

# Liam Fleming

## Falling into Space

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What's the next point after just blowing a beautiful shape? It doesn't feel finished to me yet.<sup>1</sup>

Liam Fleming's glass vessels push the limits of the medium. His abstract yet evocative forms curve, drape, and fold in on themselves; some appear to balance precariously, as if on the verge of collapse. Their opaque surfaces simultaneously absorb and reflect light, creating dynamic intensities and interplays of colour. In his previous role as Design Manager at JamFactory, Adelaide/Tarntanya, Fleming was responsible for producing functional ware as well as objects for other artists. In recent years, the artist has also developed a sculptural practice that subverts the traditional hierarchies of art and design. A highly skilled maker, these new forms have required Fleming to relinquish much of his control over the making process in the creation of something exciting and unfamiliar. 'Falling into Space' presents two recent bodies of work that emphasise these important developments in his practice.

The origins of Fleming's more speculative objects lie in his *Graft Vase* 2018 series, an ongoing line of functional ware comprising cubic and rectangular prisms stacked in various arrangements and colourways. These elegantly precise vessels are the product of the artist's extensive experience and knowledge of mould blowing and cold lamination processes. Their success, the artist notes, is the result of "understanding the material and controlling all the variables".<sup>2</sup> Perfecting these exacting techniques has enabled Fleming to explore further possibilities. To develop as a maker, the artist had to reconsider his own role in the highly regimented process of glassmaking.

*Compositions* 2022 follows the artist's series *Post-Production* 2020, in which Fleming took segments of imperfect glass intended for his *Graft* vases and used heat to slump and collapse the individual pieces. Fleming then applied a cold lamination technique to fuse the forms together, dissipating their

functionality to create new sculptural objects. Instead of repurposing damaged production ware, the *Compositions* are deliberately made, using the same metal moulds as the *Graft* vases. Unlike *Post-Production* and the more recent *Transitory* 2022 works, they retain traces of the original vase shape, while uniform colour focuses the viewer's attention on the vessels' elongated and knotted forms. As their collective title suggests, the *Compositions* are designed to an extent; Fleming sketches preliminary drawings on graph paper, but the final result depends on what happens when the individual pieces of glass are stacked together inside the kiln for firing. The artist arranges them to encourage the desired form but ultimately forces beyond his control—namely heat, weight, and downward pressure—determine the outcome.

As with his *Graft* vases, individual titles from the series, such as *Composition #3 in AG* 2022, acknowledge the ongoing influence of music on Fleming's practice. *Track 3* 2011 was an installation of pulled glass canes suspended in mid-air, made when the artist was a student at the University of South Australia. The work attempted to visualise sound using glass in space: "I loved the idea of making the invisible, visible; the ephemeral, tangible."<sup>3</sup> *Compositions* extends this idea further, drawing a musical equivalence to Fleming's working methodology. Here, the artist credits German composer Johann Sebastian Bach's innovations in relation to inverting or reversing a bar of music, sometimes more than once, to generate longer contrapuntal phrases, thus moving the composition forward.

It would be an oversight not to mention the role of colour and surface in Fleming's work. The artist's non-functional ware is characterised by its opaque finish, as well as unexpected colour choices and combinations. Here again, Fleming draws upon his experience of making *Graft* vases over the years, each vessel distinguished by a unique configuration of colours and forms. For his experimental works, the artist uses a lathe to cut the glass surface to create opacity. Fleming applies up to

four colours in each work—sometimes on both the inside and outside of each glass segment—experimenting with layering to produce dynamic and unexpected colour relationships.

It is interesting to consider the influence of *Subway Escalator* 1953 by Australian modernist Frank Hinder (1906–92) on Fleming’s colour palette, amongst other aspects of his work. The painting has been a formative influence on the artist, which he first saw as a child visiting the Art Gallery of South Australia and has returned to many times since. The cubist composition is dominated by a series of tessellating shapes that cascade down the canvas, communicating the sense of progress and technological innovation that defined the post-war period:

The way he [Hinder]’s portraying what I see as forward movement in the piece. That’s something I’m now trying to achieve in my own work: continual movement and thinking about what’s next. I see that and feel that in *Subway Escalator*.<sup>4</sup>

Bach and Hinder’s formal experiments especially resonate with Fleming’s most recent body of work, *Transitory Forms and Vessels* 2022. The series represents the artist’s strongest subversion of process and technique to date, elevating the objects further beyond their craft origins. Evoking the sense of movement Hinder depicted in *Subway Escalator*, Fleming sought to articulate “how an object is not static, seeing form as a constant flow”.<sup>5</sup>

*Transitory Form #1* features two curving columns in shades of brown that rest underneath a watery blue canopy. Fleming describes the way he manipulated the object in the kiln to achieve the precariously balanced form, in doing so recalling Bach’s inventive compositions: “It was standing upright and then I flipped it over when it was in the kiln, put it back down again, and was able to join the pieces. A lot of play can happen in the kiln, sometimes.”<sup>6</sup>

To accomplish a greater sense of freedom in these works, Fleming had to let go even

more. Although glass blowers traditionally use kilns to heat up and cool down their material, Fleming pushes temperatures beyond 600 degrees to realise his increasingly soft and fluid forms. The artist notes that working at such high temperatures is unusual in glassmaking and often results in the destruction of the vessels: “I’m taking the material as far as it can go, in a sense. If I fire these pieces anymore, they’ll break.”<sup>7</sup>

Austrian artist and writer Roman Kirschner argues that changeable material states afford the possibility—albeit with risk—of escaping the mundane and repetitive nature of daily existence:

Fluidity reminds us on the one hand that the world is in constant movement and on the other hand that this movement is irreversible. And although many aspects of becoming are subject to chance, and could therefore be seen in a fatalistic light, the world is nevertheless excitable and not just stuck in an eternal equilibrium.<sup>8</sup>

Fleming’s *Compositions* and *Transitory* works can be simultaneously apprehended as both an exemplar of *and* an exception to the artist’s experience and knowledge of glassmaking. Only someone with such a skillset could create these daringly playful and singular vessels which challenge the viewer’s conception of what glass can do.

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Hamish Sawyer is a Brisbane/Meinjin-based independent curator and writer.

- 1 Email from the artist, 24 September 2022.
- 2 Interview with the artist, 14 September 2022.
- 3 Email from the artist, 22 September 2022.
- 4 Interview with the artist, 14 September 2022.
- 5 Maddee Clark, ‘Liam Fleming’, *The Saturday Paper*, no. 369, October 2021, [www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au](http://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au) (accessed 24 September 2022).
- 6 Email from the artist, 22 September 2022.
- 7 Interview with the artist, 14 September 2022.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Roman Kirschner, ‘Foreword’, *Raw Flows. Fluid Mattering in Arts and Research*, ed. Roman Kirschner, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin, 2017, p 7.