



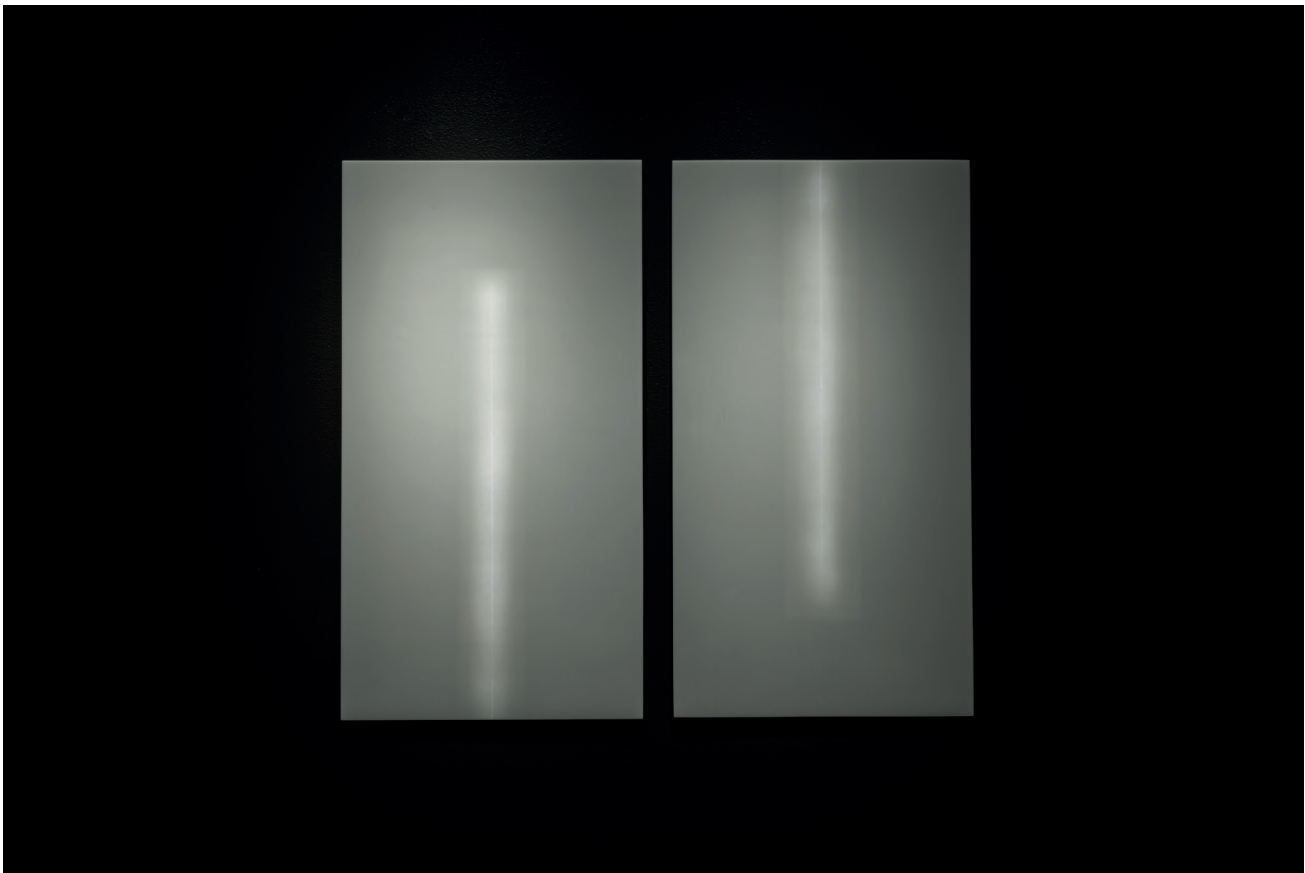


READING BETWEEN THE LINES MEL DOUGLAS

STORY ELLI WALSH

PHOTOGRAPHY ROHAN THOMSON

Mel Douglas conceptualises her glass forms as drawings, and conceives of her artmaking in terms of a drawing practice. By referring to the multiplicity of ways line has been used across the wider field of visual arts, the artist looks to see if glass can offer a new species of line – a liberated line, severed from its substrate.





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The glass scene in Australia is rumbling, swelling. A jolt of new energy pulses through its crystalline veins as many contemporary artists are starting to think more about glass as an accessible, experimental material. Mel Douglas has been at the forefront of this glass scene for almost three decades. Working out of the Canberra Glassworks – a studio that has piloted innovations in Australian glassmaking – her practice explores the flexibility of glass as a material for drawing and mark-making, stretching the boundaries of what drawing is, and what it can be.

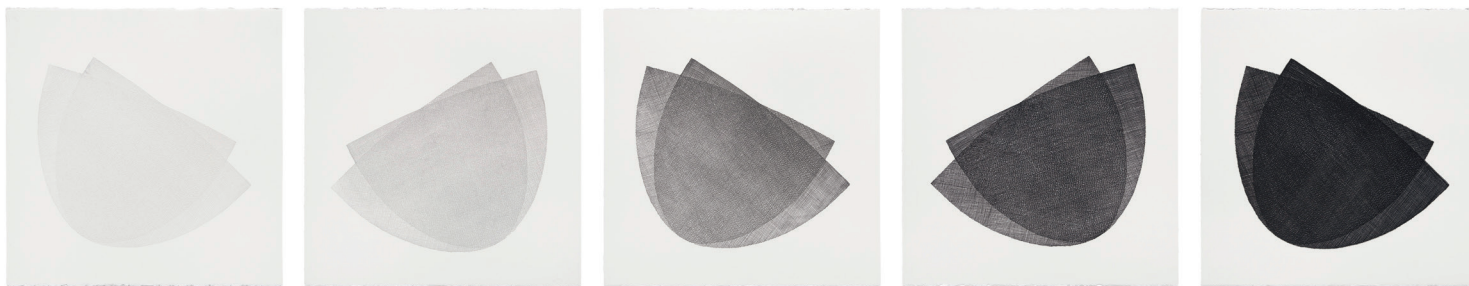
Objects and lines are often considered two separate entities, but Douglas's work uncovers the creative prospects of liminality – where the form is not merely a support for the drawing, but a three-dimensional drawing itself. “The transformative material of glass can be a means for mark-making, to draw lines spatially”, explains the artist. “Glass is an amorphous material which gradually changes viscosity depending on temperature; therefore, a line of molten glass can be drawn out freely into the space

and immediately sets into a drawn form. It can hide and conceal line; it can cast shadow lines which move through and into the substrate.” In Douglas's work, line, form, space, and surface collide in a melting-hot matrix, where glass is drawing and two dimensions are three. Douglas consciously harnesses what Kandinsky termed, in his 1926 text *Point and Line to Plane*, “the rhythm which lies in the in-between, realised by following the motives and discovering the meeting points of lines and forms.” We are reminded of the poetics of potentiality, and the symbolic beauty of interstitial space.

Douglas has been working with glass for twenty-five years, but she speaks about the medium as if courting it for the first time – the excitement, the warmth and wonder. The Canberra artist studied ceramics at the Australian National University (ANU) from 1995 to 1997, but fell in love with glassmaking after taking a few night classes. She embarked on an undergraduate degree in glass in 1997, and has been working with the medium full-time ever since. Douglas recalls that part of her attraction to glass

was the community: “Working with glass requires specialised equipment, and some techniques require work to be made in a team. This facilitates a strong, tight-knit community of artists. Most artists that work with the material know one another, and it's a very supportive community.” From 2000 to 2008, she worked at the National Gallery of Australia in travelling exhibitions, where she would spend her lunch hours exploring the gallery spaces and discovering or revisiting artists' work – an explorative and collaborative tenor that informs her practice to this day. Despite being a fixture in the Australian glass scene, Douglas also has a strong international practice. In April this year she is exhibiting in Venice with Caterina Tognon; she's been showing work in the United States since 2003, including major US art fairs like Salon Art + Design, New York, and Art Miami; and in March this year she'll be showing at Collect in London. In May 2023, Douglas is doing a collaborative residency at

01 *Lumen I and II*, 2022, kiln formed and cold worked glass, diptych, 90 x 47.5 x 1.6 cm each, installation view, UNSW Galleries, 2022, photographed by Jacquie Manning



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Biot, France, with artist Nancy Callan, and in September she is the featured artist at Pittsburgh Glass Center . . . the list goes on.

Traditional conceptions of glass are moored to objecthood, yet Douglas is interested in the medium's versatility – the potential for it to be de-objectified; other. "Glass has so many applications," she explains. "You can use it as a drawing material, as two dimensional, as three dimensional. It comes in many forms – as a liquid, a solid, a powder. For me, the possibilities are endless." Her works circuit one guiding question: How can glass be used in distinctive ways to explore the relationship of line to three-dimensional space and surface?

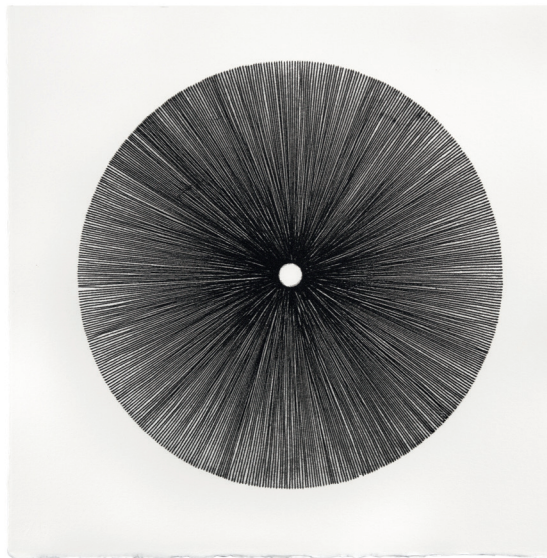
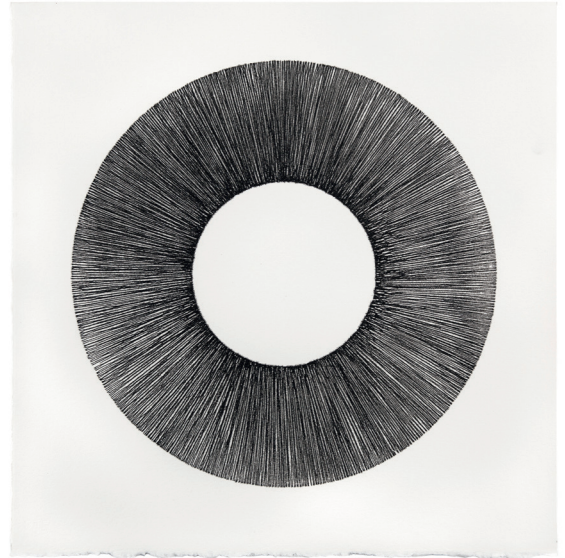
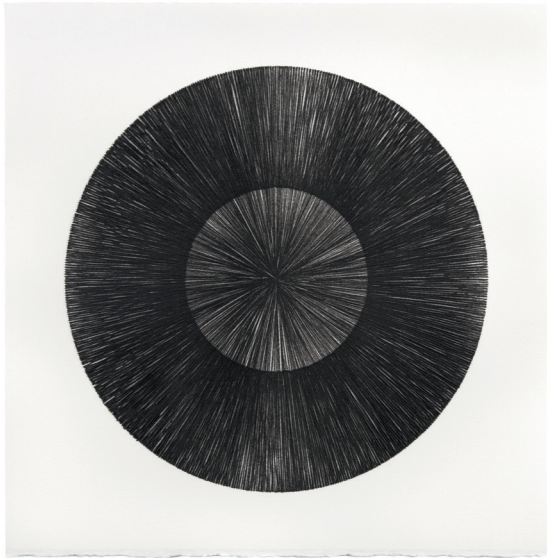
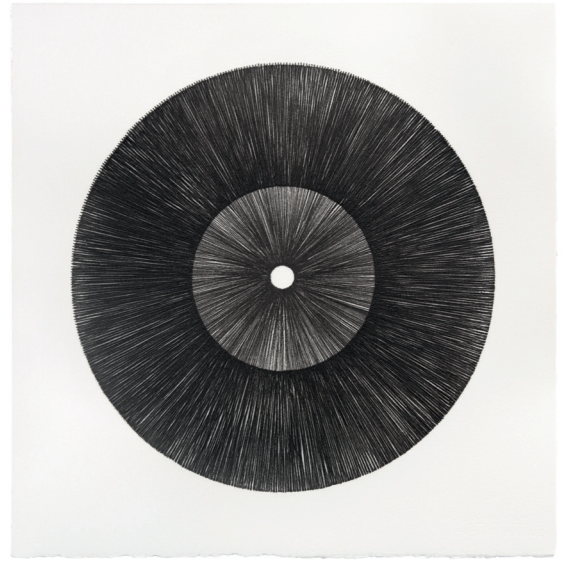
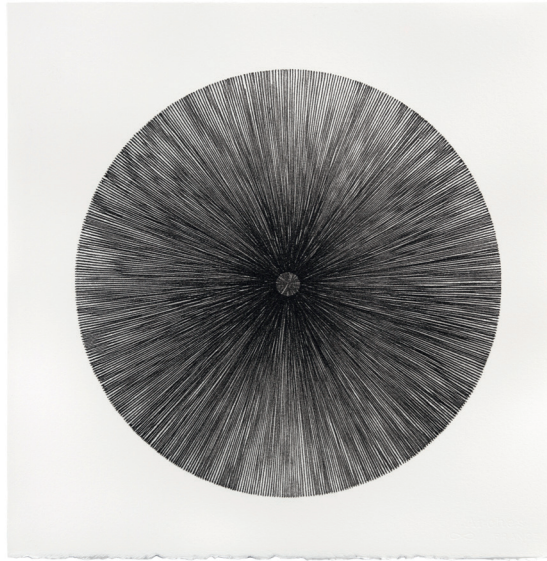
Looking at the historical ways that artists have used drawing to express space, Douglas examines the idea of a "third space" – using multiple layers of opaque, translucent, and transparent materials to hatch a third dimension. Her radiant wall series *Lumen*, 2022, plays with transparency and opacity to create illusions of light and networks of moving line. By changing the density of opaque glass, creating rupture lines in the surface, and by layering light- and dark-coloured sheets into homogenous panels, the artist discovered new ways of compressing space, developing new modes of illusory volume and, by using cracks, cuts, and creases, a means for drawing with light and shadow lines. Though the work is entirely non-representational, one cannot help but glimpse architectural interiors, walls, doorways, rooms. There is a quietude to this series, and something ethereal – spiritual, even – lingers in the luminescence. Glass is not just glass, *Lumen* seems to tell us. Glass

For Douglas, line is a way to inform, define, and enable three-dimensional space. Line is explorative. Line is social

is a portal, and a barrier. It is a window – literally, yes, but more so it's a metaphoric medium for revelation and concealment. While working on *Lumen*, Douglas became less interested in the revealed lines of light, and more intrigued by the spatial illusions that emerged. Bands of light started to appear on the surface and the back side of these works as they were exposed to light. She reflects, "I found that this optical phenomenon was increased by the addition of mass to the front, and to the back of the panels, which were then flattened in a kiln to compress all of the elements together. Mesmerising, shifting concentric shadows started to dance across the surface." This series opened up for Douglas a new voluminous way of working with line and space.

It is hard not to be tugged into the orbit of Douglas's sincere love of line, which she says can simply be traced back to her childhood obsession with drawing. For Douglas, line is a way to inform, define, and enable three-dimensional space. Line is explorative. Line is social. Drawing from the rich history of line across artistic disciplines such as printmaking and drawing, her recent glass drawings are about the expression of a two-dimensional space in a three-dimensional area. She engages with traditional screen-printing processes, where instead of printing with ink onto paper, she prints with glass powder di-

rectly onto a kiln shelf and fires the glass. The glass is then adhered to paper or to a sheet of glass. Each glass drawing is taken from an original drawing. These works hold a sense of relief – enabling, paradoxically, the construction of three dimensions in a flat way. Douglas builds them up via multiple layers and firings, often up to four or five layers over the top of one another. Informed by the work of other artists probing this conceptual field – such as Fred Sandback's two-part constructions, where string creates objects floating in space – she questions how lines can exist in space without a substrate. For *Field Lines I-VI*, 2020, Douglas created flexible glass drawings on paper in concentric circular formations, reminiscent of the iconography of early non-objective painters like Hilma af Klint, Wassily Kandinsky, and Robert Delaunay. These delicate forms, made of converging directional lines, experiment with tone and layer to create depth and perspective, with the central points pulling us into their blackened voids, or pushing us away. They are, indeed, at once receding and approaching – a motion that feels dizzying yet somewhat calming, too. Micro-associations such as the pupil and the iris, or the trope of the target with its elusive bullseye, give way to macro-journeys through space and time, our surroundings spinning past us at spacecraft speed. These imaginings in the mind of the viewer are valid, of course, but for Douglas it is the idea of



02 *Perception of Depth*, 2022, kiln formed, cold worked, and engraved glass, installation view, UNSW Galleries, 2022, photographed by Jacquie Manning

03 *Tonal Value 1-9*, 2019, blown, cold worked, and engraved glass, dimensions variable, installation view, UNSW Galleries, 2022, photographed by Jacquie Manning



drawing sans substrate that pivots and propels the work.

Unassumingly, Douglas's practice delves into the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold, who draws on a wide range of ethnographic material to propose a taxonomy of lines. "Within my practice I've started to work out my own taxonomy of various lines, and how they can express various types of space," comments Douglas. Her recent bodies of work can be divided into six categories of lineal, surface, and spatial investigations, all considering the materiality of glass in relation to the characteristics of drawing: mapping, transcribing, rendering, highlighting, tracing, and inscribing. In a series such as *Tonal Value* (1–9), 2019, we see the artist as cartographer, mapping the surfaces (inside and out) of blown three-dimensional vessels through engraved mark-making and plays of transparency, translucency, and opacity. A more recent work, *Perception of Depth*, 2022, exemplifies "inscribing," as Douglas investigates ways of representing three-dimensional space on a flat plane. A confluence of form, colour, and line modify the optics of the paired objects, seducing the eye into a new kind of geometry: one where two- and three-dimensional-

ity mingle on the same plane. One of Douglas's great influences, László Moholy-Nagy, comes to mind here – specifically, his 1943 work *Papmac*, where flat oil and incised lines on plexiglass conjure a 3D composition. Yet Douglas is not necessarily interested in illusion; instead, she seems fixated on *collusion* – the coming together of that which was apart.

In conversation with Douglas, the word "research" seems interchangeable with "practice." There is the sense that her artmaking journey is an experimental continuum, propelled forward by exhaustive formal and philosophical investigation. Through a combination of reading, examining works of art, drawing, writing, model-making, material testing, and making work, she is constantly probing the parameters of glassmaking. Every new idea is followed by many months of small studies and experimentation, whether that's through hot glass, kiln-formed and cold working techniques with handmade tools, or more traditional drawing studies in her sketchbook. Douglas reflects, "That's the beautiful and frustrating thing about glass – you never get the same outcome twice, so there's this constant sense that you need to explore and push and test." Her goal, ulti-

mately, is to not think of glass just as a substrate for drawing, but as a vehicle for engaging with space through removal of material, erasure, and disruption. Ingold's "dissolution of surfaces" comes into play, where traces are transformed into threads, and the concept of a substrate becomes obsolete. "What I'm striving to do is to really think about how line can exist in space without a substrate. How line can explore space without physically being attached to an object. Glass has the potential to do that – I haven't figured out exactly how that exists or how I'm going to do it, but it's something that I want to explore." ■

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EXHIBITIONS

Collect 2023
3–5 March 2023
Somerset House, London

Mel Douglas
28 April – 29 July 2023
Caterina Tognon, Venice

04 *Tonal Value*, 2019, glass on paper, five pieces, 72 x 72 cm each, photographed by David Patterson

05 *Field Lines I–VI*, 2021, framed glass drawings on paper, six pieces, 72 x 72 cm each, photographed by David Patterson

Courtesy the artist, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Beaver Galleries, Canberra, Canberra Glassworks, Canberra, Caterina Tognon, Venice, Heller Gallery, New York, Sabbia Gallery, Sydney, Traver Gallery, Seattle, and UNSW Galleries, Sydney