

# A DELICATE BALANCE

BY DIANA HOBSON

An idea sparked into my mind when, as a student at the Royal College of Art, I applied enamel to sculptural objects made in various precious metals. I loved the etched glass quality of the enamel – perhaps I could make very thin-walled, translucent objects by laying the metal enamels directly over a refractory mould instead of metal? I imagined that after firing the enamel in a kiln, I would somehow remove the mould. Having very little knowledge of glass or mould technology at that time the notion sounded very simple!

Four years later I began to research how I might do this, thanks to a grant from the Crafts Council, Camberwell School of Art and support from Martin Hunt, then Professor of Glass at the RCA, who first introduced me to the French *pâte de verre* of the late nineteenth century. The V&A have in their collection my very first real piece – 'Original Form' – to emerge whole from the kiln.

Naively, I began by using metal enamel bound with lead glass and somehow, against all odds, it worked! I moved on to more compatible materials, but even then the success rate was only one in five and I whimsically imagined the freedom to be gained one day by making the objects in paper!

Working with *pâte de verre* meant constant experimentation, from developing moulds with a coefficient of expansion to match the glass and mould during the firing cycle to the inclusion of found earth materials into the glass mix to form a textural matrix. Entering a new field with an inspirational idea and without enough knowledge can sometimes be a big advantage. The results were exciting, so I knew I was 'onto something', which kept me going. But there were many surprises.

Although I had some early notes of Argy Rousseau's *pâte*

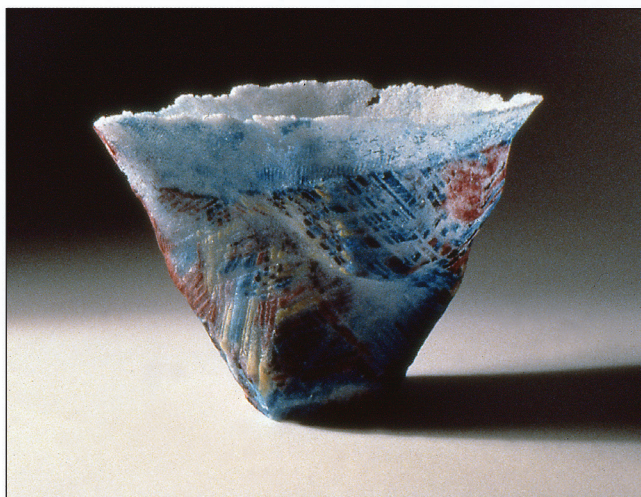
de verre mould technique from the early 1900's, practical research was a trial and error process – picking the brains of chemists and manufacturers for information as I tried to make ideas work. It was important to me that the final piece came freshly from the mould as if it had been excavated from the earth so I used no finishing techniques. I found that bringing 'foreign' materials into the process, although at first it brought with it its quota of ridicule, was not only liberating but shifted the success rate to nine in ten!

Crushing lead glass to a fine particle and breathing in toxic fumes from the *pâte de verre* firing process eventually impacted my health. Fortunately my creative thinking had already started to move in new directions. Another light went on and a new body of work, 'Language of Light', took form involving cast glass, stone and bronze. This became a solo show at the Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, Ireland in 1996. As I wrote in my journal and quoted in my book, *Language of Light*:

*'I still find that new ideas definitely include glass, not as form but as a container for the formless, and in itself not containing it but defining it.'*

This was a very fulfilling time. 'Language of Light' was a very personal body of work dealing with death, loss and ultimately transformation. It was a real ending which freed me to make a big transition. In 1997 we moved to Northern California where I continued briefly to include cast glass in my work. I missed the friends and colleagues, luminaries like Colin Reid and Bruno Romanelli, Gayle Matthias and other friends who helped in casting the glass elements when I was in London. In my new situation I found I

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▲▲ COVER GARDENING WITH MORRIS (DETAIL) ROSA NGUYEN, 2015, SILK SCREEN, CERAMIC AND GLASS VESSELS, LACQUERED BOTANICAL MATERIAL.

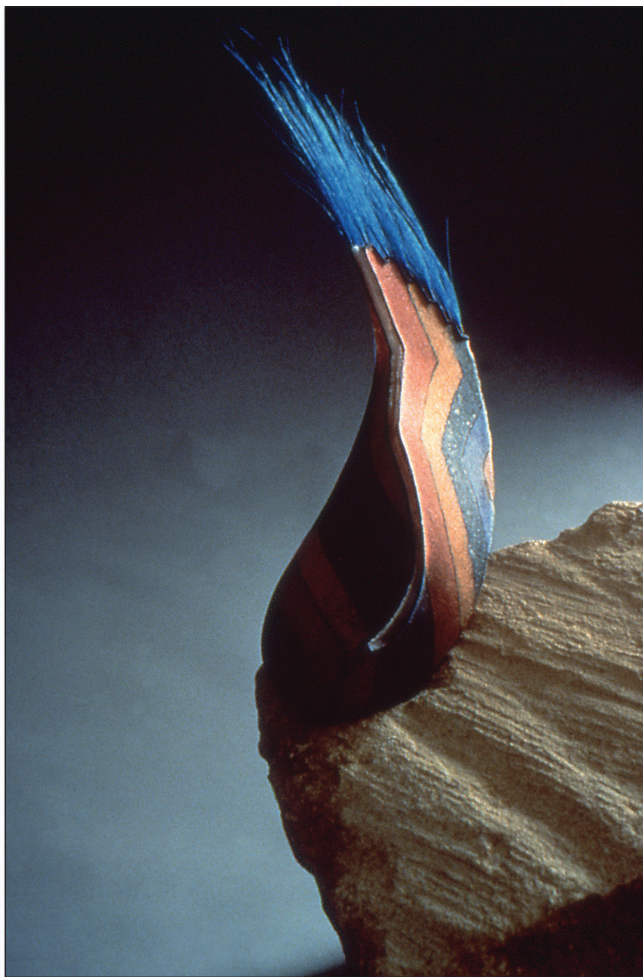
▲▲ LARGE ORIGINAL FORM NO.1 DIANA HOBSON, 1983, PÂTE DE VERRE, FINELY CRUSHED LEAD GLASS, MIXED WITH JEWELLERY ENAMELS, HEIGHT 10cm



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▲▲ FRAGILE MEMORIES (DETAIL) DIANA HOBSON, 2013, REDWOOD SKIN, 15cm x 15cm, JAPANESE SEKISHU PAPER LOW RELIEF IMPRESSION FROM THE BARK OF THE REDWOOD TREE. DRAWN INTO WITH GRAPHITE AND DYED BY THE TREE. DETAIL OF ONE PAPER REDWOOD SKIN FROM A 122cm x 122cm GRID OF 49 REDWOOD SKINS.





▲ **BENU BIRD** (DETAIL) DIANA HOBSON, 1990, PÂTE DE VERRE AND LIMESTONE BLOCK, SPRINGS SECURING BLUE HAIR, CRUSHED LEAD GLASS, MIXED WITH CRUSHED RED BRICK, YELLOW EARTH, COLOURED GLASS, CERAMIC OXIDE STAINS. HEIGHT 38cm.

couldn't achieve glass with the qualities I wanted and I finally moved away from glass as a material for my work.

A solo, retrospective show at Vessel Gallery in Oakland, California this year (2015) included three of the 'Language of Light' sculptures. Alongside them were recent pieces using paper as medium. Somehow, a full circle has played out and my whimsical musings of replacing pâte de verre with paper has actually materialised.

My main inspiration for some time has been with the land and planetary change. From an invitation to create an installation about the San Lorenzo River that flows through the city of Santa Cruz in California, I began to work with video, animation and photography in collaboration with composer Susan Alexander. Video for me is about light, movement, illusion, transparency and space, in a form that is time based – a valuable learning curve.

I began to miss the 'hands on' approach and in 2012 was lucky enough to get a residency at Bær Arts Centre in north-west Iceland. A friend had given me rolls of Japanese Kozo paper which I shipped to Bær not quite knowing how I would use it. There I took low relief impressions from the volcanic rock, first wetting the paper in the ocean, then making marks on the paper using iron oxide pebbles from the fjord. Peeled from the rock, the dried paper, a thin



▲ **TALKING STICK** DIANA HOBSON, 1994, CAST GLASS, PATINATED BRONZE, LENGTH 52cm.

translucent skin, strangely resembled my early pâte de verre! These 'skins' hold the memory of the rock in incredible detail. I see them as 'Fragile Memories' of our earth as planetary change escalates and all that is known and familiar threatens to slip from our grasp.

Back in California I took Sekishu paper impressions from the giant redwoods that surround our home, drawing into them with graphite while still on the tree. These ancient trees have survived fire and cataclysm over 240 million years on the Earth and here we have the last remaining coastal giant redwoods on the planet. My fragile, translucent memories are a tribute to them as they struggle with drought.

Light, translucency and the fragile qualities that I find in glass stay with me on my path, while the materials shift and change with the passage of experience.

Diana Hobson is a multiple media artist from the UK, now based in California. She has pâte de verre in collections worldwide, including the V&A, Corning Museum, NY, Museum of Decorative Arts, Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.

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