

COLIN HEANEY ART GLASS



PHOTO: SUZANNA CLARKE

QUICKSILVER SERIES
Sculpture and Goblets, 19 cm, 42 cm and 24 cm



'Sunset Series Vessels', ht 25 cm

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On the 12th year of his exploration of hot glass, Colin Heaney could be described as a constantly maturing yet perpetually naive artist – a juxtaposition that underlines every aspect of his creativity. Text by Debbie Kruger.

'Minaret', 1993, blown & handworked glass, sculpture, ht 61 cm



'Caravansarie', 1993, blown and handworked glass sculpture, ht 58 cm



'Oceania #2', 1993, glass sculpture, ht 42 cm

THE maturation of Colin Heaney's themes and concerns, and the perfection of his artistry and techniques, coexist with a perpetual naivety in attitude, a constant yearning for experimentation, and a boundless exuberance of style. Heaney has a youthful wide-eyed innocence which emphasises his sincerity and candour while never detracting from his earnest commitment to the preservation of beauty and the prevention of insidious forces that threaten it.



'Sultan Series Vessels', 1993, blown and handworked hot glass, ht 21–36 cm



PHOTO DAVID YOUNG

PHOTO ROBERT ECKHART

PHOTO DAVID YOUNG

He is aware of the necessities of economics, the need for marketing and promotion, and has set up his Byron Bay studio accordingly, with management and public relations support as well as his talented team of glass blowers; yet he is averse to the power games and expectations of the influential elite in the art world. Byron Bay, on the NSW North Coast, is an appropriate location for an artist and a businessman who embodies such a harmonious blend of contrasting approaches.



PHOTO: ROGER DECKER

'Pacific Crystal Cup', 1993, sculptured goblet with handcut crystal, ht 17 cm



'Ruby Series', 1993, sculptured glass pouring vessel, ht 21 cm

PHOTO: ROGER DECKER



'Neo-Nouveau Tulip and Goblet', 1992, sculptured wine glasses crystal, ht 21 and 17 cm



'Lolita' (detail), 1993, sculptured goblet, ht 16 cm

PHOTO: ROGER DECKER

Below: 'Exotic Pleasures Series', 1993, wine glasses, ht 21 cm, and crystal cylinder goblet, ht 19 cm



PHOTO: ROGER DECKER

The laid-back New-Age holiday resort is renowned for its hippies and unemployed, but the rich diversity of Byron life also includes many artists, writers, filmmakers, scientists and business entrepreneurs. If the eclectic mix of inhabitants is inspiring, then the environment which they all share is awesome in its capacity to infuse feeling – and in this context Heaney's glasswork takes on a multi-layered significance. After a background as a sculptor in various media,

Heaney launched himself into glass art in a spontaneous move in 1983, virtually teaching himself to blow and manipulate hot glass. That instantaneous spirit is evident in all of his pieces, small or large. The unpredictability of his work, from one minute to the next, makes the creative process a riveting spectacle, and the viewing area in Heaney's studio is usually full of eager onlookers.

'Glass blowing is by nature an action process. An hour is the absolute maximum that you would ever spend on a piece, and it's moving the whole time because it's hot, and if you're not moving it gets cold and will crack – so you're always working within the parameters of the temperature. It's speed makes it fascinating to watch. Even if I'm making it up as I go, if I'm improvising a totally new piece, I don't stop and think about it. Creative decisions are made on the spot.' Heaney is an artist who is a craftsman by necessity; his loose abstract expressionism in glass transcends formal design, and makes it difficult for other craftsmen to produce his concepts. This gives each of his pieces integrity and explains why some people have been known to collect dozens of his sculptural wine glass designs. Heaney's glasses are his trademark, each a one-off, due to the manner of their creation, no matter how many are produced in a series. The bowl may be clear-coloured, iridised or in combination, while the stems, twisted and variegated, with multiple joints and fused crystals, are pure Heaney.

The need to be free of constraints accentuates all of Heaney's work. His first commission in 1983, to make imaginative wine glasses for a Brisbane restaurant, resulted in a complete set of individual glasses, and that theme has continued in other commissions from restaurateurs who admire Heaney's style including, in 1991, Michel Roux's Waterside Inn at Bray, outside London. The ensuing *Ruby Series*, now available in Australia, is one of the more popular lines he produces. Even more pleasurable for him is making wine glasses that are genuinely one-of-a-kind, not even comprising a series. His exhibition at the Australian Craftworks Gallery in Sydney, in 1993, featured a large collection of individually created glasses that were 'really fun to make'. Enjoyment is an integral part of Heaney's creative process and this is reflected in the ebullience of his glass. The expeditious blowing process means the work is deceptively simple in its contrivance, yet always sophisticated.

A recent collaboration with Australian Interflora Champion, Julie Wileman, for the World Interflora Championships in Stockholm in October, 1993, was also fun. Heaney produced all her props, including five iridised platters representing *lily pads*, a gold leaf base with a slab of black marble on top, and some gold pipes at different levels to hold the platters in an S-shape so that the floral display would cascade from pad to pad.

The evolution of Heaney's glass work has led to a greater interest in fabricated sculptural pieces, small and decorative or large and statuesque, as well as furniture, using mixed media and combining the spontaneity of blowing with the contemplation of more pragmatic design. His background in sculptural fabrication gave him a variety of skills, technical knowledge and respect for a wide range of materials. Now he is drawing that history into his present work.

'I am moving away from the single blown object, such as a wine glass, a vessel form or platter. My most

'Forest Crystal Tulip Wine Glasses, 1993, ht 23 cm; Centre: 'Figsatz Chalice', 1993, sculptured goblet, ht 23 cm



'BC Vessels', 1992, ht 14 cm; Centre: 'Sultan Series', 1993, sculptured vessel, ht 24 cm



'Amethyst', 1993, blown and handworked platter sculpture, ht 34 cm



PHOTO: ROSEBEECHER



'Ruby Series Crystal Tulips', 1993, sculptured goblets, ht 23 cm



recent platter designs have two elements – a base and a top. And in my furniture designs I incorporate plaster, mirror, sheet glass, wood and metal. My glass is a major element in the sculptural pieces and the furniture, but I use the other materials to join them structurally.'

He avoids designing on paper, relying instead on intuition and empathy with the material. A smaller, exquisite piece such as *Minaret*, made up of three elements, exemplifies his combination of impulse and contrivance. Comprising a cut, ground and polished crystal incorporated into a handworked circlet atop a free-blown base, the piece features iridescent and silver-lustre colouring. The finesse of the manipulations evidences an ornate figure, belying the simplicity of its invention. Heaney made two or three examples of each section before piecing it together.

'I sketch in glass, improvising as I go. The next day when I analytically examine the piece in question I think that's right, or that's wrong. I know basically the size I want, what function the element must fulfil within the piece, and I work within the areas of technical difficulties. Depending on the type of feel, shape and effect I want, I'll use either clear balls or cut-glass crystals and then build them up. So I have those ideas set, but how they actually come together in the end is something else. If I intend to use crystals, for example, I'll ensure that 10 or 15 differently shaped and variously coloured crystals are pre-heated and ready for immediate application before starting a piece. The actual selection of a particular crystal is made at the last moment and this decision influences the piece down the line.'

Larger works, particularly furniture, can be more thought out beforehand, although even with a table Heaney will make eight bases and choose later on which one will be incorporated into the final work. Of crucial concern to Heaney is durability. 'I like to make objects that last, that have a fair chance of surviving for posterity. Too much contemporary art gives insufficient thought to craftsmanship.'

A recent commission for the Kooralbyn Valley Resort gave Heaney a free hand to design the pieces he wanted; all the glass in the resort's public spaces was by Heaney, with the exact lighting he needed provided. He is not, however, interested in moving into large-scale corporate or domestic interior decoration. The Kooralbyn project was an exception.

'I don't normally like to work directly with clients, because it compromises my control over the final result, and basically how I work now is pretty much to please myself. If somebody doesn't like a piece, they don't buy it. But as soon as you enter a situation where you're doing commission work for someone's home, they want some input into how it looks, and I find it hard to fulfil other people's expectations.'

Heaney's passion for his local environment continues to manifest in his work. The inspiration he draws from the sea is well noted, with his *Starfish* and *Fan Shell* paperweights proliferating in homes and offices around the world. While the regenerating effects of the ocean will always have a profound influence on his creative energy, the past three years have seen Heaney look beyond for stimulation. He has made several overseas trips, with a particular focus on Europe, where museums and historical work were instructive, and the Middle East, where clients and galleries in Dubai and Bahrain gave new incentives.

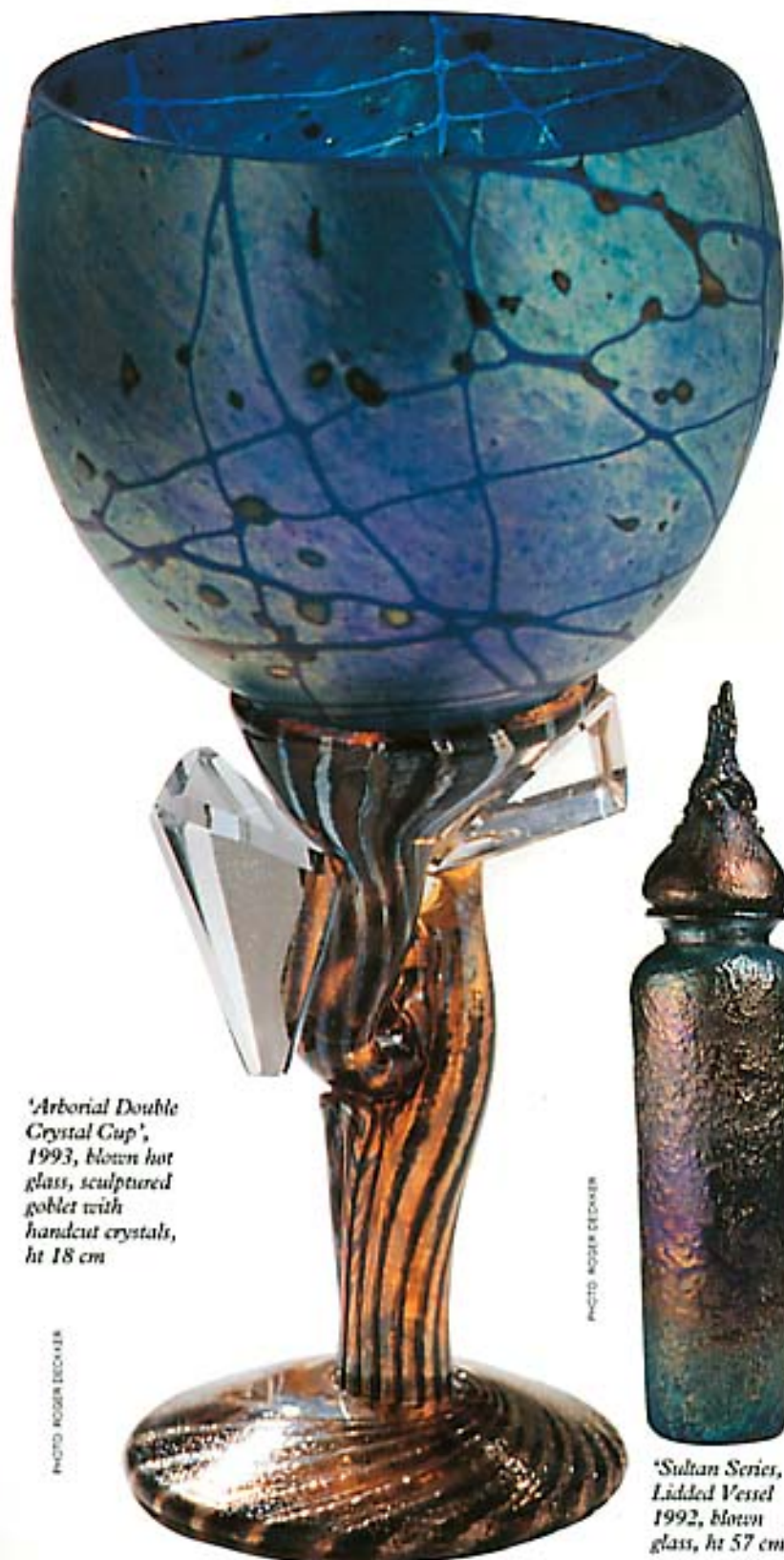
'Salome Series, Candelabra', 1993, blown hot glass with gilded wrought iron, ht 110 cm

PHOTO: ROGER DECKER

The *Minaret* was one of a six-piece commission for a Middle Eastern collector, which also included the baroque *Salomé* pouring vessel and the *Ruby* and *Amethyst* platters, featuring free-blown spun-out tops on manipulated built-up bases. The recent affinity with Middle Eastern influences comes after years of creating objects with a "timeless", even "ancient", look. The quality of the iridisation, particularly the crusty, coarse-textured volcanic effect of the *Sultan* series vessel, even gives the impression that it is an artefact from some antiquated world. Yet Heaney's work also smacks of his own worlds – the US West Coast and the Australian East Coast.



Colin Heaney



'Arboreal Double Crystal Cup', 1993, blown hot glass, sculptured goblet with handcut crystals, ht 18 cm

PHOTO: ROGER RECHNER

PHOTO: ROGER RECHNER



'Sultan Series, Lidded Vessel' 1992, blown glass, ht 57 cm

'I've been told that my work seems Californian. Although I left California when I was 18, I suppose the experiences I had must have influenced me, because I've certainly heard that more than once from people who wouldn't know my background. Obviously, it's still a West Coast look.'

The effusive nature of his art is even more clearly a reflection of the easy-going Australian lifestyle and landscape, and Byron Bay is intrinsically in everything Heaney does. His reverence for nature permeates his life and work, leading him on personal journeys of self-discovery which imbue his recent sculptures with qualities of inner power. His political campaigning work in the Byron region has seen him outspoken against large-scale development, such as a proposed Club Med resort, which he believes threatens to alter the character of the area, and in doing so imperil the natural beauty of the region.

The political work is an extension of Heaney's commitment to the environment and the preservation of natural beauty. 'I prefer to make objects that are beautiful, or embody some aspect of beauty in them. I believe it's important to make things that raise people's feelings of well-being, not bring them down, as some so-called fine art does. These sentiments also extend to the environment, because it is vitally important that the beauty of Australia's natural heritage is preserved for future generations.'

Heaney's work is held by private collectors all over the world and is featured in many public collections around Australia and overseas in Spain (a result of being exhibited at World Expo in Seville, in 1992) and Denmark.

'There are basically two ways you can make a living in art: one is to appeal to people through their love of the work ... because it is uplifting and makes them feel good; or you can appeal to those who buy something for status. Personally, I prefer to rely on the former aspect of the marketplace for my living.'

Exhibiting is a double-edged sword for Heaney; he appreciates the value of having his work seen by a larger, often uninitiated audience, and in 1993 he had shows in Sydney, Melbourne, Hong Kong and Florida. But he is also circumspect about the time, effort and cost involved, and is happy to continue exhibiting and selling through his own studio/gallery.

However, 1994 will see the unrelenting pace continue with collaborative research into the development of new colouring techniques for glass with scientists from the University of Technology in Sydney, as well as a major exhibition at the Glass Canvas Gallery in Florida. But Byron Bay and its surrounding region are destined to be Heaney's home for as long as he can see. His regard for the majesty of the rainforests and mountains that border the entrancing coastline is such that he avoids attempts to re-create their detail in glass.

'Really, it's a creation of God and everything in nature has such awesome intricacy – regardless of the level on which it is observed – it just becomes more and more interesting the closer you look. You can never do it justice, because the thing that makes it beautiful is its infinite variety, timelessness and biological fragility. It's like words trying to describe ultimate reality – it is not possible.'

Debbie Kruger

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'Fandango', lidded vessel, ht 22 cm

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