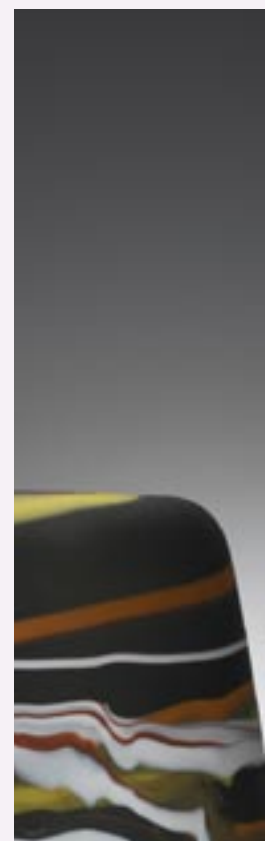
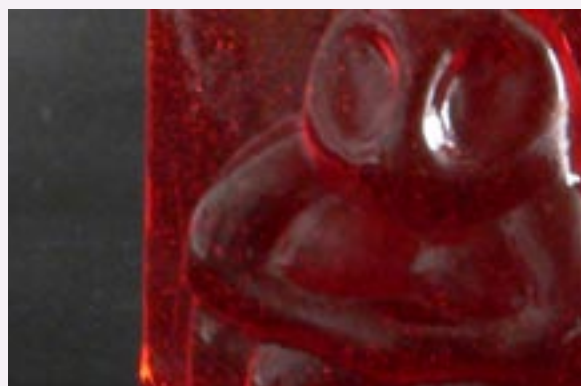


# *A Little Drop of Kindness*



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Long before the introduction of the sedition laws in this country, the arts and crafts appear to have drifted languidly into the doldrums of arch conservatism. Whether herded by insinuating market forces or simply the reflection of the general malaise inherent in our astonishingly apathetic society, the crafts (and glass in particular) seem to have settled for a safe existence that smacks of little more than interior décor. The ubiquitous arts-craft debate that so dominated the last century has now petered out to a whimper in the rush for commercial status, and the concept of professional practice has been literally duffed and nose-ringed into a cattle run of design and product, where concern is less about the individual expressionism of the artist and more likely to be specifically tuned to the coffer of the art sector shop facades (aka galleries.)



**Image credits:** (left to right) **Tevita Havea**, *modern primitive*, 2005, glass, wood, twine. Photo: Scott Chaseling; **Luna Ryan**, *Tatwamasi*, 2006, hot cast glass by Studio Tangerine. Image: Tim Foster; **Brendan Scott French**, *Catastrophic Engagement* (detail), 2007, blown glass, high fire enamel, diamond wheel cut. Photo: Grant Hancock; **Harriet Schwarzrock**, *A Common Thread* (detail), 2006, blown glass. Photo: Johannes Kuhn, Workshop Bilk; **Itzell Tazzyman**, *A Little Drop of Kindness*, 2005, blown, carved and cast glass. Photo: Rob Little.

In an era of celebrity mania it's hardly surprising that the trend has tainted the creative well, and that practitioners now spend an inordinate amount of time plotting self-promotion rather than nurturing that most difficult of mistresses, the muse. Not everybody has sold out, of course. A few years ago, a dowager patroness of the arts froze me with a rheumy, gimlet eye and haughtily proclaimed, in her very best Bracknell-esque manner, 'there is no place for social or political commentary in the decorative arts.' Most of the serfs comply. Not all, thank goodness. A small number of artists who work in glass are driven by a stronger imperative — and foray beyond the mere object to investigate and address issues of contemporary social justice in a pervasive political climate where compassion is sadly thin on the ground. The glass exhibition *A Little Drop of Kindness* has been dovetailed to coincide with the National Multicultural Festival at a time when we can no longer simply take homogeneous co-existence for granted. One glimpse around the global stage should be sufficient to inform us that we can't keep ignoring the plight of people so pitifully less fortunate than ourselves, neither beyond our shores nor within.

The genesis for the exhibition followed a visit to glass artist Itzell Tazzyman's studio in Canberra. Tazzyman, who's work has always dealt with the big picture: life and the universe (and the relentless struggle for a sense of redeeming humanity) happened to show me, amongst other things, a small marquette — a beautiful, quite understated, piece that was so full of pathos that it made one weep. It was a classic visual essay in

black and white — a withered breast mounting the breach once more to squeeze yet one more drop of human kindness into a well of unquenchable need — a time immemorial piece, and it both set the tone of the exhibition and supplied the title.

Tazzyman is joined by four others. Harriet Schwarzrock's *A Common Thread* contemplates the tide of desperate souls that clamour for succour at our shores. Her piece, a virtual rash of blown ventricles, addresses the harshly clinical nature of the process of/for refugee status, the lack of dignity inherent in the scrutinizing procedure, and the mounting bloom and comfort for those lucky few who manage to make the grade. Luna Ryan, who for the last several years has worked with indigenous (specifically Tiwi) communities, presents a boxed crowd of *Tatwamasi* (lit.trans, thou art that), a benevolent creature that first emerged in 1988, in her student work, and has recently made a comeback. Cast from a disparate mix of glass (from lead crystal, to uranium glass, to melted television screens) the group, interspersed with new characters somewhat more hardened in nature, present nonetheless a harmonious community regardless of the mongrel mix in cast(e). Brendan Scott French's installation of blown glass objects, *Catastrophic Engagement*, also ponders the group dynamic — in a compositional arrangement (to quote the artist) 'in which if something was removed it would still balance, yet one in which each piece is totally dependent on the other for inclusion.' An appropriate analogy for community if ever there was one. This is typical work from Scott French, who invariably makes work with a quizzically conscious, urban-angst edge. Tevita Havea lends a Pacific voice to the show, in

a piece called *Push and Pull* which encompasses the issues of identity, culture and the demands of contemporary (Western) life. Having an identity staked in one community, he suggests, doesn't preclude meaningful relationship with another. The work, indicative of Havea's wider art practice, balances the responsibilities of traditional culture with the demands of encroaching, outside influence. Though *not* the subject of the piece, Havea's Oceanic sense of dignity and respect thoroughly puts to shame the very notion of interventionist actions as ugly and iniquitous as our own government's 'Pacific Solution'. What on earth were the spin doctors thinking?

Havea contends 'Beneath the surface of primal ideology there is wisdom and proof. Through these rituals and initiations you are drawn to something greater than yourself, you find the pieces of who you are and where you fit in.' The world plainly doesn't need another pretty vase, but it could certainly do with a solid dose of introspection. The arts and crafts are an extraordinarily suitable platform for ethical examination and societal reform. Even Da Vinci was known to daub the odd subversive socio-political thematic in his time.

*Vive la différence.*

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