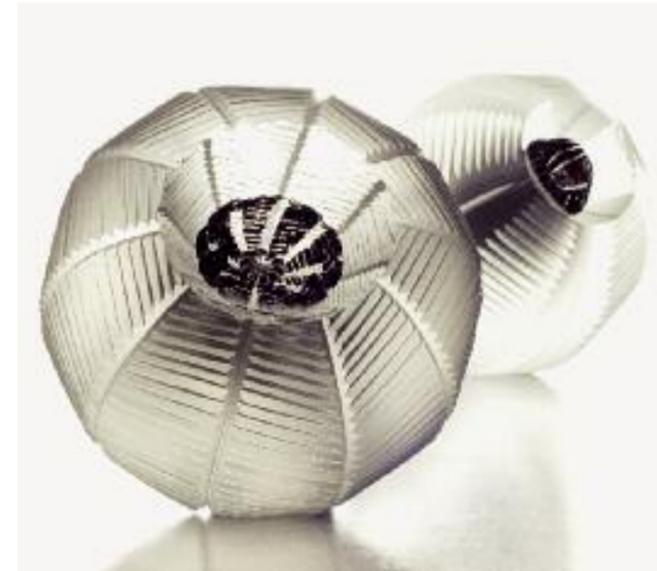




'Proteus', 2013, blown glass, wheel-cut, 14 x 16 x 16 cm



'Microcosm I', 2011, blown glass, wheel-cut, 10 x 12 x 12 cm



'Microcosm Pair I', 2012, blown glass, wheel-cut, 10 x 25 x 18 cm



'Microcosm V', 2011, blown glass, wheel-cut, 7 x 16 x 16 cm

## DISCOVERING ZOE WOODS

Emerging glass artist Zoe Woods uses her discovery of an adaptation of the traditional Graal technique to create within her pieces fractal views and reflections that work as endless optical illusions. Text by Sera Waters.

ZOE Woods is an Adelaide-based glass artist and 2011 graduate of the South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia. Since the completion of her studies and ever-growing success, Woods' work has persistently gained complexity. The solid patterned glass objects she produces feature reflections and repetition, yet obsessive patterns also permeate her making processes. Woods employs both hot and cold techniques and in doing so has made a place for serendipitous chance and complex repetitive tasks to inform one another. While the resulting pieces evoke a multitude of associations, foremost they read as devices of wondrous optical pleasure connected to the ancient lineage of humans using glass to "discover" the natural world. Celeste Olalquiaga, in her book *The Artificial Kingdom*, writes of the faddish collecting of domestic glass aquariums in

the 1850s and 1860s in Victorian England. She cites these collections as indicative of a new modern age of "visual pleasure".<sup>1</sup> Like glass paperweights and the early incarnations of snow-domes, the small aquariums showcased miniaturised arrangements of nature, such as shells, creatures and plants, and staged scenes in glass for optical enjoyment. The works of Woods link historically to this fascination with containing views frozen in time. However, unlike the kitsch and somewhat macabre process of encasing life – at once destroying but preserving a creature by taxidermy – Woods forms and captures organically repetitive patterns of glass which speak to a continuing desire to scrutinise nature and natural occurring phenomenon.

It is in this vane and in consideration of titles, like *Microcosm* and *Cross-section*, that Woods' use of glass makes a strong connection to microscopy – the scientific realm of visual investigation and discovery. While the history of visual experiments with glass and crystal lenses reaches back before written records, indicating the human predilection for observing the minute, it was in the 1600s that the invention of the microscope opened up worlds not visible to the naked eye. Bill Bryson has written of the Dutch linen draper and secretive lens maker, Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, who in the latter half of the 17th century employed tiny bubbles of glass to see and record microscopic views of bread mould, blood, hair, teeth, saliva, semen and water. His discovery of more than eight million "animalcules" (protozoa) in a single drop of water revealed, for the first time, teeming ecosystems of intricate complexity living all around us.<sup>2</sup> Microscopic technologies since this time have continued to extend exciting new frontiers within our world at cellular, atomic and even quark levels.

This sense of wonder and discovery hovers around all of



'Microcosm Pair II', 2013, blown glass, wheel-cut, 9 x 24 x 15 cm



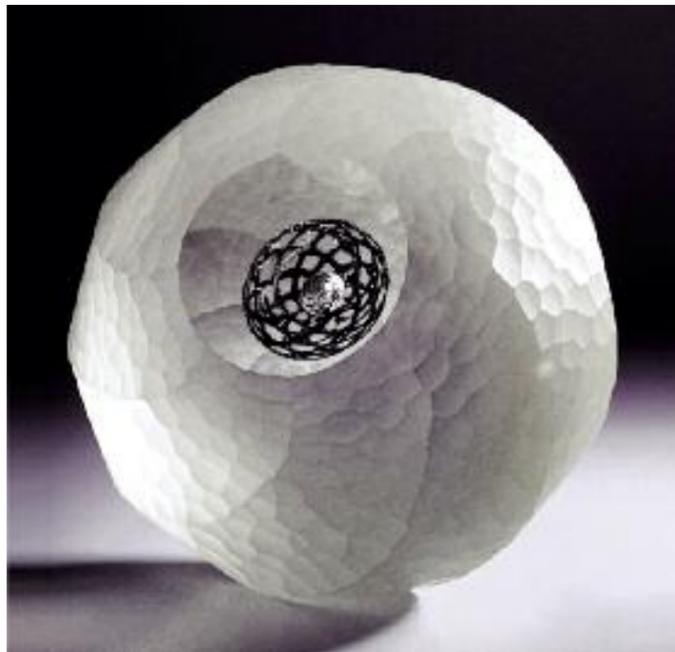
'Glacial Shift', 2014, blown glass, wheel-cut, 15 x 22 x 15 cm



'Microcosm VI', 2011, blown glass, wheel-cut, 8 x 14 x 14 cm



'Microcosm Series - Blue', 2012, blown glass, wheel-cut, 9 x 38 x 25 cm



'Microcosm IX', 2012, blown glass, wheel-cut, 11 x 12 x 12 cm

Wood's work. Looking through one lens, or the many lenses of her latest series, suggests organic "discoveries" which could be anything from a single cell organism to a previously unseen sea creature, or even the universe. With their muted colour palette, black, clear, or subtle shades of blue and green, the layers of glass patterns operate as a myriad of reflection and optical illusion, never revealing their inner workings yet parading scenes of endless exploration and discovery. Like the perpetual questions around how life came to be, Woods' use of the recurring title *Microcosm* makes apparent the interrelationship of tiny organisms (or their traces paused within glass) with vast and unfathomable universal matters. Through such microcosmic views we are reminded of our shared ancestry with most elements of the universe, as well as the importance of symbiotic relationships within ecosystems.

The notion of "discovery" also permeates Woods' making process. Literally it has been Woods' own discovery of an adaptation of the traditional Graal glass technique which has become central to her work. She continues to use this moment of discovery, physically an extra inner space, and holds it captured within the work to break our view into fractals and reflections of endless wonderment and optical illusion. It is also in the high pressure hot shop aspect of her practice that the unpredictability of glass is chanced upon; Woods approaches her making experimentally as it is never completely known how optically complicated her layers of glass will appear. In the cold shop, where Woods works on the outside of her objects through time-consuming techniques, small shifts evolve in line or shape due to the unpredictability of the hand. It is owing to these unintended variations that her glassworks become formed and reformed through happenstance and time spent in the studio. She is reflective about the aspects of her practice which are time-consuming and repetitive and speaks of using such occasions as an opportunity to think through the work and allow for new discoveries.

Like nature, what is enjoyable about Wood's glass views is their unpredictable organic formulation and asymmetrical symmetry. Within the inner patterns are small bubbles, minute pockets of air held in suspense forevermore when the glass cools, and tiny signs of life. These bubbles are indicative of the magical process of glassmaking, trapped forever between liquid and solid states and not unlike bubbles forming upon a submerged specimen. Through her works, which incorporate both natural phenomena and controlled elements, Woods appeals to the human desire to seek out signs of life and pattern and revel in the unfathomable marvels of being.

Since being selected for the national graduate exhibition "Hatched" in 2011, Woods has had an impressive line-up of shows, prizes and residencies, including time spent at the Canberra Glass Works, the Corning Museum of Glass (New York), and winning the Waterhouse Youth Arts Prize in 2012. In 2014 she exhibited at BMG Gallery in Adelaide, and 2015 will exhibit for the first time at Sabbia Gallery in Sydney. Zoe Woods' is a slow and meaningful journey, one where she is making time to move through the many possibilities of her processes, and with each step making new discoveries. This dedication to "discovery" promises an ever changing and exciting glass career ahead.

#### Sera Waters

Sera Waters is an Adelaide-based artist, arts writer and lecturer. All photographs are by Rebecca Kammer.

#### Footnotes

1. Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: a treasury of the kitsch experience*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1998, pp. 12-13.
2. Bill Bryson, *A short History of Nearly Everything*, Black Swan Publishing, London, 2003, pp. 454-455.