



Denise Pepper and Brooke Zeilgman, 'Life Savers', 2009, fibreglass, acrylic, wood, 180 x 180 x 60 cm. "Sculpture by the Sea", Cottesloe, WA

FANCIFUL AND FORCEFUL

The complex cast glass forms Denise Pepper creates and the attention to detail in surface texture, colour and pattern are testament to her exceptional application of the medium of *pâte de verre*. Profile by Dr Nien Schwarz.



Denise Pepper, 'Flummeries' 2010, *pâte de verre*, found objects, variable dimensions

It is clearly evident from a few houses away that I'm approaching the residence of a sculptor. I pause to fully appreciate a row of tractor-wheel-sized, fruit-coloured Lifesaver candies casually leaning against one side of the house. Highly saccharoidal lemon, lime and orange flavours immediately pique my salivary glands and I imagine Hansel, Gretel, and all neighbourhood children, unable to avert such overt temptation. This is Denise Pepper's domain of the symbolic glass object.

On entering the premises I am awed and immediately enveloped by this artist's unapologetic appreciation of rich wall colours, stained glass, collectibles, and funky, cut glass light fixtures. Evident in multiple still-life tableaux is her decorative sensibility for arranging objects, a flair developed through years of work in commercial interior design. This home, which beckons comfort many generations in the making, is no nostalgic nod to yesteryear, but a passionate embrace for many things vintage, whether foxy, faux, faux pas, or grandly refined.

Pepper's most recent work can be described as a dessert buffet of whipped chiffon, creamy custard, classic Charlotte, lemon mousse, and snow-white peaks of meringue. Flagrantly fluted, frozen and festively festooned fruit purees flaunt sugar sprinkles, candied violets and raspberry swirls of delectable delight. Dramatic jellified gems – gelatinous, glistening, gleaming – and all one hundred percent fat-free *pâte de verre* glass, are captured in mid-quiver on ornate silver platters. On a nearby tea trolley, individual dessert portions swoon me with chocolate sprinkles and mouth-watering curlicue cream. Here is an unabashed joy of "cooking" with a rainbow assortment of variously textured glass frit and powders. Despite this cast crystalline extravaganza, *Flummeries* is a poignant work too; the sheer variety of pressed tin and copper mould forms employed in making these fragile homemade treats pays tribute to generations of women who cooked from scratch under pressed tin and plaster ceiling roses, their kitchen equipment now exiled to op shops and car boot sales. For Pepper, these antiquated dessert forms symbolise a lamentable loss of handmade domestic values and elegance in presentation.

For several weeks during "Sculpture by the Sea" in 2009, the giant fruity fibreglass Lifesaver candies commandeered the sand directly outside the Cottesloe Surf Life Saving Club. This site-specific cluster of sweets with body-sized portals had kids all over it, and one morning graced the front page of the *West Australian* newspaper. As the outcome of a collaboration with Brooke Zeligman, this work, in association with the ornately decorated decadent desserts, is a testament to Pepper's palpable conceptual interest in glass as symbolic of temptation, whether alluringly sweet, or as we shall see, in the form of lacy lingerie and fine accoutrements.

Pepper exhibited again in "Sculpture by the Sea", 2010 in collaboration with Pierre Capponi. Their work *Plastic Vortex*, like *Life Savers* before it, was designed by Pepper with an ocean context in mind. Its three large welded steel exoskeletons woven over with strands of ubiquitous plastic strapping allude to fish traps and question our collective commitment to minimising plastic pollution and reducing harm to sea life. To participate twice in a competitive outdoor international exhibition of this calibre, within four years of graduating, is no small feat. Furthermore, there are other competitive attributes Pepper can claim on an equally impressive scale.

She completed an Advanced Diploma in Environmental Art in 2003 at Polytechnic West, locally renowned for fostering technical skills development. I met her a year later when, as an undergraduate student at Edith Cowan 'Nannie Pannie', 2009, *pâte de verre*, 45 x 25 x 20 cm



Denise Pepper and Pierre Capponi, 'Plastic Vortex', 2010, polypropylene strapping, mild steel, 180 x 180 x 300 cm. "Sculpture by the Sea", Cottesloe, WA 2010



Denise Pepper, 'Byzantine Couture' 2009, *pâte de verre*, 60 X 40 x 30 cm





'Shelf Life', 2006, pâte de verre, hand printed wallpaper, 500 x 300 cm

University (ECU), she was exceptionally hungry to learn more about sculpture and inspired to learn about glass. Completing introductory workshops with David Hay and Estelle Dean, and attending the 2005 Ausglass conference in Perth, became springboards for experimenting and casting with pâte de verre glass. My recollection of her student years is that she seized every possible opportunity to exhibit new works, while she tackled any technical setback with renewed vigour.



'Walls Talk Hat and Gloves', 2010, pâte de verre, 40 x 30 cm



'Bow Bra Blue', 2008, pâte de verre glass, 30 x 25 x 20 cm

Like many sculptors in Perth, Pepper's ability to hone her praxis was fostered by the Gomboc Gallery Sculpture Survey. Now in its 27th year, this exhibition, generously funded by renowned sculptor Ron Gomboc and his wife Terrie, Director of the Gallery, provides tertiary students with the opportunity to design, develop, and exhibit outdoor sculptures. Pepper participated three times in this annual event and established early on in her career that she was not shy of working long hours, on a big scale, or of tackling newsworthy issues. In a collaborative project with fellow student Janet Carter, Pepper cast 500 cement "yellow cakes", a common term for uranium concentrate. Trademark black and yellow radioactive decorated cakes fanned across a paddock from a centrally located child's cubby house. This early reference to cooking with dangerous goods and interest in environmental or familial contexts can be referenced to more recent works such as *Flummeries* and *Plastic Vortex*.

Pepper graduated in 2006, receiving ECU's Visual Arts Head of School Award. She was simultaneously selected as one of Australia's top 40 emerging artists and for this honour was invited to exhibit at the "07 Hatched National Graduate Exhibition", hosted by the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA). *Shelf Life*, her installation of handmade and hennaed wallpaper discreetly encrusted with glass pâte de verre flowers of the same colour, and a staircase banister also composed of delicately cast glass, explored the term "wallflower", or feelings associated with anxiety, alienation, vulnerability and a sense of fragility. 'If walls could talk what might they say?' asks Pepper.



'Walls Talk Tie', 2010, pâte de verre, 40 x 30 cm

Her reference to a staircase, as a potential exit, offered no real support. Also in her graduating year, the pâte de verre flowers were selected for exhibition in the prestigious Ranamok Australia and New Zealand Glass Prize. In 2007, as invited graduate-in-residence in the ECU's Sculpture Studio, Pepper refined her firing schedules and mould-making skills by working alongside technician Norton Flavel. In 2009, she was recipient of the Ausglass Vicki Torr Prize for her exhibition "Control Briefs", a series of exquisitely rendered, life-size, cast glass pâte de verre undergarments that echo delicate detail, the allure of the original garment and the contours of the body. *Byzantine Couture*, for example, is a freestanding bustier with the most delicate whisper of black lace overlaying peach coloured glass lace. An undulating lacy bottom edge successfully supports the bustier on just a few points and the implied movement of the seductive black trim adds a twist of practised sensual elegance. Pepper uses glass as a material with meaning, and for her, making glass lingerie, like the glass wall flowers, alludes to a fragile tension between the body and how the mind perceives and punishes the body to be beautiful. Her glass clothing, including delicately textured bras, frilly knickers, a man's casually loosened red necktie, and a buttoned up waistcoat, allude to fragile relationships. Collectively, these glass garments combine allusions to temptation and control.

The complex cast forms Pepper creates and the attention to detail in surface texture, colour, and pattern is testament to her patience in devising methods for sufficiently stiffening the garment to make a plaster-silica mould. When the clothing is removed from the mould she then brushes, sifts, or uses a syringe, to move sand-sized grains of colour into the delicate lacy or jacquard imprints. Thin layers of colour are reinforced with a thicker layer of colourless glass. After firing, the glass cast is carefully removed, washed, and any remaining plaster particles patiently picked out. The resulting sensory interplay of form, colour, texture and light is stunning and her commitment to having her works expertly photographed is also a testament to her dedication.

In 2010, Pepper has again been selected as a finalist in the Ranamok Glass Prize, this time for exquisitely cast vintage lace flowered café curtains. The blood red on white of *Vintage Lace Panel* imbues this work with a distinct physiological and psychological edge.

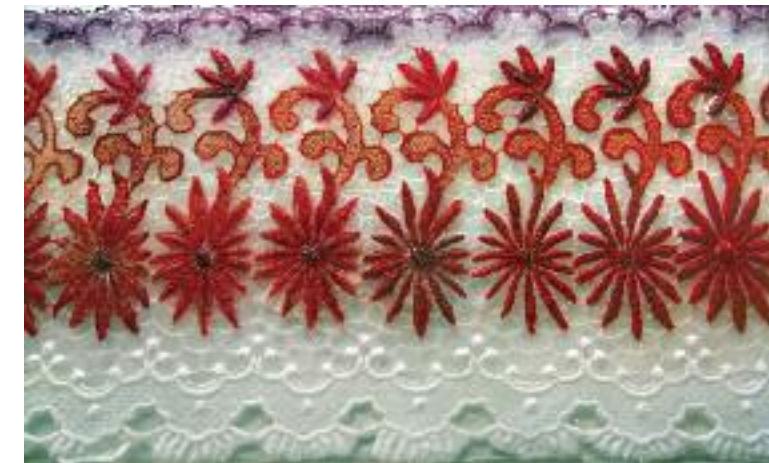
Perth is isolated, wedged between a huge inland desert and the vast expanse of Indian Ocean. In this regard, Pepper states: 'I don't have a mentor here. I'm teaching myself and my sense of direction is to just do it ... To go straight in, without testing my ideas, materials, or processes (like I know I should).' Indeed, she throws caution to the wind, much like a flamboyant cook, challenging herself by making decisions in the heat of the moment, letting the adrenaline of imagination, passion, adventure and sheer determination give shape to the challenges of evolving ideas and associated vintage objects. The number of breakages is breathtaking, but she doesn't seem to care. Pepper assesses the damage, revels in problem solving, and recycles the glass. 'What I like about glass is that it dictates its own outcome. You can't control it like painting. So much can go wrong at every small step of the way, particularly when working on life-sized lingerie pieces. Yet every time I make something there is the anticipation of what it might look like. Then the excitement of liberating the fired glass from the mould, revealing what is underneath, and giving it the breath of light – it's exhilarating.'

Dr Nien Schwarz

Dr Nien Schwarz, Visual Arts Coordinator, School of Communications and Arts, Edith Cowan University, and correspondent for Art Monthly.



'Drapes' (detail), 2010, slumped and fused pâte de verre, 90 x 28 cm



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