

FROM MICRO TO MACRO IN TALLER GLASS

The scale and form of Matthew Curtis's glass structures continue to mutate as if by quantum leaps into loftier and uncharted dimensions. Text by Shane Giles. Photography by Rob Little.



'Segmented Blue Carapace', 2006, mould blown segments, steel blue glass, lathe-worked and bonded, total ht 215 x 64 x 15 cm

THE diversity of form in nature and the ability of humans to describe the universe mathematically holds a particular fascination for Australian glass artist Matthew Curtis. This is the basis of his latest body of work "Structural Divisions". Curtis takes the seemingly random patterns of microscopic natural forms and explores the effect of systematic repetition created in the finished work. His life-sized structures attract the viewer not only through the gravity of their immense scale but also because of what they evoke. For Curtis, the process of making art involves more than the vision imposed by the artist; it is also about the process of creating forms and the way in which an audience might interact imaginatively with the work.

Matthew Curtis with 'Segmented Blue Carapace', 2006



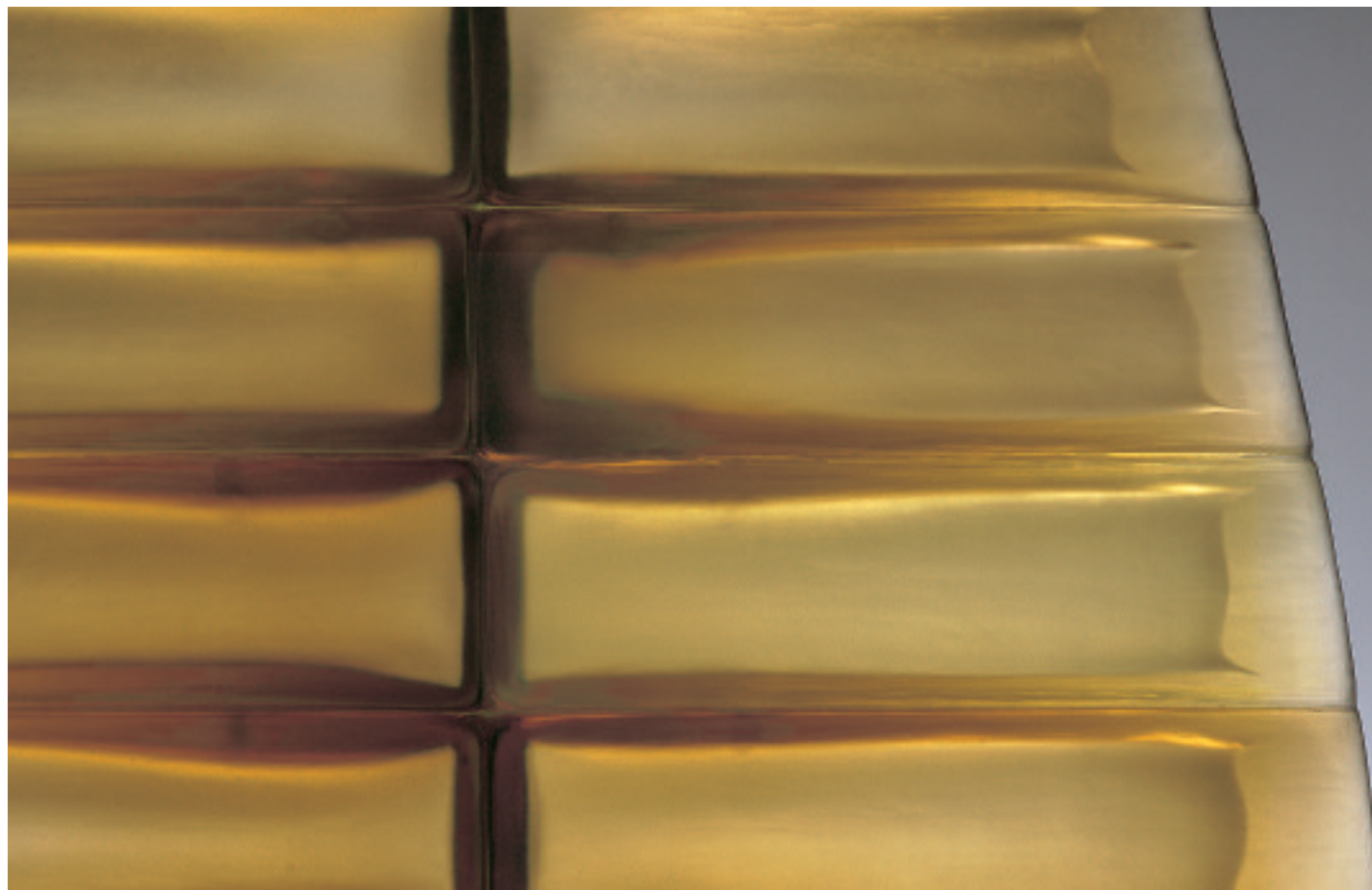


'Segmented Amber Thorax', 2006, mould blown, lathe-worked, 202 x 63 x 16 cm

The scale of these new works involved the application of a variety of traditional glassmaking techniques, but combined in unusual and unorthodox ways. His huge segmented structures, up to two meters tall, are impressive and imposing sculptural forms. Their design and construction posed a number of technical challenges, which were overcome through careful planning, experimentation and collaboration. Through a combination of blown and moulded glass, as well as cold-working techniques, Curtis has achieved a hybridisation of the glassmaking process which has resulted in forms that allow for a simultaneous examination of internal and external morphology. Each segment captures a space within a bubble membrane. The process is purposeful, yet produces randomness within the work. There is a refined edge that produces depth and introduces aesthetic complexity to the structure. The resulting forms are both regular and irregular at once.

Fusion and hybridisation underpin and inform much of Curtis's approach to life and art. He and fellow glass artist Harriet Schwarzrock relocated to Queanbeyan, NSW in 2003 and immediately set about converting a vacant warehouse into a home and studio. 'The advantage of this place isn't just the convenience of having one's home and studio in one building,' says Curtis, 'but also its proximity to the Canberra arts scene. The university and galleries attract a lot of talent to the region, and with the Canberra Glassworks opening in 2007, there are some exciting times ahead.'

Curtis is keen to encourage young artists in developing their practice. He explains that the pursuit of a career in the arts is a lifestyle choice; a kind of journey. It can't be done in isolation and must be nourished in community. His own practice started this way when he went to work for Rob Wynne at Denizen Glass Design Studios in Sydney's beachside Manly in 1991. Curtis built his practice from 'the ground up' with no formal training. His path has been unusual in that he is one of the few



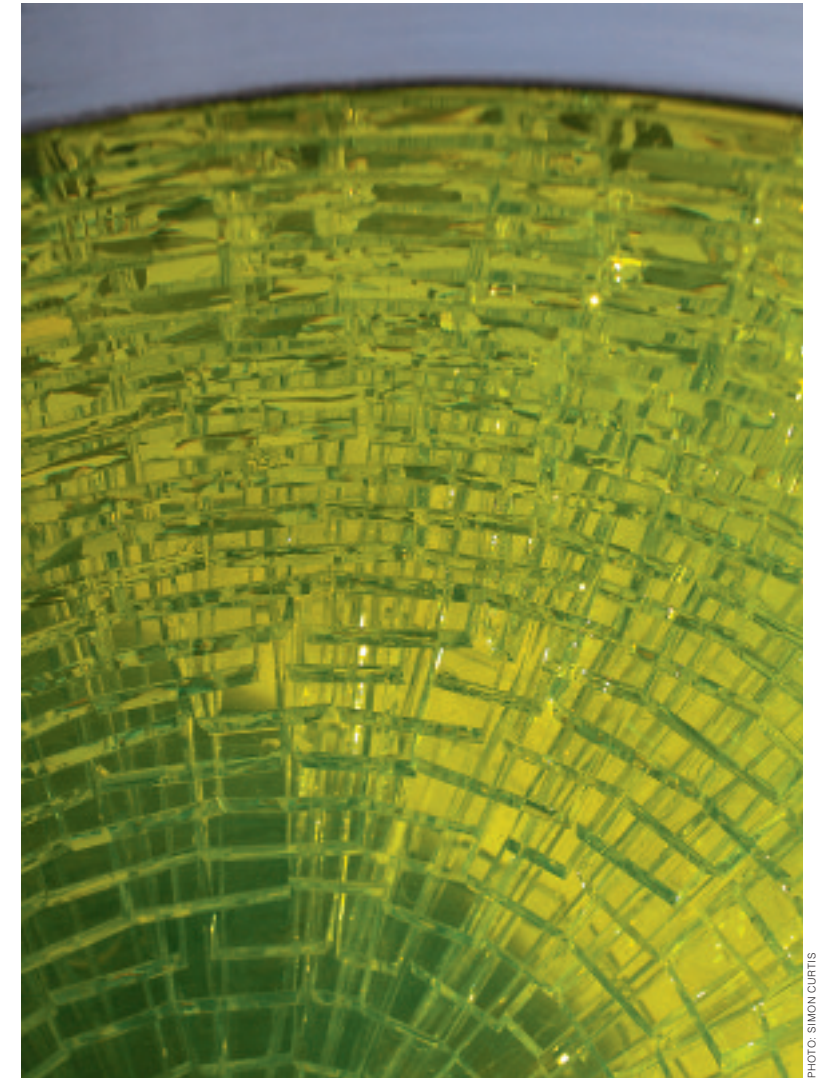
'Segmented Amber Thorax' (detail)

established glass artists who has trained on the job in a structure akin to an apprenticeship. 'I was extremely fortunate to be involved in the dynamics of the Denizen Collective, where such accomplished practitioners as Richard Whiteley, Ann Jakle, Ben Edols, Kathy Elliott, Bettina Visintin, Robert Wynne and Tom Rowney all developed their glass successful practices.'

Curtis has tutored in various capacities in hot glass studios in Australia and Europe, and he favours the hands-on workshop approach of collaboration. It reflects his own experience and allows emerging artists to see not only dynamic arts practices, but also to understand the realities of running the business of a hot glass studio.

The Australia Council grant which Curtis received in 2006 enabled him to employ assistants on a part-time basis in preparation for his forthcoming exhibition at Axia Modern Art in Melbourne. He insists that shared experience is the great teacher. 'It's not just the work', he says, 'but the downtime is important too. We swap stories, share problems and offer solutions. In the end we help each other and we have something to offer.'

'Structural Divisions' is an extension of these ideas too. He takes his inspiration from microscopic structures in nature and combines them repetitively to suggest forms. This fusion of ideas in the design extends to the viewer who, too, must collaborate with the work in order to grasp a sense of its meaning. 'I want people to respond to it, and I like the fact that viewers interpret the works in different ways.' His imagery is sourced largely from biological structures. Insect segments are most readily obvious in his work, but he also extends himself to follow the microscopic architecture of diatoms, planktons and other organic and mineral forms. 'I don't necessarily set out to make a beetle or to reproduce the geometry of honeycomb,' he explains. 'This new series is my response to the inspiration I experience in nature. I'm intrigued with the elegance, intricacies and mathematical beauty of the natural world. I aspire to reproduce



'Constructed Citrus Bowl' (detail), 2006, blown glass, float glass, 28 x 58 x 46 cm

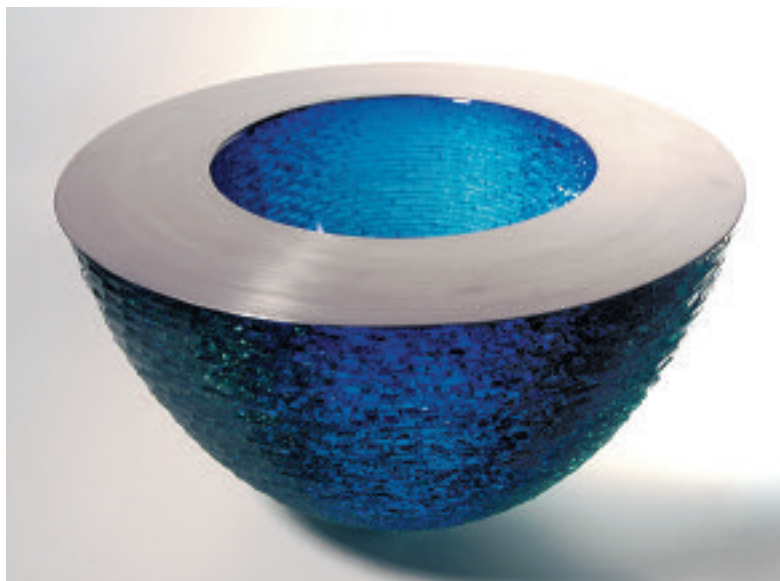


'Constructed Cherry Bowl', 2006, blown glass, float glass, stainless steel rim, 28 x 56 x 56 cm



PHOTO: MARK DONALDSON

'Segmented Sculpture', blown steel blue glass segments, with red glass interior, wheel-cut and bonded, 240 x 29 x 29 cm. National Gallery Sculpture Prize, 2003



a patterned form from the manipulation of seemingly random elements. I want to remind the viewer of the fascinations and complexities of the world. I want them to recall a childlike memory of wonder.'

On first inspection, the simplicity is immediately recognisable, though the viewing is wholly personal. Every eye has experienced it through childhood and beyond in myriad experiences. The proportions and symmetry resonate with an understanding of nature. We imagine our existence in nature through our experiences of a creature held in a small hand, an ancient flint discarded or the distant connection we find in a fossil relic. The drama of these imaginings is heightened further by the enormity of the sculpture in front of us. It is confronting and inviting all at once. We see the microscopic writ large and can't help but walk around the piece and scrutinise its angles. 'Such mathematical precision, with its superficial simplicity and underlying complexity, is fascinating, and to see it displayed on such a prodigious scale is a real joy,' enthused Curtis.

Over the past decade Curtis has staged a number of major exhibitions, with his first tall piece being shown in the National Gallery Sculpture Prize exhibition in 2003. But he is particularly pleased to return to Axia Modern Art. 'The curator, Bev Kenna encouraged me to follow my passion in this work. She has supported me and understands the potential of the ideal and the aesthetic that I'm working towards.'

In addition to the tall segmented structures, Curtis has developed a series of large *Constructed Bowls*, which involves a totally different creative process. These bowls consist of green plate glass sections bonded around a blown vessel. The result is a heavy bowl that captures and reflects light sources in a unique and playful way. Coloured inserts further enhance this effect and the light behaves differently with variations in the shape of each piece. A completed bowl is the result of a methodical process where each section is individually placed, fitted, and bonded, with the finished work capped by a brushed steel rim. The effect is contemporary and the hard finish draws the eye into the depth of the vessel as it concentrates and refracts captured light.

It seems that there may be a disjuncture between the abstract associations of the standing structures and the functionality of the *Constructed Bowls*; it is the process that unifies these ideas and the philosophy behind them. 'Each work consists of segments, and each segment is related mathematically to the other. Much of this is concealed beneath steel rims or dark glass, although the audience is allowed an internal view. Audiences really respond to the mass of these sculptures, and the effect is amplified owing to the organic relationships between the components.'

Curtis sees his work and practice as something that has evolved and will continue to evolve in the future. The establishment of his Queanbeyan studio is a long-term decision which allows him to put his family life alongside his studio work. He is able to fuse aspects of art and life in a considered and organic way, and continues to contribute to the development of glass art in the region. 'I am incredibly indebted to those practitioners who afforded me their skills and time and wish to be able to offer opportunities to other practitioners in the future.'

Shane Giles

Shane Giles is a freelance journalist based in ????????????
The exhibition "Structural Divisions" will be held 19 April – 3 May at Axia Modern Art, Melbourne. www.axiamodernart.com.au

'Constructed Oval Cobalt Bowl', 2006, blown glass and float glass, with stainless steel rim, 28 x 58 x 46 cm