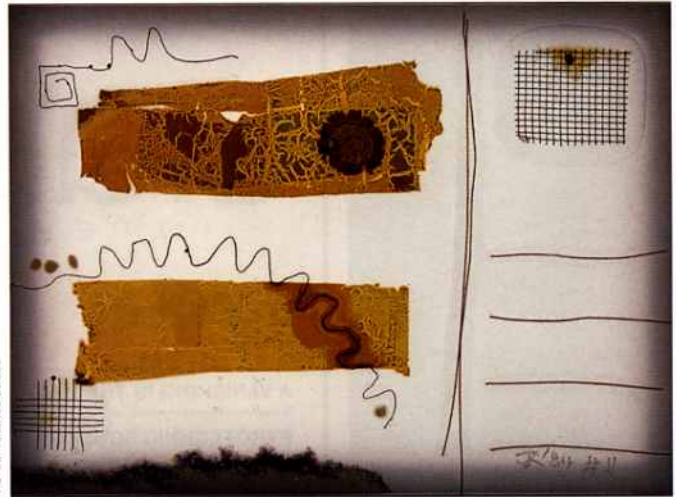




'The Briefcase', 1986, fused and cast glass, mixed media, 46 x 66 x 9 cm



PHOTOS: TERENCE BOGUE

'Trivial Postcards from a Country Madhouse #11', 1984, fused glass, 9 x 13 cm

A VANISHING IN THE PERIPHERAL EYE

The Evolving Glass Art of Rob Knottenbelt

The recent work of Rob Knottenbelt is the product of an extensive career in the field of contemporary glass art, one which has been informed throughout by an exceptional dedication to understanding and expressing aspects of self, place and society. Text by Dr Noris Ioannou. Photography by David McArthur.

AT its most elementary level, Rob Knottenbelt's work manifests as research-in-glass, specifically through a personal study of loss and change within the natural environment. His current output of chromatic cast forms not only celebrates his technical virtuosity, but also reveals an innovative creative florescence. With over 30 years of participation in the field, Knottenbelt's current sculptural works encompass a warmth, colour and dynamism that engage the viewer to elicit a welcoming optimism in the face of considerable obstruction.

A pioneer of the contemporary Australian glass movement, the first person to work at the Adelaide Jam Factory Glass Studio in 1975, and one of the three co-founders of the national body for glass artists, Ausglass,

the early part of Knottenbelt's career was controversial. As well, unlike many practitioners in the burgeoning glass movement, he steadfastly avoided the limelight, seeking instead a secluded lifestyle.

Glass artist, poet and philosopher – an unlikely though potent blend – Rob Knottenbelt's philosophical stance includes various meditations, particularly his perennial: 'We are all exiles ...' Not surprisingly, given this compelling makeup, his work has always evoked a mix of strong reaction and admiration. This new body of cast forms is likely to generate a similar response and undoubtedly reaffirm his prominence even further.

The paradoxical complexities of Knottenbelt's work, and indeed his personality, are perhaps encapsulated in his viewpoint of "exile" and the notion of, as he puts

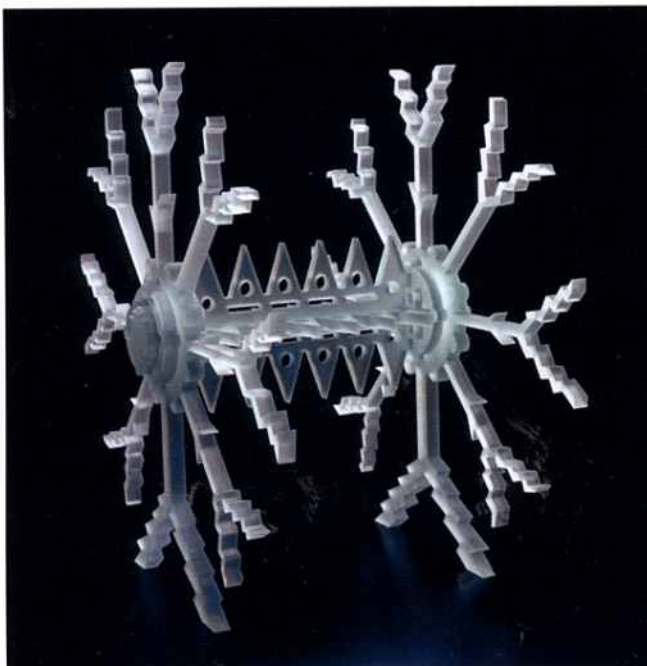


PHOTO: ROBERT COLVIN

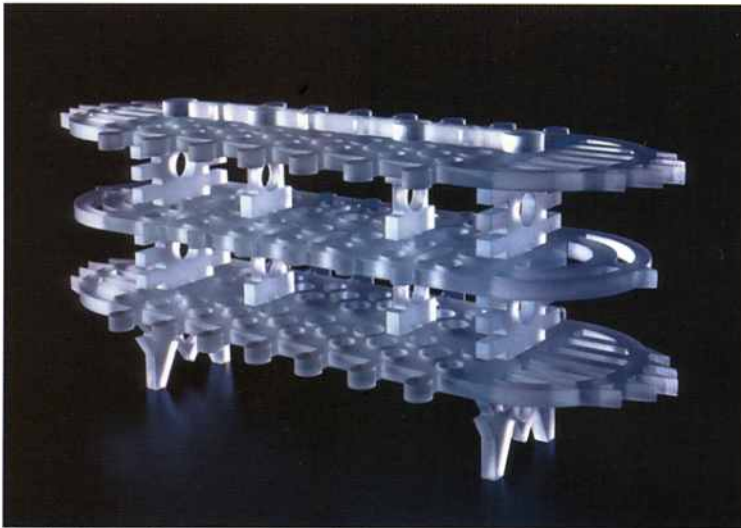
'Dervish', Diatom Series #2, 1992, CadCam, Waterjet work, 50 x 50 x 32 cm



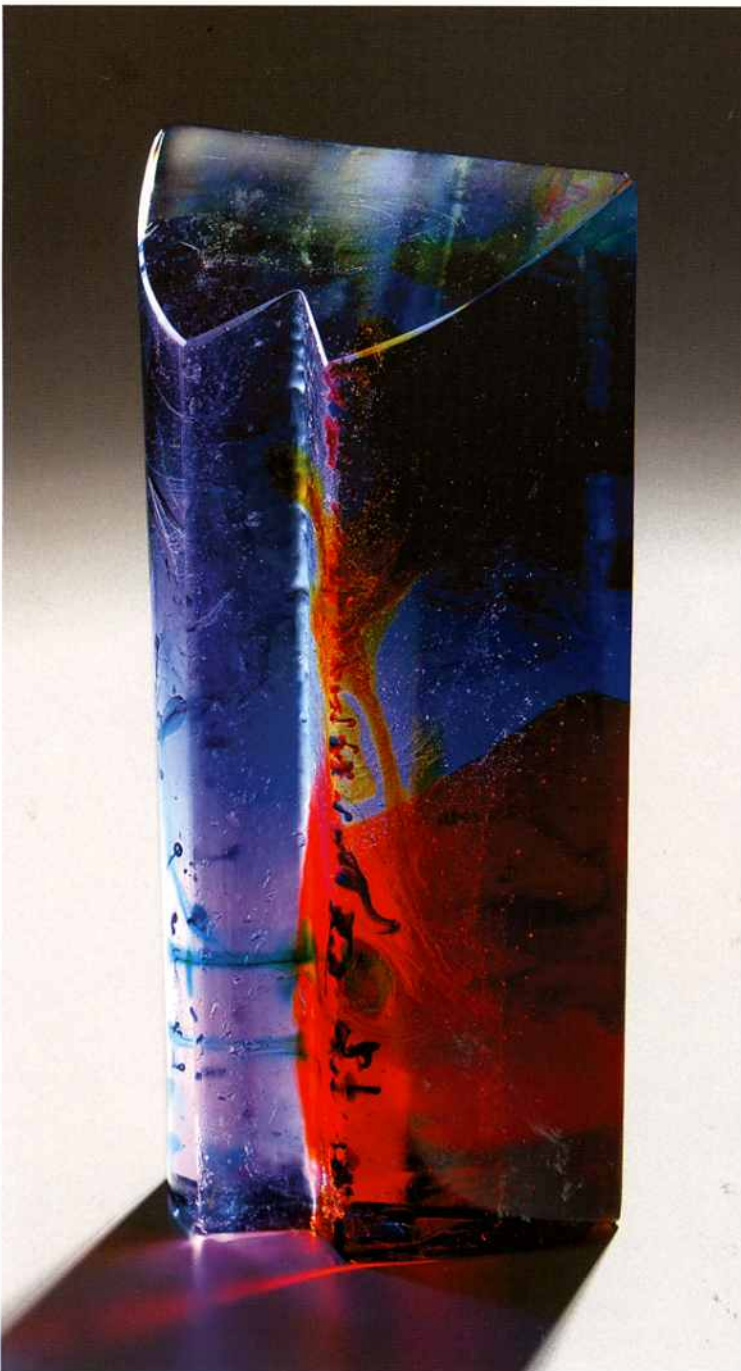
'Sunburst – goodbye to all that #16', 2004, cast glass, 15.4 x 14.6 x 7.5 cm



*'Falling Away – a vanishing
in the peripheral eye #2', 2004, cast
glass, 53.1 x 24.8 x 9.5 cm*



'Ancient Loving Navigator - Diatom Series #4', 1993, CadCam, Waterjet, ht 20.5 cm



'Dreaming of Belize - goodbye to all that #6', 2003, ht 15 cm

it, 'becoming an outsider by being a thinker within Australia'. Compare his image as a dissident, one who has never really played the game - and still doesn't - to the success of the so-called iconic glass artist. Knottenbelt preserves integrity of personal creativity through a deep-founded courage that avoids the conformities and dictates of economics and fashion. He observes: 'We are mortals struggling with the immortal in our attempts to create something immortal.' It is in the context of this struggle that Knottenbelt sees salvation or, at least, an affirmation: 'Have I made anything of consequence?'

Using the visceral imagery of a Peter Booth painting, Knottenbelt explains: 'It immediately provokes a response. Here is someone who wrestles ... he produces images that demand that you be engaged ... you become the soul stripped bare.' For Knottenbelt, much contemporary glass art has become self-referential: 'It has become equated with lifestyle and, by its nature, is non-threatening and doesn't interrogate the status quo.'

In the 1980s, Knottenbelt's challenging work *Trivial Postcards from a Country Madhouse* provoked strong reactions. These postmodernist interpretations of the tradition of the postcard parodied its fleeting images and snatches of banal text. His glass postcards came at a time when the artist had moved from Adelaide to an idyllic valley in the rural outskirts of Melbourne; a place where he has since continued to live and work. At the same time the "postcards" proclaimed a mental change - an insight - that led to his determined move. The postcard series also set the stamp of much of his future work in that in their innovative power and directness of style they encapsulated multiple readings. And it's here that we have the first glimpses of what became the artist's preoccupation concerning humanity and its place and effect on the natural environment.

In 1986, Knottenbelt took a radical departure from the hot-working furnace techniques that were being widely adopted by many practitioners, to investigate instead the creative possibilities of computer-controlled cutting with high-pressure water cutters.

He soon gained recognition as a virtuoso in this extraordinary area, combining computer programming with high-pressure water jets to carve architectonic shapes out of plate glass, which he then assembled into elaborate sculptural works. Then and now, they stand out as unique in the area of studio glass practice. Their crisp, acid-etched and sandblasted interlocking forms create striking graphic imagery which evokes delicacy and

'Glancing By - still life #2', 2004, cast glass, 29 x 15.2 x 7 cm

complexity. They encode a cryptic vocabulary at once organic and mechanic, articulating a mythic iconography charged with meaning for individual and society. The meticulousness and character of his *Diatom Series* project a dual symbolism: the *Navigator*, for example, one of the recognised icons of contemporary Australian glass, is an especially meditative work which celebrates the precision of technology, yet in its sphinx-like repose, questions that very technological future. Its crystalline beauty lures the viewer, while its austerity transfixes. Born in Amsterdam, Knottenbelt lived the migrant experience, with a sense of dislocation that cannot be described so much as intensely felt. Thus, throughout his professional career, and particularly recently, his work has dealt with loss in both a biological and environmental sense, and more particularly, with notions of complexity, species demise and eco fragility.

We may summarise his work as falling into three discrete phases. The first significant phase is *Assemblage*, which occurred 1978–88 and included 24 pieces titled *Trivial Postcards from a Country Madhouse*. Only one major assemblage piece, *The Briefcase – white Australian primitive*, remains in the National Glass Collection. The second major phase is *Computer Generated CAD-CAM Waterjet Cut Plate Glass Sculptures 1987–97*. In these works he was a world pioneer. And now, the third phase is in progress: *Cast Glass*.

Insight into Knottenbelt's current works can be gained through a glance at his just-completed masters thesis. Entitled *A Vanishing in the Peripheral Eye*, it explores within the framework of a body of sculptural works in glass, aspects of loss and change associated with the natural environment. Based on the premise that the interactive experiences with the world around us are generated by sight, touch and sound and are keystones in the construction of our varied internal mental landscapes, he has investigated how 'losses in a selected environment impact on the visual fabric of current art practice'. The loss he investigated related to the impact of one marine invertebrate species on a section of the Victorian coastal zone.

Knottenbelt further explains: 'Irretrievable loss when it happens quietly, almost unseen, in the blurred edges of our "everyday peripheral vision" changes the way we see without our overtly realising it. This "vanishing" of living components from within the physical landscape



'Red Wind #6 – the bonerock canticles', 2003, cast glass, 8 x 29.3 x 20.8 cm

subtly and tangibly affects the images surrounding us. It alters our perceptions, our experiences, our non-verbal descriptions, and our interpretive language descriptions of the world around us.'

The "vanishing in the peripheral eye" is Knottenbelt's poetic metaphor constructed to express a feeling of loss and profound change. The metaphor forms the nature of the question he examines through an astonishing corpus of sculptural works.

His research examined how changes inherent in aspects of irrevocable loss associated with the natural environment, and not apparent for some time in the future, may be approached and described through the "lens" of three-dimensional artworks. With its capacity to transmit light through physical mass, to incorporate a wide range of different internal colour values, tones and shapes, Knottenbelt deems glass as especially suitable to exploring notions of loss and change.

Through extensive experiments with open-kiln casting techniques, utilising recent industrial materials, a range of new possibilities was exposed. Notably, the ability to precisely control internal colour which provided an extensive vocabulary for Knottenbelt's interpretations.

With his previous CadCam series (of which only 18 were made), colour was only present owing to minute



'Turning Paths to the Calving Fields – the whale tooth sagas #2', 2003, cast and polished glass, 12.5 x 33.7 x 9.7 cm



'Turning Paths to the Calving Fields' (side view), 2003, cast glass, 12.5 x 33.7 x 10 cm

percentages of iron in the plate glass giving it delicate pale green tinges. And now this body of cast glass has manifested, following some four years of philosophising, research and investigation, in a blaze of colouration. The present casting series, first conceived in 2001, is a manifestation of the artist's preoccupation with the notion of complexity. 'These pieces reduce essentials to a level of understanding without overly reducing their inherent complexity,' says Knottenbelt.

His initial series of castings, "Goodbye to All That", incorporate a vase form used in the castings from the Britannia Creek Glass Studio. Here, the artist explores his palette in a test bed of small sculptures, providing glimpses to his later directions. The use of the vessel motif is also self-referential, looking back to the artist's earlier, glassblowing years.

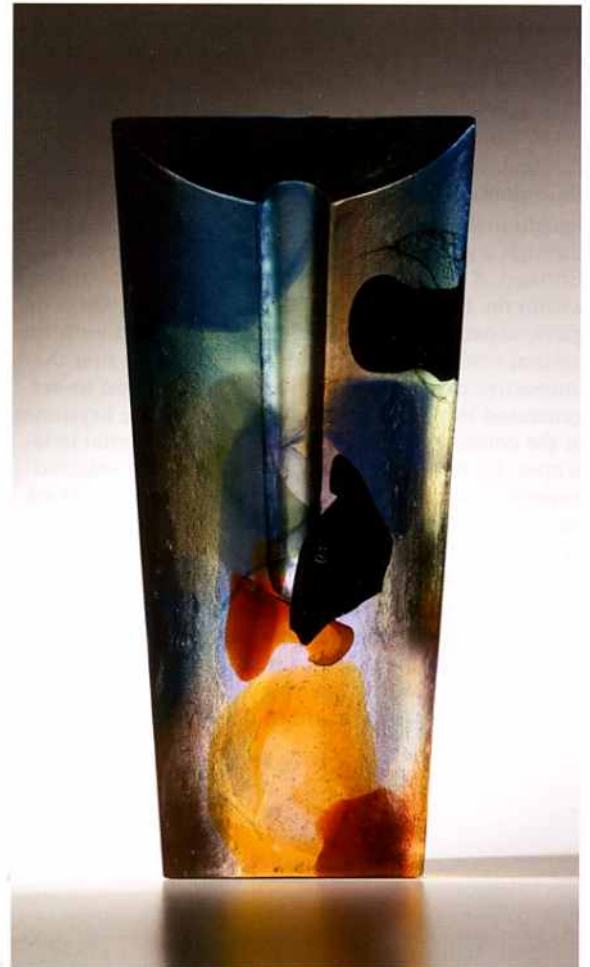
Next came "The Bonerock Canticles", a series dealing with the Great Artesian Basin and the notion of water origin and conservation. Begun in 2003, a particular form mimics the water table, while swirls of opalescence are dramatic, the inference is confrontational. The sculptural format is "table-like" in its structure, having a distinctly ancient quality, echoing the fact that water



in the artesian basin may be millions of years old. The title comes from the fact that the underwater aquifers occur in certain types of geological configurations that the artist chooses to call "bonerock", for as he sees it, aquifer water is like "marrow" in the continent's bedrock. Canticles are little songs or hymns, once used in medieval religious services; so these works are small songs about ancient water in an ancient land.

In another sub-group, "The Whale-tooth Sagas" series, the forms are based on the tooth of the Zeuglodon, an extinct whale that lived some 35-50 million years ago. This third series reflects an ongoing interest in the environment. The theme centres on the dinosaur ancestors of modern toothed whales: dolphins, beaked and sperm whales. Somewhat whimsical, they're imaginary poetic points: 'the possible perspective of what a whale might have been thinking while living in those primordial seas'.

Knottenbelt's other series, "Elliptic Chants – Songs of



'Lost - a vanishing in the peripheral eye #3', 2004, cast glass, 53.5 x 25.5 x 9.8 cm

the Engineers", was the outcome of ongoing conversations with friends working in engineering, notably his observation that 'most cannot name any god associated with their profession, other than the Roman god Vulcan. Engineering is about making dreams real'.

Casting even larger amounts of glass, sometimes up to 30 kg, Knottenbelt has also produced the "Vanishing in the Peripheral Eye" series. These are tall, angular works that take the eye on a journey through a void of internal bubbles, ethereal stria and darkness that suddenly shifts into dazzling areas of light and colour.

'Koan Wave #12 - goodbye to all that', 2003, cast and polished glass, 14.5 x 15.5 x 7.5 cm

The first large work, titled *Prime*, refers to those 'biological moments before invasion begins, those interludes of golden complexity, almost "halcyon days" where the mythic Greek kingfisher sings, its nest floats on the seas, the winds are calm.' This piece is writhing with layers, that core bore a cross-section of the intertidal zone. In the second work, *Falling Away*, 'the stripping process has begun, but the subtlety is still there. The first greys have appeared in the background, the balance is gently slipping, and the vanishing in the peripheral eye has begun. The deeper colours of the sea floor are shifting; there's a hint of kelp.' As the process continues, the artist realises extinction in a third piece titled *Lost*: 'Change for humans has to be at the level of giant tsunamis before they take any notice. It has to be violent, immediate and visible ... This work had to be quiet, with a hint of beauty. There's nothing quite as evil as beautiful evil ... it masks the brutal insanity.'

Progressively, the works have gone from the horizontal to the vertical and also become thicker in cross-section. Complexity has departed the external form (as in the computer works) and is expressed instead through the subtleties of the inner colouration that contrasts with the polished surfaces. This is a departure from the acid-etched, veil-like outer limits of the computer works.

These recent castings are all a personal and elegant response to the environment, Knottenbelt's perennial issue since the 1980s. The almost pure structural and painterly imagery of these works suggest nebulae or segments carved from galaxies – gravity sinks that invite engagement then draw you into their seductive proximity. Their beauty is almost daunting. As for black holes, once the event horizon is reached the viewer has little choice and is compelled to dive or be pulled into their luminous depths. They are deeply meditative works that have evolved from a huge breadth of experience, coupled with an exceptional amount of technical experimentation. Indeed, they are the product of considerable personal growth and insight.

Hence the dynamics of these works operate on several levels and translate into various metaphoric dichotomies, such as inner/outer, simplicity/complexity, conscious/unconscious, meditative/active and the knowable/the inexplicable. In this regard, we can also take our cue from Knottenbelt who wishes us to engage with these works 'in a similar relationship we have with this continent, its landscapes and its culture' – as exiles.

Beyond their intoxicating clarity and luminosity, perhaps what strikes one the most about Knottenbelt's current works is their sheer elegance. He has surfed to the edge of the universe where thought, light and colour comeingle, and has returned to bequeath an astonishing legacy in the medium of glass. These poetic works ponder his and our place in the antipodes and the natural world, drawing us closer to a core feeling of repose and understanding.

In his struggle with Gabriel, the artist has wrestled in a personal struggle that has led to psychological, moral and creative resolution. Rob Knottenbelt likens these works to a collection of haiku on loss and change: 'It's about emotion, moods and those delicate, subtle, shifting colour changes in mental and physical landscapes'.

Dr Noris Ioannou

Dr Noris Ioannou is an Adelaide-based cultural historian, writer and critic. He is the author of over 8 major books including Australian Studio Glass: The Movement, Its Makers, and their Art (Craftsman House) 1995.

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'Aleph Bones – elliptic chants' (detail)



'Salt #9 – the bonerock canticles', 2005, cast glass, 8 x 29.6 x 20.9 cm



'Aleph Bones – elliptic chants #1', 2004, cast glass, 12.6 x 31 x 18 cm

