

PHOTO: STEWART HAY

*Ede Horton, 'Book Series: 2 Tree of Life', 2002, cast lead crystal and bronze, 65 x 39 x 25 cm*

## CAST FROM THE HEART

Glass artist Ede Horton has made an unusual journey from the public concerns of her earlier large-scale architectural commissions through to the autobiographical concerns of her current works in cast glass. Text by Naomi Cass. Photography by David McArthur.

IN her recent body of work Ede Horton has returned again to a more universal focus that not only reflects her maturity as an artist but also adds depth to the conceptual well springs of her concerns.

As a young artist, Horton approached her many architectural commissions for church windows in regional Victoria and the new Parliament House in Canberra (1988), with an accomplished graphic style, handling large spaces with unusual grace. Drawing on native Australian flora, the artist was, nevertheless, working with a traditional pictorial means. Her work was something to be read from a distance, within the context of an overall architectural theme, controlling and embellishing light within the interior and

from the exterior, enhancing the decorative skin of the building.

Many women artists' experience a shift in focus from the large scale of their professional lives, prior to having children, to a restrained focus following the more intimate logic required for childbearing. In 1994, Horton turned away from architectural and commercial work, drawing her conceptual and technical focus inward. Beginning to work in cast glass, she established a studio at home where she found she could combine being an artist and looking after small children without compromising either the work or their care. During this time there was something more



*'Remembered Selves' - Birth, Patience, Death', 1997, cast lead crystal, each 20 x 10 x 10 cm*

satisfying in the market of small objects: they were sensuous, intimate and immediate. Working in a more personal scale, cast glass was also more responsive to her touch. This period of experimentation in her own studio was inspired and assisted by her mentor, the New Zealand glass artist Anne Robinson, with whom Horton remains contact.

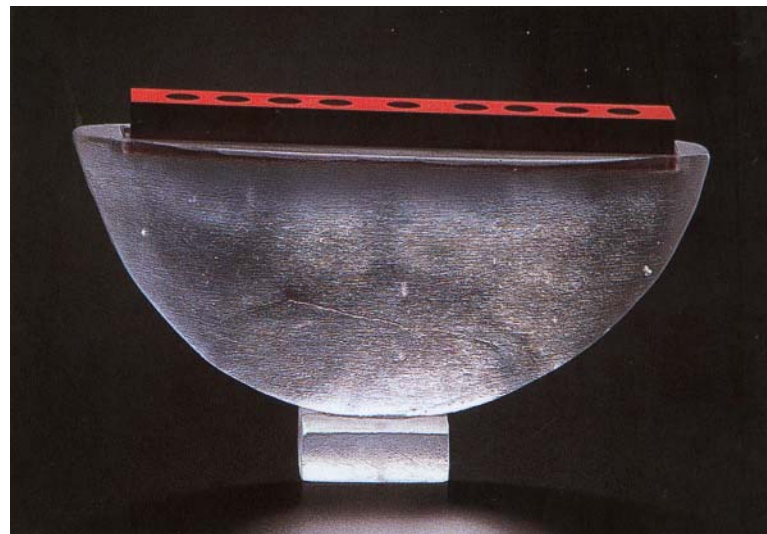
*Birth, Patience and Death* (1994-97) consists in three cast vessels and exemplifies this intimate focus. While their colours are reminiscent of flora and the sea, the artist is no longer representing or describing nature. Solid and sensuous, these vessels are containers for ideas and seem to grow from Horton's touch and from her heart. Horton has not abandoned her graphic prowess; although these works have a strong formal quality, they are nevertheless pictorial and laden with narrative. Each vessel houses a symbolic object crafted in wax at their master-form stage, prior to casting.

For Horton, vessels are analogous to the soul, they are a container for life and life-giving materials, such as water, grain and seed. Yet vessels also contain poison, loss and death. Always acutely aware of their presentation, the vessels sit together and are to be read like a story, a sentence, or an extended thought, illuminated by the light that penetrates the vessels. Jewel-like, Horton is still using light as the silent partner in her work, as it passes through the vessels, their surface and texture invites exploration with eye and hand. As Horton comments, 'For me, light and glass are synonymous: one reflects and dances off another.'

Parallel to Horton's commercial work is her ongoing engagement with making *Judaica* or Jewish ritual objects for use in the synagogue or more often in the home. *Judaica* is traditionally made in a range of natural materials, from textiles (for covers, curtains and garments) to glass and silver (cups, pointers, hanging and standing candles holders and various vessels, to name a few) and wood (synagogue furniture). *Judaica* offers Horton a stream of practice that she finds profoundly satisfying, where the objects find an active and often central place in the family home.

*Judaica* come to the contemporary artist and the contemporary user with an ancient history of ritual activity and iconography. *Judaica* is redolent of many craft traditions because, like the Jewish people, it has spread across the globe and has adapted to local materials, local craft specialisation and custom. For example, a *Sephardi* (of Spanish origin) synagogue may be decorated with Moslem pray rugs "converted" to Judaism through the inclusion of an appropriate passage in Hebrew.

Horton interprets traditional *Judaica* in a modern way, delivering the ritual function within a well designed and contemporary looking object. They don't look like reproductions of another time and place. Horton brings what she calls 'an Australian flavour' through vibrant colour and reference to Australian forms, such as the gumnut, creating objects that sit comfortably within the context of contemporary furniture and furnishings. In describing her *Havdalah Set*: Kiddush cup, candle holder and spice container (1998), Horton writes: 'The gumnut is a storehouse of seeds (life) ready to regenerate the earth; the candle is a source of light celebrating the start of the new working week. The design of the candle holder is based on the part of the gumnut after it has flowered. The colours relate to the blossoms and leaves, the spices to aromatic native plants. God is praised not just for creating aromatic seeds but also for creating many varieties of fragrant spices. If fragrances are



*Chunnukiah*, 2002, cast lead crystal and anodised aluminium, 10 x 5 x 20 cm



'United', 2002, cast lead crystal, anodised aluminium, ht 18 cm



*Havdalah Set*: Kiddush cup, spice container, candleholder, 1998  
cast lead crystal, silver, 10 x 9-x 23 cm



*'Kiddush Set', 1995, cast lead crystal, blackwood, diam, 36 x 24 cm*

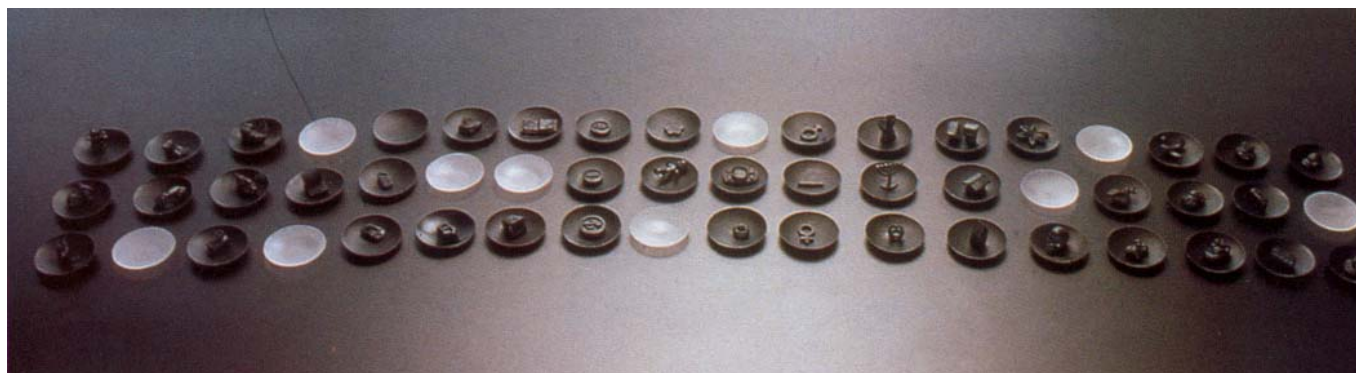
taken metaphorically to mean identities, this blessing might be said to celebrate the diversity of individual identities within creation.'

Rendering the performative aspect of ritual objects in a contemporary setting is the greatest achievement of Judaica, and in doing so Horton contributes to the maintenance of tradition in an enduring manner. She makes objects that people want to hold and to use, inspiring young people to maintain, perhaps even return to rituals such as lighting the Sabbath candles and reciting the blessing



*'Tales of Migration' (detail), 2002, cast glass, each 4 x 7 cm*

*'Memory Works', 2001, cast lead crystal and wax, 4 x 198 x 25 cm. Installation at the Holocaust Museum in Sydney, 2002*



at sunset on Friday evenings, commencing the day of rest.

In her 2002 exhibition "Memory Works", Horton fully developed her personal focus. The two installations presented under this single title, like her earlier work, are beautiful and invite handling, but as she writes, they come from a "darker place". The subject of her Master's thesis, these non-functional cast glass sculptures represent a personal exploration of her family of origin and their wartime experiences and migration to Australia.

Perched as she is, between parents who were Holocaust survivors, and her own sons, Horton has done the hard work of grappling with the meaning of her history, her present and that of the next generation. She has been, as she writes poignantly, 'listening between the generation'. In *Tales of Migration* she produced a collection of miniature cast glass sculptures reflecting a historical narrative about change and consistency across the generations. In sets of three, they represent the experiences - the technology, the aspirations and memory - of different generations. Some dishes are empty, representing absence or the unknown.

In a luminous series of three large, cast lead crystal, books, Horton addressed personal history, within the metaphor of the "people of the book". She writes: 'My mother escaped Czechoslovakia with an overnight suitcase, bound for England. Three diamonds were secretly smuggles within a cut-out section of the book she carried. My father grew up as an observant Jew in Germany. On 9 November, 1938 Kristallnacht (the night of broken glass and the burning of books), at the age of 21, he walked the suburbs of outer Berlin [and survived].'

Even under the burden of Holocaust memories, this exhibition presented a delightful tangible world, one in which we can wonder at the artist extraordinary technique and skill, and at the gentleness and honesty of her creative journey.

In her forthcoming series, entitled *Gifted*, Ede Horton returns to broad public issues. Technically and conceptually, her work has come a long way - from the native flora of her large windows and the personal preoccupation of her miniatures in "Memory Works"<sup>1</sup>. - resting for the moment with large, cast lead crystal plates. Though these works are unmade as yet, we can be confident that they too, will be cast from her heart.

**Naomi Cass**

*Naomi Cass is a freelance curator and writer and is Executive Officer of National Exhibitions Touring Support (NEWTS), Victoria.*

*1. The exhibition "Memory Works" was held at the Holocaust Museum in Sydney in May, 2003 and at Craft Victoria in June, 2003.*