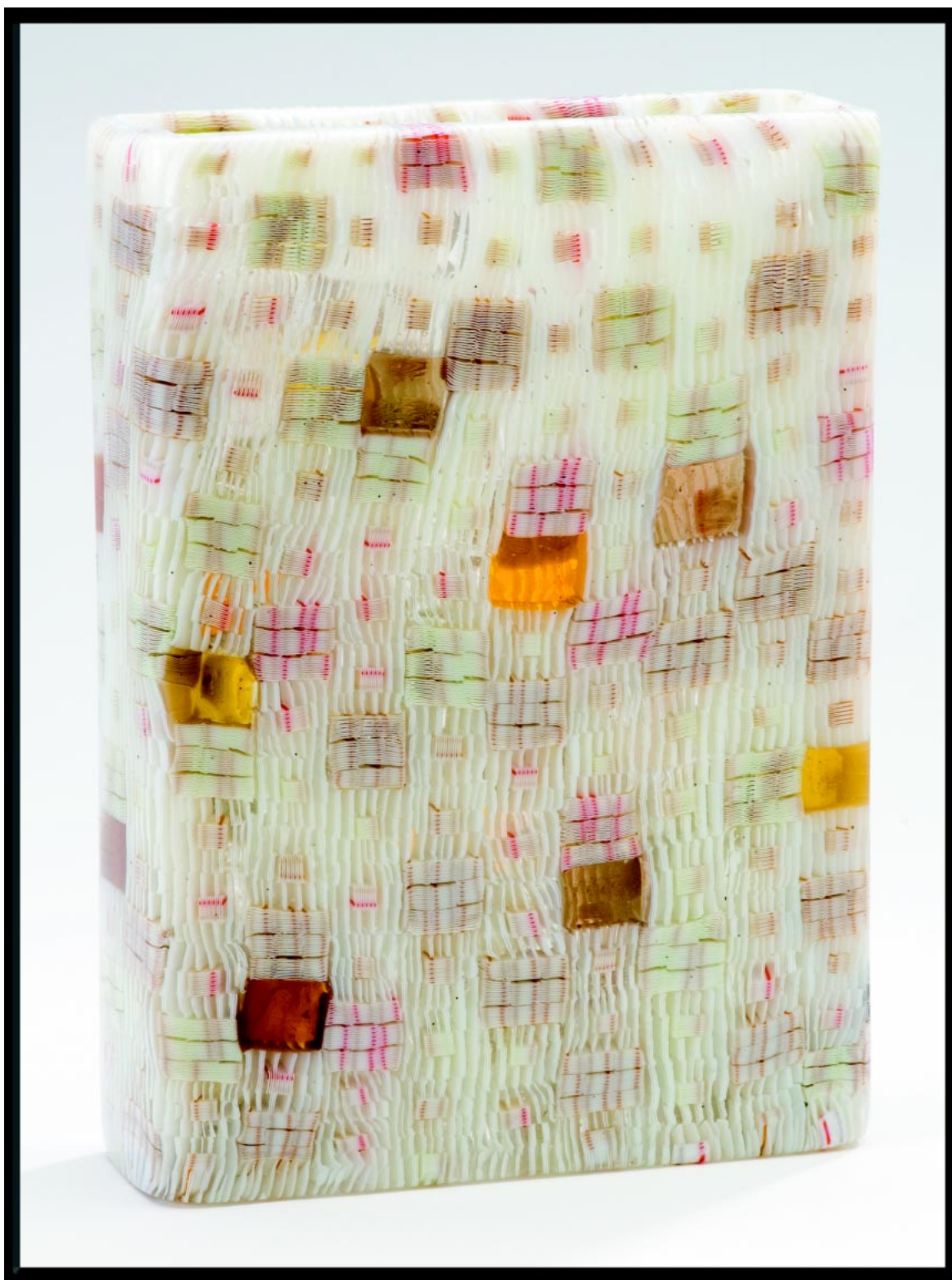


# Movement Through Life:

*The Colors, Patterns and Forms of Giles Bettison*



*Billet #17, Giles Bettison, 9.5" x 6.5" x 2", murrini glass vessel, 2006. PHOTO: Greg Piper.*

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By Shawn Waggoner

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Giles Bettison's blown murrini glass works offer vitreous impressions of landscapes, both rural and urban, woven in patterns of color and light that reflect the artist's responses to his environment, be it South Australia or Manhattan.

"My work is an exploration of my movement through life, expressed in colors, patterns and forms," says Bettison. "The light and color in rural and outback Australia is part of my experience of connecting to place and people. I use abstract representations of these and other places to explore my feelings; I want to include some essence of what these places mean to me."

Bettison, a graduate of the legendary Canberra School of Art, is known for both artistic and technical innovation. While still a student, he adapted an ancient Venetian glass working technique – the fusing and cutting of bundled glass canes into patterned slices called murrini – to a new material: an American-made colored sheet glass. He has applied this technique to a number of forms, from traditional vessels to sculptural blocks mounted on steel. His signature fused and blown murrini glass works often recall the pattern and texture of fabric.

Bettison has received a number of prestigious awards including the Best New Talent award from UrbanGlass in New York (1999), the Bavarian State Prize Gold Medal in Germany (2001), the Mitchell Giurgola Thorpe prize for design from the Canberra School of Art (1996) and a scholarship to Pilchuck glass School (1996). His works are included in many private, corporate and museum collections worldwide.

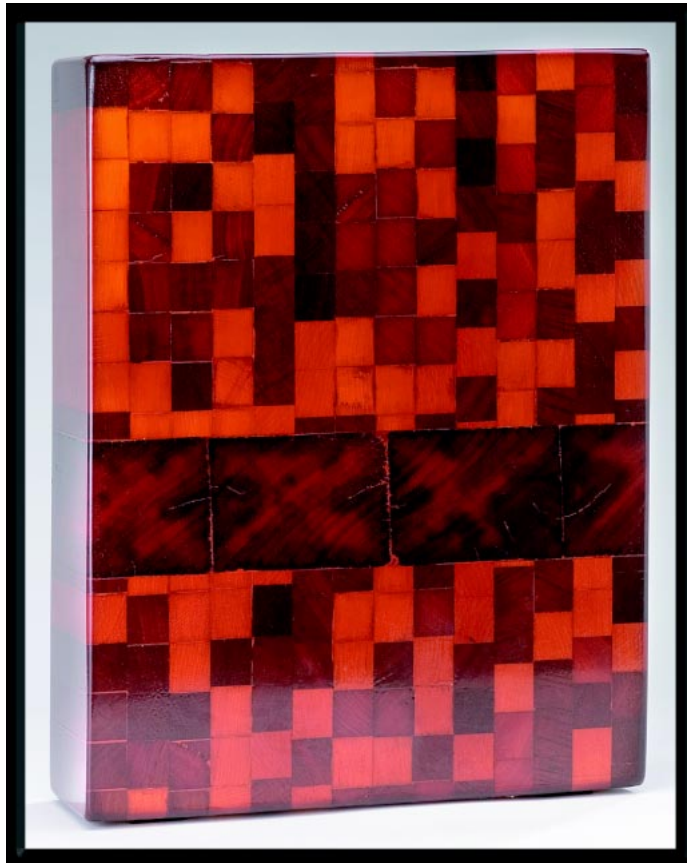
In addition to his glass work, Bettison plays the tin whistle and uilleann pipes (Irish bagpipes), and works on his family's farm, theirs since 1849. "It is an important connection to have and has influenced my life and work a lot at different times," says Bettison.

In early 2007, Bettison and wife Suzanne will be artists in residence at Canberra, as well as instructors of a few workshops. He has plans to use the furnaces and large ovens there to experiment with ideas he is unable to realize in his own studio.

In the following conversation with "Glass Art" magazine, Bettison discusses various series of his work, his process and his need to explore beyond glass for art making media.



Billet #25, Giles Bettison, 16" x 12" x 4", welded steel sculpture, 2006. PHOTO: Greg Piper.



Billet #27, Giles Bettison, 15.5" x 12" x 4", laminated timber sculpture with shellac finish, 2006. PHOTO: Greg Piper.





*Billet #17 (detail), Giles Bettison, 9.5" x 6.5" x 2", murrini glass vessel, 2006. PHOTO: Greg Piper.*

**GA: You were born in Adelaide in 1966. What was it like growing up there? When did you first begin to think about art? About glass?**

GB: I had a pretty normal early childhood. I have a younger and an older brother, and we did things that other boys did. Our parents took us camping a lot into some pretty rugged and remote areas, and I always liked the outdoors and nature. My mother was studying and then working as a psychologist, and my father was setting up his business with two of his friends making short wave radios, among other things. Me and my brothers played music and were always encouraged to make things, to draw and paint. We used to go to the art galleries and museums, and my parents had friends who worked in the arts.

I always thought about art of one sort or another; I was never really good at academic subjects. I really wanted to be a musician from a very young age. The first musicians I can really remember liking were Louis Armstrong and Herb Albert, and I did have trumpet lessons and play the trumpet for quite a few years as a kid. Of course when the teen years came along electric guitars got involved in a big way. I dropped out of school and lived the rock

and roll dream between a load of different jobs and share houses. I also began playing Irish folk music with a group of friends and through that connection began to work for some glassblowers. I eventually decided to go to art school in 1992 and graduated in 1996. I still play Irish traditional music, from which I get a lot of enjoyment.

**GA: What was the Jam Factory Craft and Design and what impact did visiting artists Richard Marquis and Dante Marioni have on you?**

GB: The Jam Factory is a government subsidized craft workshop that has been running in Adelaide since 1974. It was set up in part by the English glass artist Sam Herman. Sam had studied under Harvey Littleton in America and then came to Adelaide to help set up the Jam Factory. In 1990 and '91, I was employed by the Jam Factory on a very part time basis to help make furniture for some jobs they had going. I was also working some other jobs part time in the construction industry and metal fabrication. It was during this time working at the Jam Factory that I met a lot of craft practitioners and got a good insight into what art and craft as a career could be. I found the community much more to my liking than most of the ones I

found on construction sites or metal fabrication factories. By this time I had pretty well given up on music as a career, but I could see a visual art career as an option.

I began studying at the University of South Australia in 1993 before moving to the Canberra School of Art in 1994. At the end of 1993, Richard Marquis and Dante Marioni came to Australia to do some demonstrations and to commemorate/celebrate 20 years since Richard Marquis had first come to Australia to blow glass and demonstrate around the country with a glassblowing trailer. (Marquis is a seminal figure in Australian Studio Glass.) I was fortunate enough to see Dick and Dante demonstrating a lot of Italian-style techniques, including the murrini technique.

I had been wondering about how I could introduce some more graphic elements into blown glass without painting or engraving, and here it was. I saw Dick and Dante work at the Jam Factory with Ben Edols and Nick Mount and then in Canberra. After Dick and Dante left Canberra, Ben stayed there as artist in residence with Kathy Elliott. He had been working with Dick for a while at this stage. I offered to help Ben and Kathy at every opportunity I could, and I learned as



*Vista NOLA, Giles Bettison, 7.5" x 8" x 2", 2004. PHOTO: Will Crocker.*

much as I could from them both while they were in Canberra. This was my first glimpse of what was possible.

I went on to find out more about Richard Marquis and Dante Marioni and have been inspired by their work and by the generosity that they show in sharing their ideas and knowledge with others.

**GA: What was the Latitudes workshop and how did it affect your career?**

GB: In 1995 Kirsty Rea organized the Latitudes workshop, which was a collaboration between the Bullseye Glass Company and the Canberra School of Art Glass Workshop as well as a collaboration between kiln forming and glassblowing artists. The artists included in this first session included Klaus Moje, Stephen Procter (rip), Jane Bruce, Kirsty Rea, Ben Edols, Kathy Elliott, Liz Kelly and Scott Chaesling. I was asked along with some other students to be a technical assistant for this session, and in exchange was allowed to use some of the glass sent by Bullseye. I was invited to exhibit some of the pieces that I made in the exhibition that followed in Portland, Oregon, at the Bullseye Connection Gallery and later in Sydney.

In 1997, there was another session, and I was invited to participate as an artist and

again exhibited my work in Portland, Japan and Australia.

The Latitudes workshops were an amazing opportunity for me to begin to work with Bullseye Glass and to begin to define my own work. It was also a great opportunity for me to exhibit my work in America and to begin what has been a very rewarding and helpful relationship with Bullseye Glass, Lani McGregor and Dan Schwoerer.

**GA: Talk about your days at Canberra School of Art (graduated 1996). How would you describe your education there? What was Klaus Moje's influence on your work?**

GB: By the time I arrived in Canberra, Klaus had left the glass workshop there and was getting back to his own practice. Stephen Procter had taken over as the head of the glass workshop, and Jane Bruce was the other faculty member full time in the workshop. I feel very lucky to have been able to attend The Canberra School of Art. There was a huge amount of freedom there combined with faculty who were nearly all current practicing artists, great facilities and a lot of encouragement for rigorous exploration. There is a very small student intake there, so it is possible to get a lot of help from faculty.

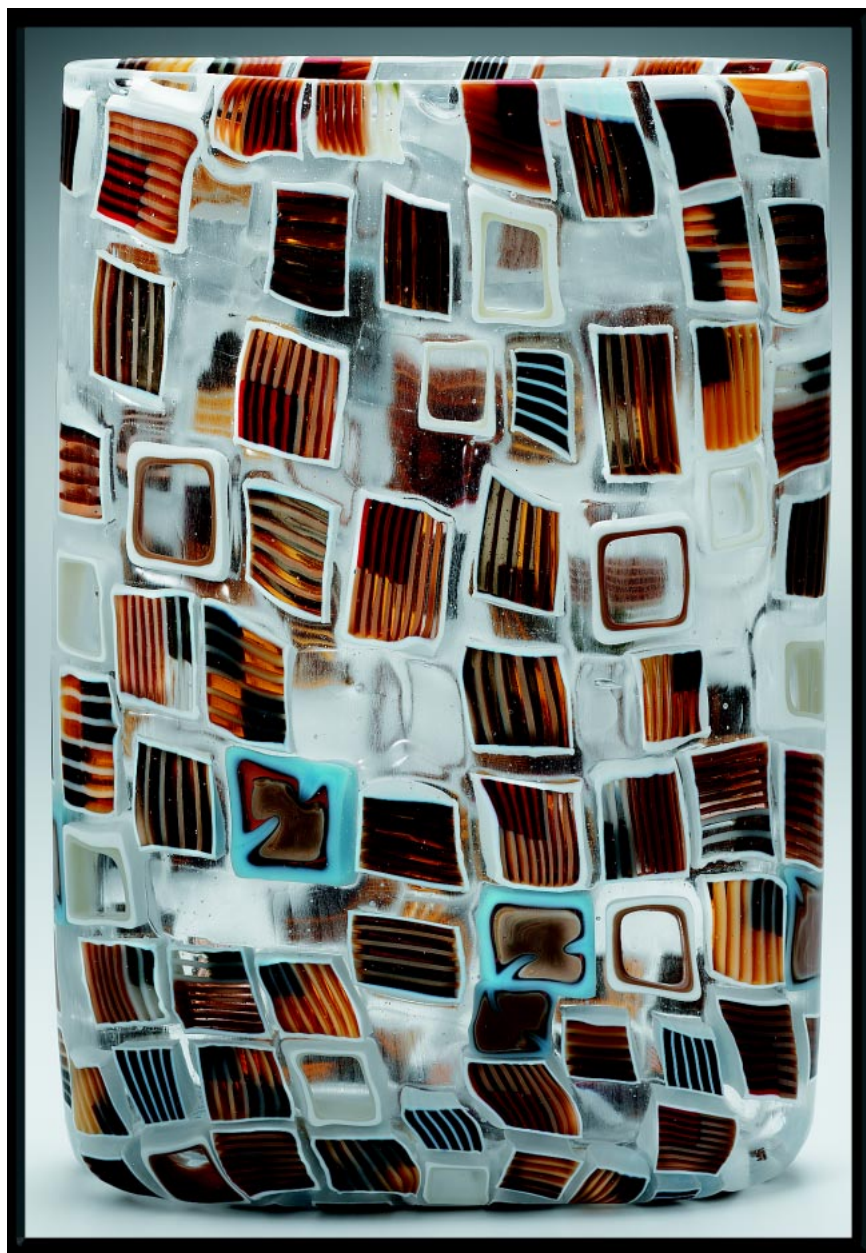
I became more aware of Klaus' work as I researched murrini and mosaic glass. I was fortunate that Klaus still visited the art school regularly, and I had the opportunity to talk with him and visit his studio on numerous occasions. I was inspired by his work and his practice and helped by the open discussion and sharing of ideas.

**GA: When did you move to New York? What was that experience like and why did you return to Australia?**

GB: I moved to New York in 1999 and stayed there until the end of 2003. In October of that year, our daughter was born, and we decided that living in Adelaide would be easier for us as we would not have as many expenses and would be able to spend more time with our daughter. Living in New York was a great experience. I was able to visit so many art galleries and museums. New York made me aware of the urban landscape in my work. I was very interested to learn about some of the history there and often very inspired by the thinking that happens there.

Suzanne and I moved from New York to New Orleans; her family is from there. We lived there for six months before moving back to Adelaide. New Orleans was an amazing place, and I think it will





*Vista 2005, Giles Bettison, 11" x 6.5" x 2".*

continue to be. I very much enjoyed our time there, and I do have an ongoing relationship to the city and family members who live there.

**GA: You recently built a new studio in Adelaide. What's it like?**

GB: About 5 years ago I was able to buy an old car repair workshop in the city of Adelaide. The area was pretty undeveloped at the time. In 2003, when our daughter was born, my wife Suzanne and I decided that living in Adelaide was going to be the best option for us. Prior to this I had begun a design process for the site with my stepsister and her husband who are archi-

tects. I was looking at the possibility of turning the building into a glass studio, so we were already a fair way along in this process by the time we decided to move to Adelaide. In early 2004, work was begun on the building, and in May 2005, the studio was mostly finished. I operated all the hot equipment for the first time when we had some demonstrations at the studio as part of the GAS Conference, which was held in Adelaide in 2005. Operating everything for the first time in front of an audience was a little hair-raising, but went off mostly without a hitch.

The studio was originally two brick single

story shotgun terrace houses built in the late 1800s. In 1950 they were converted into a car repair workshop. The dividing wall and all interior walls were removed, and a new front and rear were added to the building. A concrete floor was poured and more modern windows and big sliding garage doors were added. The building operated as a crash repairer until about 1995. After that it was used for storage and was squatted by homeless people.

I had all the walls rendered and an insulated ceiling and big ventilation/sky-light installed. I brought power and gas in to operate all the kilns and glory holes and had a clean office space built with a small kitchen and bathroom/shower. In the office space I glazed in some windows that I made. There is a small outside yard. It is a fantastic space to work in, about 3800 square feet.

**GA: Looking at images of your work, especially the detail shots, baffles the mind. How are these tiny landscapes and textures created?**

GB: I begin with designing the piece I am going to make. As I usually work in series, the pieces are often variations on a theme or themes, different ways of exploring the idea. The actual making of the pieces starts with Bullseye sheet glass, which I cut into strips and stack into bundles that are about 3" x 3" x 5". These stacks are then loaded into my oven, which heats them to a temperature where they just start to stick together, but not hot enough for them to move or slump significantly. Once they are at this temperature, I pick them up on a punty iron and heat them in my glory hole until they are hot enough to stretch. Then my assistant climbs up a ladder, and is handed the punty iron. The glass stretches vertically towards the ground, and the stack that was 3"x 3" x 5" is now 3/4" x 3/4" x 7', a murrini cane. Once this process is complete, I put the hot murrini cane into my annealing oven. Often I will cut the murrini cane into 5" lengths and bundle it up again and stretch it a second time. The finished cane is then cut into tiles, murrini, using a kind of guillotine that snaps the cane into 3/8" lengths. The murrini are then laid out on a steel plate and heated, first in a gas oven and then in a glory hole until they begin to fuse together, forming a sheet comprising all the murrini. At this point, I roll the sheet onto a glass collar on the end of a glass-blowing pipe and form it into a cylinder. Then, I close off the open end of the cylinder and form it into a bubble, which I





*Billet #14, Giles Bettison, 8.5" x 7.5" x 2", murrini glass vessel, 2006. PHOTO: Greg Piper.*

can then form into a vessel. I have experimented with different ways of doing this, and my most recent work, the Billet series, is a variation on the way the vessel is formed.

Once the vessel is complete, it is cooled slowly in an annealing oven. The final step is the cold finishing. The entire surface of the vessel is ground back through increasingly finer grades until it is almost to a polish. I use glass cutting lathes and stone milling tools adapted for use with glass.

The techniques I employ for forming most of the vessels that I make are fairly standard except that I don't have a furnace.

Instead I make the tools one would usually make from furnace glass, punty and collar, from glass that I pick up from a pick up oven. I have been working on a technique for forming vessels that varies quite a bit from the usual method for making or blowing murrini vessels. This technique involves forming the shape of the vessel without inflating it, leaving the vessel wall quite thick so as to accentuate the visual depth in the glass body and, in the case of very transparent murrini, to show the contours formed by the uneven surface created by all the different murrini tiles.

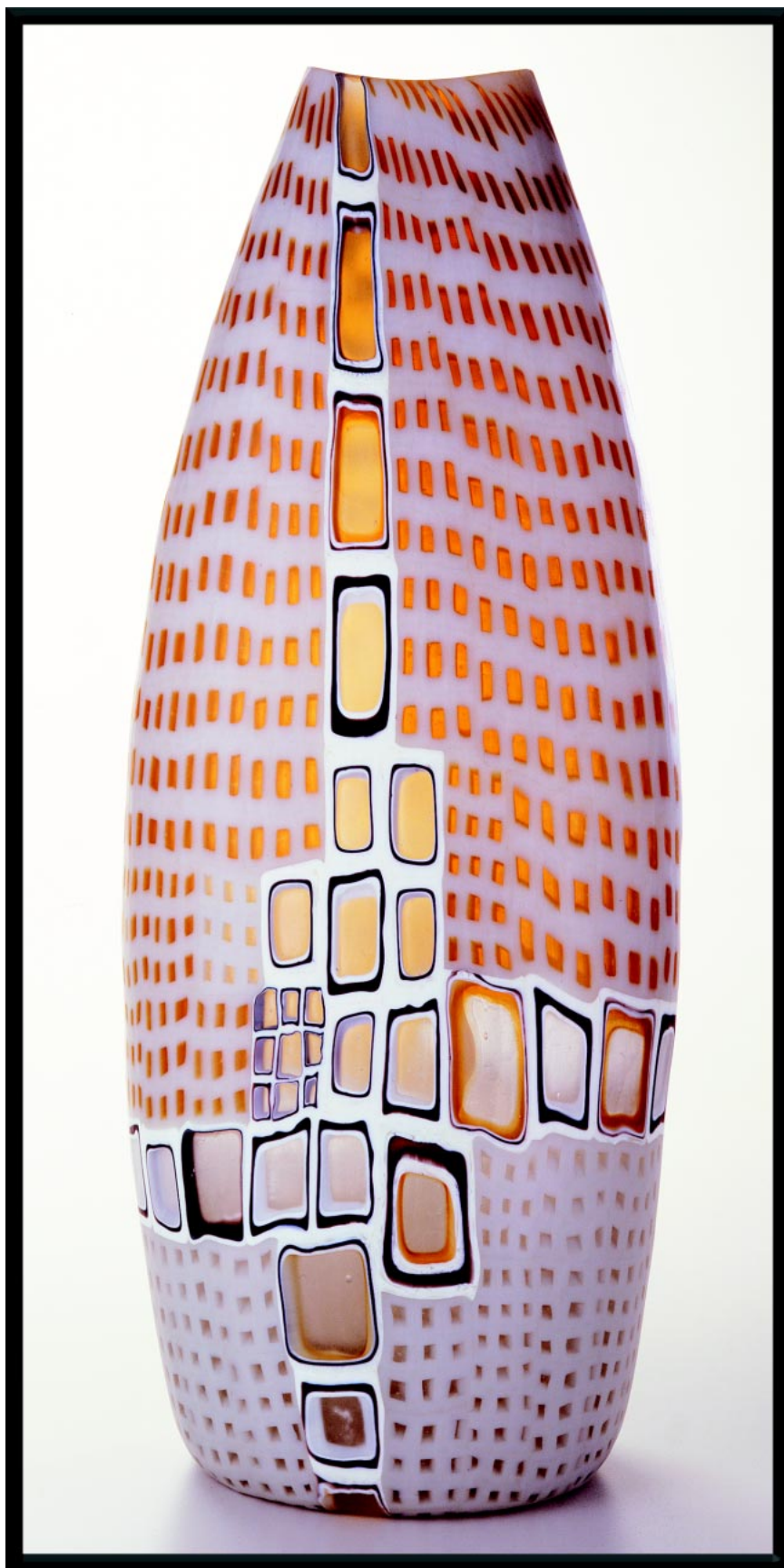
Sometimes I use the canes and murrini

in different ways to make solid objects or flat panels or windows. I have developed the way that I work so that I do not need to operate a furnace. This, in many ways, makes operating my studio a lot easier.

**GA: Does the combination of hot and cold working techniques characterize Australian glasswork?**

GB: There are a good amount of Australian studio glass practitioners who use cold finishing techniques. This is not a specifically Australian thing to do, and I don't think that it necessarily characterizes Australian Studio Glass. Perhaps the thing that does characterize it is the need





Cell #4, Giles Bettison, 11.5" x 5", 2001.

to travel a lot further if one wants to attend studio glass events in the USA or Europe or the familiarity that you get with international shipping companies if you show work in these places.

**GA: What is appealing to you about the vessel form, about *creating* vessels?**

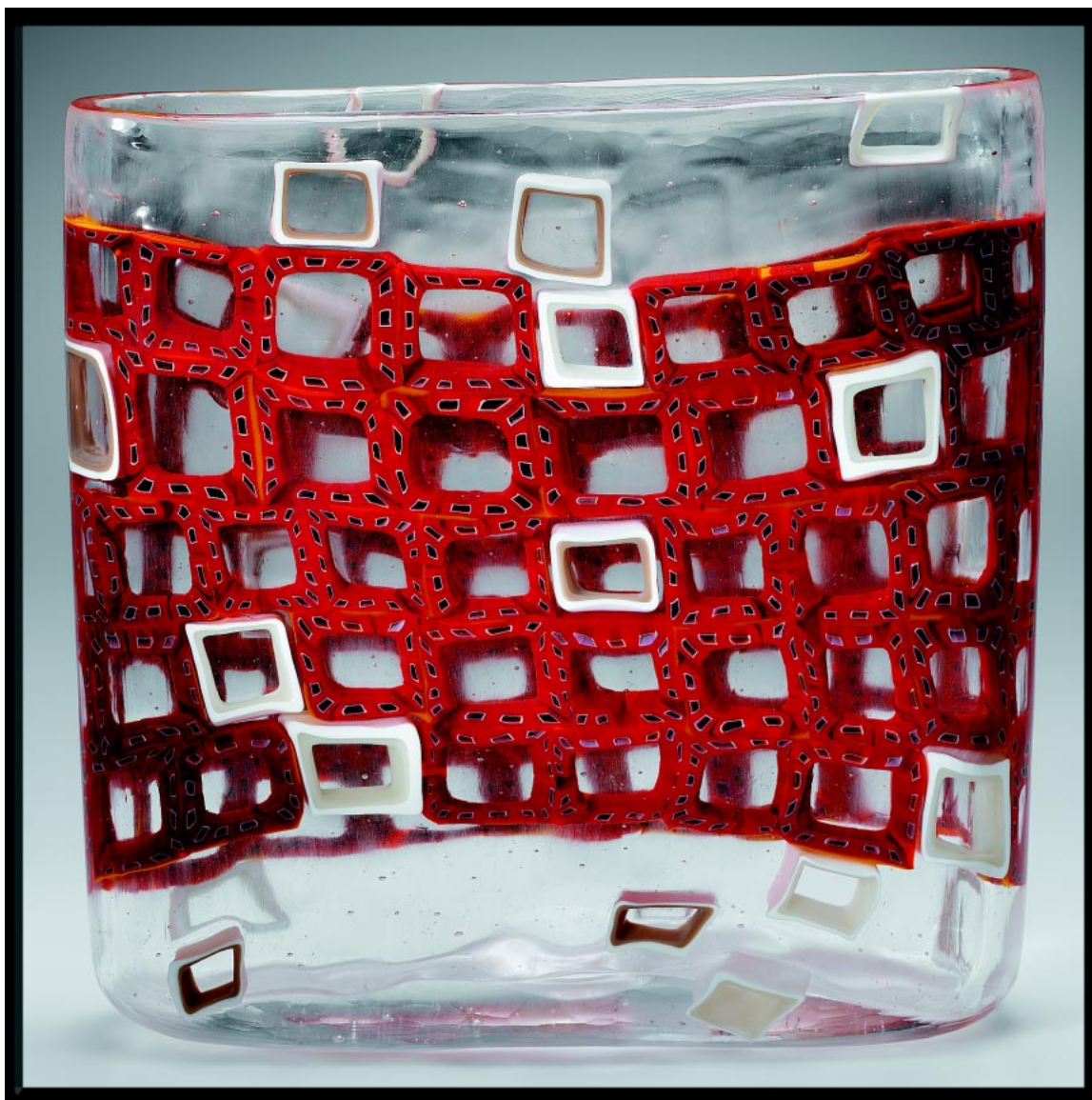
GB: I have a deep respect for the history of the tradition that I work in, that is the hand making of glass. One of the main focuses of nearly all hand making of glass has been vessels, perhaps partly because glass is very good at being a vessel. If you can hand make something like a glass vessel then it stands to reason that it is going to be on a comfortable scale for people to interact with. I like the opportunities for intimacy with the object that this presents, and I look for ways to encourage and enhance this dialogue. I believe that vessels and other utilitarian objects, as well as objects that strongly reference utilitarian objects, can use a value reference point to communicate ideas of familiarity. I have always liked working with tools and interacting with my environment using them, whether it is a musical instrument or a wrench.

I like the way vessels and functional objects can communicate in a different way than other things, say, paintings or sculpture or non-functional objects.

**GA: Your work is often described as “similar to woven textiles” or having “fabric like” qualities. How do you feel about this description? And who is Anni Albers?**

GB: I have always liked textiles. When I studied at the Canberra School of Art, I was doing research that helped me understand how different values were perceived in objects, and that led me to study textiles, particularly community based weaving in parts of Africa and Asia. I learned how the stories were woven into the cloth and how different symbols and techniques were passed down through generations. It was about this time that I began experiments with using Bullseye colored sheet glass to make murrini. I found that by layering the sheets, I could create an effect that looked like little woven threads.

I have found that the technique of layering sheet glass to make murrini offers endless possibilities for the creation of patterns, and that can be a vehicle for colors and ideas. I think a lot about the role textiles play in all of our lives, the potent bunch of messages which are regularly ascribed to them and all the different references textiles can have. I like that people can see things in my work that are not particularly glass like qualities. The textile reference is something I keep coming back to. It is one thing that can open up more possibilities for interacting with my work.



*Orbit 2005, Giles Bettison, 9" x 8" x 2".*

Anni Albers was a weaver who studied art and design at the Bauhaus in Dessau between the World Wars. She fled to America at the beginning of WWII with her husband, Joseph Albers, and many other members of the Bauhaus. This group of people went on to have a very big impact upon architecture, art, design and craft in the US and the rest of the world.

Joseph was one of the founding members of the Bauhaus and Anni became a teacher there. Anni was an amazing artist and made beautiful, well thought out and executed objects. While I was studying at the Canberra School of Art and researching textiles, I discovered her work, and it stood out to me. I have since sought out her work at various museums around the world. There is a major collection in New

York, which I was fortunate to have seen on a couple of occasions. Joseph Albers was a painter, and among other things, did some very nice red paintings. He also made some experiments with glass that I like. His fused panels and variations on leadlight techniques were very much ahead of their time.

**GA: Within each series you've created, what were your aesthetic concerns and how was your vision achieved?**

GB: I often re-visit series that I have worked on in the past. Each one represents for me a different way of exploring an idea or ideas. I might move on to a different idea or series, but sometimes I am led back to looking at things and making work in a way that is similar to earlier ways of working.

Billet (2005) is the most recent series of work I have been making. This work is much more abstract in the way that I have constructed the patterns, used the colors and formed the vessels. This is in part due to my immersion into fatherhood (which is great!). The way my time is structured both outside and inside my head is very different now. Where in the past, I would directly reference photographs and drawings of landscapes, rural or urban, to inform my use of color and pattern, I am now drawing more on my memories of these things. I am imagining landscapes in glass, and in some ways, exploring the material more. I very much enjoy watching the way that changes in my life and circumstance are manifested in my work.



I have made a variation on the way that I form the vessels while experimenting with this work. I have wanted to look into the glass and experience the depth in the vessel wall. To do this I have been using more clear glass and polishing the surface. I have wanted to continue to make vessels, but have also wanted to continue to explore a flat plane and so have made vessels that are even more box like. This has taken the form further away from a traditional glass form. To aid looking into the glass body, I have wanted to lessen the distortion in the patterns that often occurs when the glass is stretched in the inflating and forming process. To achieve this, I am not inflating the vessels, which leaves the vessel wall quite thick. I am really enjoying seeing the way the individual murrini tiles are expressed, and in some ways, the construction of the piece becomes apparent.

The Veil (2004-2006) series was the beginning of experiments to see into the glass body. I was experimenting with laying a secondary pattern over the top of the existing pattern. I was slicing up glass to melt onto the surface of the vessels and then grinding back through it to reveal more parts of what was behind it. I wanted to look through one piece of glass onto another layer behind it. I was already moving towards making a more sharply defined box type shape. I initially began working from photographs that I had taken from an airplane, where there were small clouds in a somewhat regular pattern low down over the landscape.

In the Orbit series (2004) I was exploring making patterns that radiated from a central point in the murrini or patterns that had elements that formed a ring around a central element — a lot of more bold repeated patterns on forms similar to those used in the later Vista series

In the Memento series (2002) I was constructing a pattern using visual references from New York City, where I was living at the time, and sticking a piece of glass that was from an earlier series that referenced rural landscape over the top of it. The patch of rural-inspired glass was like a Memento from an earlier time in my life. A bit literal, but it was fun.

I had been looking at images of cells taken by an electron microscope. This was a jumping off point for my imagining of thousands of tiny glass cells, resulting in a series by the same name, Cell (2000).

The Vista (1999) series was begun after



*Paddock Series 2001, Giles Bettison, 10.5" x 6.5" x 3".*

I took a lot of photos out of an airplane window flying over the north US. I began to take a lot more photographs from airplane windows and use these to inform my work. At this stage, the amount of time I was spending traveling was influencing my work a lot. This series began using forms similar to the ones I used in the Paddock series. After a while I began to want to make more complicated composi-

tions with the murrini and found that the traditional round or cylindrical forms did not show these compositions the way I wanted them seen.

During this time, I began to make flat panels, but still wanted to keep making vessels. I began to flatten the vessels so there were two long and fairly flat faces on the vessel. I eventually settled on a fairly square or rectangular profile that I



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thought interfered less with the patterns and compositions I was creating.

The first pieces in the Paddock series (1998) were made in Portland at the Bullseye Glass Factory, where I was lucky enough to have a residency along with three other recent graduates from the Canberra School of Art. This was a series of work that I began using drawings and photos of paddocks (fields) on my family's farm, among other places. It soon came to encompass paddocks anywhere that I could see them and photograph or draw them (or elements of them). I used my photos and drawings to help me design the compositions and colors of the murrini's that I made. I was using quite traditional glass-blowing forms for this work. I was really mainly interested in exploring the color and pattern possibilities available to me with this way of working.

**GA: Talk about your recent exhibition "Passage," held at Sabbia Gallery in Sydney. This show featured your experiments with steel and timber.**

GB: The "Passage" exhibition took place in March 2006. All the objects were given the name of the "Billet" series. This name came from a time when I worked in a pattern and tool-making workshop. Often patterns and tools were machined from large lumps of steel or timber that were called billets. There are a few reasons for this choice of name, one being the square box shape that my work has taken on; another being that at this stage in my work, I am exploring qualities of the material itself and really trying to understand how ideas I am dealing with are embodied in the material. I am very interested in understanding the moment that my idea is manifested in material. Part of this has led me to look at the elements I use to make my work, namely the small murrini tiles. I have looked at different aspects of these, and this led me to make some objects that were "large murrini."

In 2003, I made a series of objects I called Grid. Some of these objects were solid glass blocks that were fused up out of longer pieces of murrini canes. These blocks were about 3" thick and about 12" square. I attached these to similar sized steel blocks. As I have explored this idea more, I have been looking at other materials that could be used in a murrini like fashion. For the "Passage" exhibition I experimented with using steel tube and recycled timber to make "large murrini."

These pieces are informing my work with glass, and I have plans to make further experiments with other materials. I have made some experiments with concrete and have plans to use more timber, steel, non-ferrous metals and stone. ♦

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