

Interview: Klaus Moje

50 by Anne Brennan

The last five years have been full and successful for Klaus Moje. Since his retirement as head of the Glass Workshop of Canberra School of Art in 1992, and the award of an Australian Creative Arts Fellowship, Moje has embarked on an intensely creative period of work and reflection. He has been honored with an internationally touring retrospective exhibition of his work, he has exhibited in the US, and he was an invited guest of honor at the Venezia Aperto Vetro in 1996. The work for the Venice exhibition recently returned to Australia, where it was exhibited at the Craft ACT Gallery in Canberra.

Anne Brennan: *Could you reflect on the ways in which glass has developed in Germany, the United States and Australia?*

Klaus Moje: In Germany, I developed work in an aesthetic frame which extends very far back in a particular history and set of traditions. The more you come from a history, the more you are bound to certain expectations which a public has, and which artists have, and it is difficult to break away. We didn't have any art schools which taught glass, and I don't have an art school background. When I started, my working process was trial and error.

I first exhibited my mosaic work in 1975; the following year I met Dale Chihuly, who invited me to work at Pilchuck in 1979. At Pilchuck, I realized that my work doesn't have the performance value of hot glass. My working approach came from a different level. Also, I didn't have an immediate following amongst the students. I had to introduce my glass, and they had to be excited by its possibilities. At the same time, I was confronted with several problems: there was no glass, no controllable kiln, no grinding equipment.

During the first sessions, I wasn't able to complete a single piece of my own work to a point that met my own standards. Lino Tagliapietra, Ann Wolff, and a few Swedish glassblowers had also come to Pilchuck to teach. Lino and these Swedish glassblowers and I were seen as technicians. You see, at that time, there were a lot of slogans in the air like "Blow Glass for Peace." People would say, "We don't need technique, we push our breath into the glass, and we have a piece of art." That was never enough for Lino and me, or the Swedish glassblowers. So technique or skill was a four letter word at the time.

The argument at the time was that art lay in the creative part, whereas for me, it is necessary to find my base first, and the base in all artwork, as I see it, whether it is glass, or painting, or writing, or dancing is the craft. If you have set the craft in place you can free yourself from the resistance of the material. Your creative mind can work independently from the resistance which the material supplies. That was not understood in America then, but I believe it is well understood now: they have a level of technical excellence in certain aspects of glassblowing, casting, and montage techniques which cannot be bettered anywhere in the whole world. What I learned from my experience in America was that you can break rules so you can do what you want. When I got back to Germany in 1979, the first thing I made was a huge piece which you couldn't put on any table or any shelf. I worked against the perception that a piece of craft or an object that you could use had to fit into its surroundings.

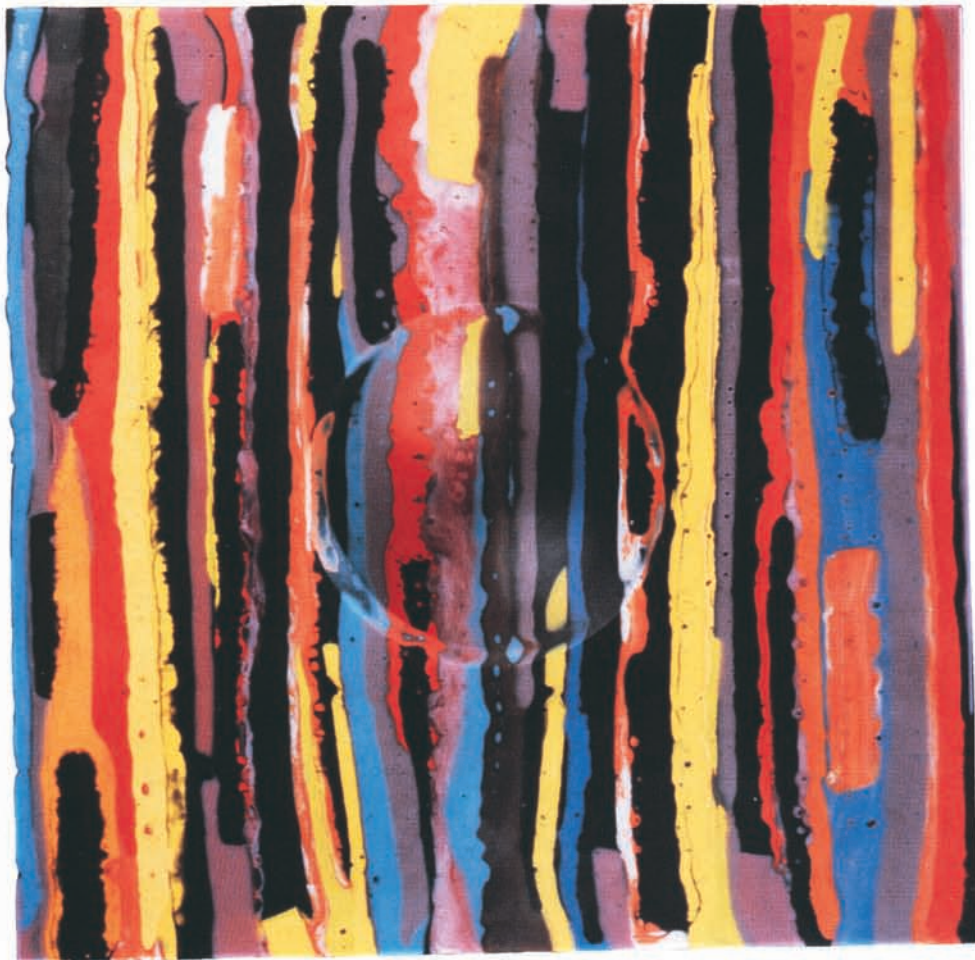
I had an exhibition in 1982 in Germany which was my most successful exhibition to date. I had got to a point where I knew that whatever I did after this exhibition would be a repetition of this work, and that I had to challenge myself with something new. I had been offered several teaching positions in the US, but they were within existing teaching institutions. Then I was invited to set up a glass department in Canberra, and that was just the thing. I had the chance to build up a glass department which was very different from either those of the Americans or the Europeans. I had the chance to apply some of the ideas which I had had for quite while, and try to realize it in such a way that this department could have a lasting effect on the artistic community. That was the reason why I came to Australia.

Would you like to reflect on the development of your work in Australia?

Australia confronted me in many ways: there was the confrontation with Australia itself, with its landscape, its skies, and its colors. As well, I had been working with Bullseye on the development of some new glass since they first saw my work at Pilchuck. I received the first consignment-

#7, 1988. Fused glass, 39.5 x 39.5 x 5 cm.



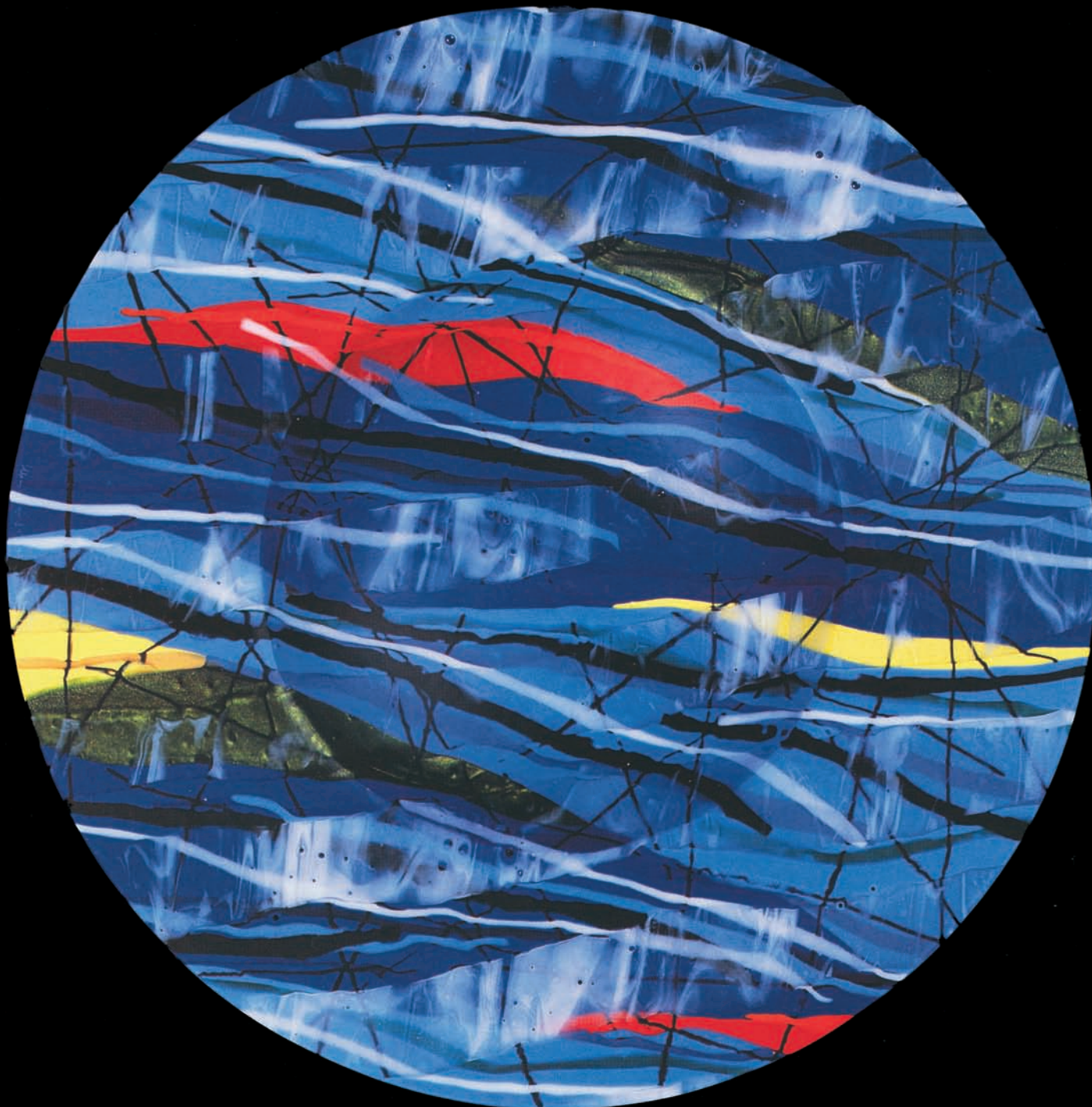


#4, 1988.
Fused glass,
18 x 18 x 18.5 cm.



#1, 1988.
Fused glass,
23 x 23 x 23.5 cm.

Untitled, 1997.
Fused glass,
52 x 7.5 cm.



ment of new Bullseye glass soon after I arrived in Australia.

Many people have ascribed the change in your palette to your move to Australia, and your response to the landscape and the intensity of the light. Do you think this is true?

I don't really believe that the palette that I developed here is significant in itself. [It is as much the outcome of the availability of the Bullseye glass as it is a response to Australian conditions.] Color is something which operates on the mind and senses, it is not something which has a value in itself. [Richly colored glass has always been available], it is only the question of how the artist uses it.

Your first ten years in Australia were spent as an educator as well as an artist, weren't they?

Yes, I really worked at two jobs. I had put aside ten years for teaching, and in those ten years I also developed my career; so I worked during the vacations, my twin sons were born, and altogether it was a very fruitful ten years.

Not having an academic background, being in an academic institution enhanced my life and my thinking. I am as grateful as any other student that I could be here for ten years. On the other hand, towards the end of ten years I began to feel that I was working more and more from my reserves, and the work I was making was becoming more cramped. The more expressionist work I made in 1986 was a great breakthrough from my point of view. It was a move from the very constructed pieces into very free floating work. Gradually, however, it became mechanical for me in some ways.

At the end of ten years, I was fortunate to receive an Australian Creative Arts Fellowship, which gave me a breathing space which I had never had before. I had two exhibitions, one in the US a few years ago, and this one. I was able to freely explore different approaches. On the one hand I have developed a body of large, highly colored, very free works. On the other hand, there is a group of smaller pieces which are very fine constructions. The important thing is that there is limitless time involved in these pieces, which has been very valuable for me.

Your work regularly attracts analogies with the formal qualities of painting; comparisons with Stella and Pollock, for example. Do you think that these analogies with fine art practice are a good way to look at your work?

Those comparisons have always been made without my ever intending them in my work. For my part, when I'm working, I have my white sheet of fibrefrax on which I build up my piece, working in steps and layers of construction. In this sense I don't differ from anyone whatever they're making: I have to know how to build up my work so that I get out of it what I want to achieve. One of the possibilities of glass, as opposed to paint, is that it offers transparency. It may not be

obvious in my work, but it is part of the depth which I am able to achieve. My principal concern is working with color and achieving something out of it.

What you are describing is a very about intensive process, and yet the outcome is often extraordinarily spontaneous looking.

These pieces are really the outcome of a series of developments which I have been working towards for the last twenty five years. It has to do with that process of overcoming the resistance of the material. You can see the development of my technical experience and knowledge of the material in my retrospective, from the early geometric forms to the first breakthrough in the middle of the 1980s, where it becomes clear that I can use a very resistant material as though I were using a paintbrush. Today, I am at the point where I am technically master of the glass and the only limitation I have from now on is my creative mind, which will determine whether I go further or not.

Does that painterly effect happen in the kiln?

It happens before that. The control of the building up of the piece must be absolute. I only have very limited possibilities to change the structure and coloring in the fire itself. I can put another layer on it, but that is a very dangerous game, in the sense that you can destroy your color. In some senses it is a process of working blind towards an end result but it is only the knowledge of how colors float through or fold which makes the work successful.

In my early years I used to say that there was twenty percent of the Good Lord in my pieces. Today I would say it is closer to three to five per cent of the Good Lord. There must be space for others now!

Your long career has been marked by a narrow set of technical procedures, and a very consistent set of forms. Why have you chosen to do this?

It is probably about restricting myself. Sometimes you build a set of frameworks from which you go out and explore, and that is what I do: I can go wherever I want, but within a set of constraints, and this method ties me together again. I never wanted to do the wild thing. If the wild thing can't be seen within the restriction of these forms, then I haven't succeeded.

In the work you made for Venice, there was a body of small vessels which were similar to some of your earliest work in their scale and form. Can you comment on this?

Yes, those small pieces are made to rest in the hand, to excite you by their fragility, their structure, their ornamental qualities. They are works for creating peace of mind.

[Returning to earlier forms] is part of the need to establish a base. There is a base in my life, there is a base in my work. I frequently go back to my roots and spread out again from there. When I can't see

how to go forward, I will return to my own history and reassess what I did in that time, and work from that level again. I can jump forward from there to the latest work, and work from there again. Possibly what I did twenty years ago had a certain strength, and revisiting this work means that with today's knowledge I can add to it. I know where my mistakes are, where I failed and succeeded. It is a wonderful feeling to see that in my later work. I like to go back, and make those steps forward.

This process raises the question of how much innovation can be done. Someone once said to me, "You're lucky, you're working in a niche, and no-one else can occupy it." I think that's so stupid. You don't occupy anything, there is no niche. That's becoming more obvious as people work in the same field, using similar techniques, and achieve their own characteristic work. I certainly have been lucky that I have found something that I love to do, but I also had to work for it.

What do you envisage as the next development in your work?

I may jump onto the wall, but that involves so many big decisions. If I move my work from the plinth onto the wall, then my work obviously becomes a painting, and I will be measured against the finest standards of painting. I sustain this kind of criticism from within myself as well as from the outside. As long as I can survive that, then I would like to do it.

There are other ways of thinking about glass on the wall apart from painting: an architectural context like windows, for example. Are you interested in this as another departure from the vessel form?

Architectural applications are certainly the next step away from the vessel. Another

Anne Brennan is an artist, historian, and art theorist who currently teaches at the School of Art, University of Australia, Canberra.

writer suggested that it would be nice for my images to be transformed into large wall pieces, commenting that they don't seem to be limited by their size.