

MAJOR EXHIBITIONS (ABRIDGED)

Systema Naturae: New Works by Kevin Gordon, solo show, FORM Gallery, Perth, Australia, 2008.
SOFA, New York City, USA, 2008.
Steninge World Exhibition of Art Glass, Steninge Palace, Sweden, 2008.
Masters 07, Sabbia Glass Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 2007.
Art London 06, Represented by Glass Artist Gallery, Chelsea, UK, 2006-07.
Australians in Glass, Sandra Ainsley Gallery, Toronto, Canada, 2006.
Arts in 06, Represented by Gaffer Glass Gallery, Singapore, 2006.
Mastery, Gaffer Glass Gallery, Hong Kong, 2006.
Art Taipei, Represented by Glass Artist Gallery, Taiwan, 2006.
Australian Visions of Glass, Leerdam Glass Gallery, Holland, 2006.
Transformations: The Language of Craft, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2005.
Best Artist, Leerdam Glass Gallery, Holland, 2005.
Origins, Glass Artist Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 2005.
Tuscany Art Fair, Florence, Italy, 2005.
Contemporary Australian Studio Glass Exhibition, Gaffer Glass Gallery, Hong Kong, 2005.
Kevin Gordon Solo Show, Axia Modern Art, Melbourne, Australia, 2004.
Ranamok Glass Awards, Australian national tour, 1996-2005/07.
Collect, Represented by Glass Artist Gallery, Victorian and Albert Museum, London, UK, 2004/2005.
Gordon Family Exhibition, Kirra Galleries, Melbourne, Australia, 2003/2006.
Hot Glass Show, Axia Modern Art, Melbourne, Australia, 2003.
City of Hobart Art Prize, Hobart, Australia, 2003.
Ausglass Conference, Members Exhibition, Australia, 2001-2003.
Glass Weekend, Wheaton Village, Millville, USA, 2001-2003.
SOFA, Represented by Glass Artist Gallery, Chicago, USA, 2001-2003.
Kevin Gordon and David Hay, Leerdam Glass Gallery, Holland, 2002.



Kevin Gordon

Facets of Australian Glass, Leo Kaplan Modern, New York, USA, 2002.
The Cutting Edge, Axia Modern Art, Melbourne, Australia, 2001/2005.
Transparent Things: Expressions in Glass, National Gallery of Australia, Australian national tour, 2001-2002.
Perth Craft Awards, CraftWest Gallery, Perth, Australia, 2000.
Australian Glass Exhibition, Lisbon, Portugal, 1999.
COLLECTIONS AND AWARDS
Sir Elton John Glass Collection (four works), USA, 2007.
The Mobile Museum, USA, 2006.
Mid Career Fellowship Grant, ArtsWA, Perth, Australia, 2006.
Peoples' Choice Award, *Ranamok Glass Awards*, Australia, 2000-2003.
Peoples' Choice Award, *City of Hobart Art Prize*, Australia, 2003.
Australian National Art Gallery Collection, Canberra, Australia, 2001.
Armada New Community Hospital, Perth, Australia, 2001.
Australian National Glass Collection, Wagga Wagga, Australia, 1997.
Devonport Gallery Glass Collection, Devonport, Australia, 1997.
La Trobe Valley Glass Collection, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, 1996.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Norway 1968, Kevin Gordon grew up in Scotland before relocating to Australia in 1980. Learning through his family – a dynasty of glass design – Gordon developed astute glass-working skills, gradually building a career that now spans 15 years. Gordon's first steps into professional practice took him into architectural glass, but since 1995 he has worked as an independent glass practitioner, constantly pushing boundaries to achieve technical innovation.

Internationally regarded, Gordon's works are held in collections in Australia and internationally. Cornerstones include acquisitions for the Sir Elton John Glass Collection and the Mobile Museum in the United States, the La Trobe Valley Glass Collection at La Trobe University Melbourne, the Australian National Art Gallery Collection in Canberra and the National Glass collection in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales.

Admired by peers and public alike, Gordon has been a finalist in Australia's prestigious *Ranamok Glass Awards* for 10 consecutive years, has won three people's choice awards, and was recently selected as a finalist again in the 2007 Awards. His work has also been exhibited in Holland, Portugal, the UK, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Sweden and North America. Gordon has won many national prizes, including the people's choice award in the City of Hobart Art Prize.

In 2005-06 Gordon's work was featured in *Transformations: The language of craft* – an international survey exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) – the first of its kind. He also cites the *Masters 07* sell-out show at Sabbia Glass Gallery in Sydney as a recent milestone.

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SYSTEMA NATURAE NEWWORKS by KEVIN GORDON

FEBRUARY 12 – APRIL 11, 2008



*The minutiae of marine life,
the cycles threading through design
and nature, the fragility of the world
that encompasses us...*

*As life was first formed in the
oceans it is here that we still find
the basic structures and designs
in nature which resonate in so
much of our lives.*

Kevin Gordon, 2007.

When Perth-based glass artist Kevin Gordon approached FORM with photographs of his new work, we sensed something exciting was in the making. Those first works, of sea urchin and nautilus-inspired vessels in neutral tones, revealed Gordon's customary technical eye for detail and his clever use of colour, refraction and lenses to highlight the at times microscopic detail and instinctive repetition of patterns and systems in design. Yet these marine-based works were altogether new, and as the collection developed, gained a kind of vibrating visual strength that worked in complimentary juxtaposition with the works' finer, more subtle design elements. The final collection encompasses a strong colour palette and refined technical aspects – in part courtesy of Gordon's developmental work in the Western Australian Museum's Department of Aquatic Zoology. Gordon spent several sessions in the vast annals that house the dry marine animal specimens, working in a design/research capacity. Examining and photographing select specimens from the collection, Gordon later worked his research into computer-aided design templates that captured the impossibly intricate physical characteristics of the marine specimens, and which would later morph into the works created for FORM's *Systema Naturae* exhibition.

Systema Naturae: New Works by Kevin Gordon is the manifestation of a long-term fascination with the ocean for the artist. While the exhibition also focuses on themes of repetition and universality in nature and design, *Systema Naturae*, through its very subject-matter, brings forward important musings on the natural environment, particularly water and marine ecology and the status and preservation of these entities. As Gordon acknowledges: *my work would not be what it is if I were not in the environment in which I live...it does bring an awareness to our natural environment beyond our immediate proximity and I think awareness is the first step to conservation and to protect our valuable natural resources.*

Systema Naturae also coincides with the second International Year of the Reef, providing an apt context for the exhibition and its marine environment underpinnings. Gordon's works are not intended to be faithful re-modellings of specific marine forms, nor do they exist solely as vehicles for environmental arguments. However the exhibition does function as a nexus for art, science and environment – even mathematics – emphasizing the links between the disciplines and offering a case study for what can be achieved through cross-sectoral fertilisation.

Elisha Buttler
Curator, FORM



Cover: *Galaxea Coral II*, 2007
330mm high x 150mm wide.
1: *Acanthastrea Coral*, 2007
410 mm high x 240mm wide.
2: *Sand Sea Urchin*, 2007
90mm high x 330mm wide.



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A self-described scientist, inventor and visual mathematician, Gordon believes the glass design industry is particularly attuned to the value of working collaboratively and with interdisciplinary influences. Glass is a medium that commands high levels of commitment, physical effort and ability. Each complex and often heavy work is the result of a dedicated team of glass practitioners; the process demands finely tuned technical skills and design awareness from all team-members. As an exhibition, *Systema Naturae* not only showcases the results of such ability and collaboration, but sets a benchmark for Australian glass design at state, national and international levels. In Western Australia, Gordon's technically innovative and visually stunning works set a high standard for glass design in the State and seek to highlight the talent that exists in the sector.

FORM is also involved in a major project in Midland that possesses synergies with *Systema Naturae* and which takes the benchmarking elements of the exhibition much further. Partnering with the Midland Redevelopment Authority (MRA), FORM is working to regenerate the historic Midland Railway Workshops, creating world-class facilities for glass, jewellery and furniture design. This *Centre for Creative Endeavour* is part of a broader urban activation strategy for the area, which aims to develop long-term social, cultural and economic benefits while positioning Western Australia as a player in the international creative industries movement. Nurturing and showcasing sophisticated local designers/artists such as Kevin Gordon also plays a significant role in the achievement of this vision; the works in an exhibition like *Systema Naturae* speak volumes of the talent and potential already in our own backyard, while lifting the standards of aspiration.

Back cover: *Galaxea Coral I*, 2007, 340mm high x 140mm wide.
3: *Montipora Coral*, 2007, 320mm high x 140mm wide.
4: *Red Sea Fan*, 2007, 130mm high x 400mm wide.



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IN HIS ELEMENT



5 (detail) & 6: Turbinaria Coral Vase, 2007, 310mm high x 310mm wide.
7 & 10 (detail): Nautilus Shell Bowl, 2007, 120mm high x 440mm wide.
8 (detail): Acanthastrea Coral, 2007, 410mm high x 240mm wide.

9 (detail): Montipora Coral, 320mm high x 140mm wide. **11:** Tall Sea Urchin, 2007, 440mm high x 220mm wide.
12: Agariciidae I (olive), 2007, 530mm high x 120mm wide. Agariciidae II (orange), 2007, 390mm high x 130mm wide.
 Agariciidae III (brown), 2007, 450mm high x 120mm wide. **13 (detail):** Agariciidae I, 2007, 530mm high x 120mm wide.

14 & 15 (detail): Green Sea Fan, 2007, 180mm high x 340mm wide.
16 & 18 (top view): Sea Urchin I, 2007, 300mm high x 370mm wide.

17: Sand Sea Urchin, 2007, 90mm high x 330mm wide.
19 (detail) & 20: Shell Vase, 2007, 500mm high x 190mm wide.

Wandering along the sandy bay at Thurlestone, here on the South Devonshire coast of England, & picture Kevin Gordon in his element, on the other side of the globe:

*Living near the ocean here in West Australia the coast line becomes part of my life, nearly every day I go to the beach with the dogs...nearly every day you find something new that is washed up such as shells, bits of coral, seaweed, sea urchins, even bits of glass...*¹

Our shared silicon element is a rich environment awash with impurities, pattern, habit, chance and flux – the very conditions that attended the accidental discovery of glass, an ‘unknown/extraordinary translucent liquid’ that flowed (*tralucentes novi liquores fluxisse*) according to the *Natural History* of the roman historian Pliny the Elder:

In the part of Syria adjoining Judea and Phoenicia the Candebia swamp is bounded by Mount Carmel... the source of the river Belus, which after five miles runs into the sea near Ptolemais. On the shores of the River Belus the sand is revealed only when the tides retreat. This sand does not glisten until it has been tossed about by the waves and had its impurities removed by the sea... A ship belonging to traders in soda once called here, so the story goes,

*and they spread out along the shore to make a meal. There were no stones to support their cooking-pots, so they placed lumps of soda from their ship under them. When these became hot and fused with the sand on the beach, streams of an unknown liquid flowed, and this was the origin of glass.*²

Gordon’s alertness to the natural and synthetic cycles that characterise his chosen medium – from silica sand (as evolved shell and coral residue) to glass, from raw mineral to artefact to jetsam – has a direct bearing on his new work. As he puts it, ‘in effect these works are made up from what they represent’. His words signal a reflexive awareness, and a more involved or implicated approach to artistic representation, than might at first glance appear. A response akin perhaps to that of ‘Ishmael’, the narrator of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851)³, reading his whale books through transparent strips of dried isinglass, through ‘the skin of the skin’ of the whale.

His present show at FORM Gallery in Perth, Western Australia - *Systema Naturae: New Works by Kevin Gordon* – indicates a distinctive new departure in Kevin Gordon’s work, for which I am aware of no direct equivalent in contemporary glass. Indeed it seems to hold more in common with certain historical precedents,

and with late nineteenth century scientific-aesthetic sensibilities including: the extraordinary glass project of Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka (from 1880–1936); the botanical and marine illustrations of Ernst Haeckel’s lithographic and autotype prints, published between 1899 and 1904 as *Kunstformen der Natur* (Artforms of Nature); or *Snow Crystals* (1931), the Vermont archive of snowflake photography assembled by Wilson A. Bentley (1865–1931) and published in the year of his death. *Moby Dick* might itself be regarded as a similarly encyclopaedic undertaking and, in terms of human ecology, as a sustained elegy for the dying culture of the Nantucket whaling industry, with the advent of the mechanical harpoon.

Gordon has cited the 2006 exhibition of the Blaschkas’ marine work at Ebeltoft Glasmuseum, *The Glass Aquarium*⁴ as an influence, together with Haeckel (1834–1919) and M.C. Escher (1898–1972). What he shares with such artists is a rare attention to natural and mathematical form, a fidelity that might look to have skipped a century in the context of European aesthetics.

Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, father and son, made detailed lampwork replicas of botanical and marine forms based on natural history illustrations in books such as Philip Gosse’s *A Naturalist’s Rambles on the Devonshire Coast* (1853)⁵, the very shoreline where, as chance would have it, this essay began. The Blaschkas described themselves as ‘natural history artisans’, and their work was regarded by their contemporaries as ‘an artistic marvel in the field of science and a scientific marvel in the field of art’. Their project was driven by the amazing discoveries that followed rapidly upon the development of deep sea diving technology from the mid-1800s, and by the inadequacy of chemical preservation techniques used with organic specimens comprising natural history collections then in scientific vogue. Invertebrate replicas were made for Cornell and other universities, and from 1890 Blaschka glass flowers were produced exclusively for the Botanical Museum at Harvard University (by 1936 they had made some 4,400 glass facsimile artefacts).

As ‘natural history artisans’ working purposefully within the faultlines of craftsmanship, art and science (Rudolph (1857–1939) was an exact contemporary of Amalric Walter (1859–1942)), the Blaschkas’ achievement would appear altogether remote from the modernist

intelligence and formal concerns of the French poet and essayist Paul Valéry (1871–1945), himself a polymath with keen interests in biology and mathematics:

Our artists do not derive the material of their works from their own substance, and the form for which they strive springs from a specialised application of their mind, which can be completely disengaged from their being.

*Perhaps what we call perfection in art (which all do not strive for and some disdain) is only a sense of desiring or finding in a human work the sureness of execution, the inner necessity, the indissoluble bond between form and material that are revealed to us by the humblest of shells.*⁶

But Valéry’s idea may prove as significant in consideration of Kevin Gordon’s glass marine forms, insofar as a laboured aesthetic of technical perfection – a quality that might be identified and appreciated as a kind of ‘inevitability’ of material form in the eventual object – appears very much at work here, with due regard for that reflexive modernist, latterly postmodernist, ‘disengagement’ of mind and being.

Gordon’s highly finished pieces invite precisely the kind of wonder identified by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), in the opening to chapter five of *La poétique de l’espace* (1958), which he devoted to Paul Valéry’s meditation on shells:

For this poet, a shell seems to have been a truth of well solidified animal geometry, and therefore “clear and distinct”...the created object itself is highly intelligible; and it is the formation, not the form, that remains mysterious...⁷

Or again, nearer the knuckle perhaps:

...a shell carved by a man would be obtained from the outside, through a series of innumerable acts that would bear the mark of a touched-up beauty; whereas “the mollusc exudes its shell”, it lets the building material “seep through”, “distil its marvellous covering as needed”...in this way Valéry returns to the mystery of form-giving life, the mystery of slow, continuous formation.⁸

To my mind, Kevin Gordon creates luminous objects of extreme surface precision that function and perform in exactly this contested space: sculptural glass objects that establish a stilled, though animated and refractive, ocean presence on a domestic interior scale. They invite technical amazement at both *form* and *formation*, and open

curiosity as to their interior material purposes. They play with the inherent ambiguities of the transparent medium, and their exterior glamour is if anything a barrier to meditation on the metamorphosis and intimate detail of the urchin, coral, fan or shell forms from which they are derived through ‘a specialised application’ of the mind, ultimately ‘disengaged’ from its being.

As glass artefacts, not lived organic vessels of marine life, in representational terms these works are neither illustrations, scientific or otherwise, nor feats of illusion or *trompe l’oeil*. Their glassy differentiation, their ‘objectness’ in the phenomenal world, ‘obtained from the outside’, looks and feels however by turns either an intrinsic skin quality, or the worn scar tissue of hard-shelled resistance to lengthy environmental attrition.

The cutting edge makes contact, probes and reveals the familiar otherness of the material in another theory, almost contiguous with Paul Valéry’s antithesis of exuded and carved form. Unlike *modelling*, for the English art theorist Adrian Stokes (1902–1972), writing under the influence of Kleinian analysis, *carving* is thus a process of formal and psychological disclosure, acknowledging and affirming the object’s separation.

In terms of the glass substance, both aspects of Valéry’s idea offer useful insights into Gordon’s technique, in which the building material of liquid glass – shaped by David Hay’s hot glass expertise – does indeed ‘seep through’, slowly yielding or exuding its outer surface, which then cools to a translucent, shell-like exterior that contains the still-liquid form. The transparent vitreous medium opens windows on a further, interior dimension, unobtainable within the natural opaqueness of sea urchins.

On the other hand, each work is a ‘specialised application of the mind’: a work of acquired craftsmanship and intentional design, a distinction of which Valéry was most perceptively aware:

...the making of a shell is lived, not calculated: nothing could be more contrary to our organised action preceded by an aim and operating as a cause.⁹

Gordon’s application of a wide range of cold-finishing processes (wheel-cutting, carving, sand-blasting, drilling, brushing, abrasive polishing) brings an extraordinarily fine quality of decorative attention to the chilled exterior surface of the glass vessel form, inscribing a kind of ‘exo-skeleton’ that floats as a thin lattice design over the stilled liquid. He exploits the ambiguous condition of glass as a material, its metastable and

disordered molecular state – neither a liquid, nor a solid; sequentially fluid and malleable and also hard-skinned and resistant. This is especially so with, for example, *Clear Sea Urchin*, a sagging globe, all points of whose grazed, ground or smoothed surface is studded with polished lens cuts that magnify the internal refraction of the textured patterning of the internal glass wall opposite. A piece that looks to have been carved out of water.

So the mode of figuration in play in this work is not literal, nor even primarily descriptive. Rather, geometrical elements, pattern, texture, work in a kind of metonymic way – the part invokes the idea of the whole, itself contained within the span of the vessel artefact.

The fascination of beachcombing may begin with serendipity, but the flotsam and jetsam that so beguiles Gordon’s beach walks focuses quickly on shell or glass fragments, smoothed driftwood splinters, that immediately invoke their unknown origins in complete objects of the natural or manufactured world – and indeed the mysterious distances – that wash up daily on the tide line. Distances that mark our separation from, as well as our implication in, in the natural world. Each fragment has its own discrete character or value as a window on the phenomenal world,

delightful or repellent in itself, either way authenticated by chance. If not a fractal, exactly, then a fractured glimpse at least of some underlying organic or mathematical order.

I have studied the idea of fractals and the Mandelbrot theory... the idea of a few basic elements that put into a form of mathematical formula with variations... that keep repeating to build the whole design. In my work I emphasise this with the use of lens which shows that whatever the scale or resolution, the design resonates...¹⁰

Gordon’s interest in these and other mathematical forms, including the Fibonacci or Golden Series, operates both as design method and as a personal take on representation. For, whatever they owe to their source reference material:

In this work I am not trying to make an exact scientific representation of the corals, shells, sea urchins et cetera but looking for designs, textures and structures... I would also add that this body of work has challenged me to develop techniques to achieve effects that has pushed my work into new areas and has opening up new thinking and approaches to how I work the medium.¹¹

In the wider context of its native Western Australian environment, the resulting body of work gives rise to timely questions of representation in art and ecology. In its use of the part to invoke the whole, an implicit ‘metonymic’ ethos might seek, in Gordon’s developing oeuvre, through caring attention at species level, to invoke knowledgeable concern for an entire (marine) ecosystem. William Blake’s visionary transfiguration of this micro macroscopic relation, Blake’s gift ‘*To see a world in a grain of sand*’¹², scorns the scientific view of the torn fragment as finite limit to provisional knowledge – as Blake put it elsewhere, in his ‘*Proverbs of Hell*’: ‘*Eternity is in love with the productions of time*’.¹³

The sub-current of environmental sustainability subsists as no more than an implicit awareness and, though Gordon’s project doesn’t yet possess the edgy political or elegiac purpose of ecological alarm, it is intriguing to speculate as to what this new body of work may be building incrementally as a longer-term statement. What, as an eventual ensemble, as a glass reef, it might amount to beyond the sum of its constituent works.

Prof. Andrew Brewerton is a poet and writer on contemporary glass. He is Principal of Dartington College of Arts (UK), Honorary Professor of Fine Art at Shanghai University, and a council member of Arts Council England. His new book, Raag Leaves for Paresh Chakraborty was published by Shearsman Books in January 2008.

Notes

- KG, correspondence with the author, December 2007
- 190 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Book XXXVI, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Pliny_the_Elder/36.html
- “...from the unmarried dead body of the whale, you may scrape off with your hand an infinitely thin, transparent substance, somewhat resembling the thinnest shreds of isinglass, only it is almost as flexible and soft as satin; that is, previous to being dried, when it not only contracts and thickens, but becomes rather hard and brittle. I have several such dried bits, which I use for marks in my whale-books. It is transparent, as I said before, and being laid upon the printed page, I have sometimes pleased myself with fancying it exerted a magnifying influence. At any rate, it is pleasant to read about whales through their own spectacles, as you may say.” Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), Chapter LXVIII, ‘The Blanket’
- <http://www.glasnmuseum.dk/english/exhibitions/past/the-glass-aquarium.html>
- Phillip Henry Gosse (1810–1888), a contemporary of Melville
- Paul Valéry, ‘Man and the Sea Shell’, in *Paul Valéry: An Anthology*, Selected, with an introduction, by James R. Lawler (London, 1977) p.132. First published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, February 1, 1937, within a year of Blaschka’s ceasing production.
- Gaston Bachelard, tr. Maria Jolas, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, 1994) pp.105-6.
- Bachelard, *Ibid.* p.106
- Paul Valéry, *Op. cit.* p.128
- KG, December 2007
- Ibid. William Blake, ‘Auguries of Innocence’
- Ibid. William Blake, ‘Auguries of Innocence’
- Ibid. William Blake, ‘Auguries of Innocence’