

Ten Years of North Lands Creative Glass

By Dan Klein



A.

It is ten years since Bertil Vallien rashly agreed to come and lead the first Master Class at North Lands Creative Glass in Lybster, Scotland. He knew very little about us as there was very little to know at the time. A group of friends had come up with the unlikely idea of building a small glass facility in Caithness. The local Member of Parliament Robert MacLennan (now Lord MacLennan) was keen to promote the arts in his constituency (Caithness and Sutherland in Northern Scotland, the largest in Britain). The area covers an enormous expanse of land with a stunningly beautiful North Eastern sea coast that is home to puffins and seals, a lot of sheep and highland cattle, an atomic reactor, some beautiful castles and a fairly sparse farming community, not to mention, salmon fishing, golf courses and whiskey distilleries galore. It includes John O'Groats, the most northerly point in Britain. You can still drive for miles up there without meeting much more than a tractor on the road! The landscape of seemingly endless sea and sky is magical and the quality of light amazing.

Knowing of my interest in contemporary glass, Robert MacLennan, an old friend from university days long ago, spoke of his aspirations for some kind of arts centre in Caithness. Why not an arts centre devoted to contemporary glass? He also spoke to his Caithness friends Iain and Bunty Gunn. Iain had taken early retirement and decided to return North to the area where he grew up and where his ancestry dates back many hundreds of years. The Gunn clan has its centre in Caithness and Iain, as head of the clan, is much in demand in his full Scottish regalia when the clan organises meetings in Britain, the United States and elsewhere. Since returning to Caithness, Iain and Bunty have worked tirelessly to promote the arts and local heritage. In the early 1990s they had opened a small

gallery in Lybster as a retirement project where they sold work by local artists and craftsmen. At the back of the gallery was a shed, once a joiner's and undertaker's workshop, and no longer in use as anything.

Two and two were beginning to make four! Since the beginning, Iain Gunn has been chairman of what we decided to call North Lands Creative Glass even before we knew exactly what we were going to do. The Gunns offered the shed for the project. Robert MacLennan's first job was to persuade local



B.

funding bodies to support us, mine to persuade friends in the glass world to believe in what was little more than a dream. The first to offer their expertise, and without whom we would not have been able to get going, were Keith Cummings and Ray Flavell, both of them distinguished British glass artists and teachers. Between them they shared the roles of artistic and technical directors, oversaw the conversion of the shed into a basic yet fully functional hot shop and organised the first year's programme. The first Master Class was held in the summer of 1996 with a handful of enthusiastic students amazed to be learning from Bertil in such an out of the way place. New beginnings always have their

special aura, and this one was marked by enthusiasm and a sense of discovery. The master class also fulfilled a need as there was nothing quite like it anywhere else in Britain. One had the feeling that this was only the start.

As Andrew Page wrote in a recent article in *Urban Glass Quarterly* "The windswept village of Lybster doesn't look like home to an internationally known art center. There's no museum, and the handful of tiny shops sell groceries, not artwork. The closest airport is Inverness, nearly three hours drive on a winding two-lane highway that rises and falls along a hilly Highland coast ... Yet its extreme remoteness is part of the allure of North Lands Creative Glass, which has brought artists such as Bertil Vallien, Richard Marquis, Dante Marioni, Vaclav Cigler and Klaus Moje to its workshops nestled amidst the low houses of a former fishing village." Lybster was once a main hub of the herring fishing industry, its main street wide enough for a fish market, the drilling of the local regiment and for carriages to turn without reversing. Now that the herring supply has dwindled, it is a changed community. Glass and glass artists have arrived and are making a difference.

A.
Photo montage of a
Caithness croft house
and a cast glass piece
by Bibi Smit

B.
The Alastair Pilkington
Workshop in Lybster

The greatest change happened in 2002 when the new 'Alastair Pilkington Workshop' was opened by His Royal Highness Prince Charles. It was named after the inventor of float glass who had been a good friend of his, a glass collector and someone with whom early plans had been discussed. When he died of a brain tumour, his widow Kathleen Pilkington agreed to the sale of his glass collection in order to finance something that would be a lasting memory to him. With the proceeds of this sale and generous grants from various funding bodies we were able to buy the spacious Victorian village school building and convert it into a glass workshop. Aged well over 90, Kathleen travelled from her home in the United States to Lybster to attend the opening ceremony during which Prince Charles, supervised by the Danish artist Marianne Buus, blew a large mis-shapen bubble and we were open for business!



C.

The artistic director at the time, Elizabeth Swinburne, did an excellent job of designing and working on the installation of the studio. For five years before the workshop opened we made do with our 'shed' which did not seem to put off the likes of Joel Philip Myers, Paul Stankard, Tessa Clegg (our second artistic director), Jan Erik Ritzman and Josiah McElheny. Now there is a hot glass facility, a cold-working studio, a kiln room, a mould making area, a sand-blasting area, a study room and a large kitchen which doubles up as a lecture room. Lybster Bowling Green is next door and the Golf Club immediately across the road. Plenty to do whilst waiting for the kiln temperature to come down! Two years ago we took over and refurbished the school house next door where there is comfortable accommodation for visiting artists and residents.

From the outset it was our intention to widen our scope and involve artists and designers of all kinds to work with glass including sculptors, painters, writers and photographers. Students attending these classes have found them to be as inspiring as the masters themselves. British sculptors Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, David Nash and Alison Wilding have all taught at North Lands. Each is assisted by a glass artist of some renown. The Master Classes are accompanied by a thematic annual weekend conference between class sessions, where partying and the more serious stuff make good companions. This year the theme is The Skillful Hand and Eye: last year it was The Design Element. Driven forward by all these developments the programme extended further and further into autumn and, with a pause for the cold and dark Caithness winters, started again in spring. Residencies for artists (usually four at a time) are organised and open to anybody who cares to apply whether in mid-career or setting out as a professional. They last between four and eight weeks each during about seven months of the year, bringing people together from the four corners of the earth and often leading to lasting friendships.

In Lybster a glass artist can enjoy what amounts to total immersion. There is nothing to distract you and everything to inspire you. During the long summer evenings the sun still shines at midnight. The weather is unpredictable. Fierce winds, mist from the sea (known as the Haar) and horizontal rain make for an ever-changing land and seascape under the huge vaulted sky above. Sometimes the sea looks like sheet metal, sometimes it reflects an azure sky. When the sun shines land and sea are flooded with light. Nature seems very close at hand and artists frequently feel the urge to respond to it in their work.

Over the years a community of friends and supporters has been building up around North Lands. Iain Gunn, our chairman, lives close by and voluntarily gives up time almost every day to attend to the needs of North Lands. Our administrator, Lorna Macmillan, who is local,

holds everything together, performing a juggling act that would amaze even the most experienced of corporate managers. The office seems to be open all hours and nothing is too much trouble for her. Michael Bullen is our full time technical director responsible for maintaining and running the workshop. The board of directors meets four times a year. Each plays an important supporting role. Alan Poole's regular newsletters let the world know if anything of interest is happening. Another director, Dennis Mann, is also a long time Caithness resident, well known for his glass engraving skills. Together with Patti Niemann, a young jeweller and glass maker in the area, he has developed a series of outreach classes for children from schools in the Highlands and for adults wanting to chance an arm at glass making. Several, including the owner of the most popular local pub, have become addicts and visit the studio whenever they can. During the summer months the whole village becomes involved in North Lands activities offering bed and breakfast accommodation to visiting students and those attending the conference. Dave the local butcher has become world famous for his meat pies and has begun collecting glass.

Everybody who comes to Lybster seems to fall under its spell. Tina Oldknow has been a member of the advisory board for three years now and a visitor every year since joining, taking time off from her busy life as Curator of Modern Glass at Corning Museum of Glass. I asked her to say something about the place.

"North Lands is one of a growing yet still relatively small number of glass schools in the UK and Europe. This is important in itself, but what distinguishes North Lands, for me, is the unique mix of artists who are brought together every summer to teach, and the carefully constructed program for the conference. The annual conference assembles speakers from diverse fields in and out of the arts to address specific themes that are current and of considerable interest to me, and the conference is small enough to have a meaningful interaction between the

speakers and their audience. What North Lands offers that cannot be matched elsewhere is an exceptional location in the powerful landscape of Caithness, with its sweeping views of ocean and moor and its rare Neolithic-era structures, and the focus that being in a small, historic village provides. While North Lands is Scottish, it is also international, and I hope and expect that the school will attract an increasing number of foreign artists from western and eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, southeast Asia and Japan, Australia, and the United States."

Jane Bruce, our artistic director for the last four years, has been responsible for putting together the summer programs and in this, our tenth anniversary year, has brought together old friends and new to run classes. Tessa Clegg, Dick Marquis, Dante Marioni and Steve Klein have all taught at North Lands before and are returning to help celebrate this anniversary. Alison Kinnaird, Britain's best known glass engraver, will be giving her first Master Class at North Lands, although she has been up before as a student in one of Bertil Vallien's classes during which she was introduced to sand casting. Carol McNicoll (a well known British potter) and Michael Brennand Wood (a leading textile artist) complete this year's cast list.

The anniversary is being celebrated further South as well. The National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh have staged an exhibition called *Reflections* in their main exhibition gallery as their summer show, which runs during the Edinburgh Festival and ends in January 2007. In it 60 works donated to North Lands by visiting artists and students are exhibited along with videos that show the landscape and what it is we are doing in Caithness. The exhibition was curated by Rose Watban, curator of Scottish and European Applied Arts at the museum, who will be one of the panellists in the panel discussion about North Lands at SOFA CHICAGO. Another North Lands related



D.

C.
The cold workshop at the Alastair Pilkington workshop

D.
Dante Marioni doing a demonstration in the old workshop during his first Master Class at Lybster in 2001

E.
H.R.H. The Prince of Wales blowing a bubble during his visit to North Lands to open the Alastair Pilkington Workshop in 2002

F.
Kirstie Rea with work made during a master class led by her at North Lands in 2004



F.



E.



G.



H.



I.

event in Edinburgh is a benefit-selling exhibition generously organised by the Scottish Gallery, one of Britain's leading decorative arts galleries and a regular exhibitor at SOFA CHICAGO.

The main reason for this essay about North Lands being included in the SOFA CHICAGO catalogue is our special relationship with The Bullseye Gallery. Their stand in Chicago this year is devoted to 15 artists who work using Bullseye Glass and who have visited North Lands in one capacity or another, as masters, as technical assistants or as students. Our relationship started in 2001 with a casual conversation during SOFA shortly after 9/11 when Lani McGregor asked where one could go and hide in the world. She asked about North Lands which had been described to her by Dick Marquis and Dante Marioni as "the most amazing place in the world." I said I would send her more information which led to her and her husband Dan Schworer attending the 2002 conference, and suggesting a Bullseye Master Class at North Lands with glass donations and technical support staff. They were not put off by the plumbing even though Dan couldn't find the hot water switch in what we describe as a superior hotel bedroom and had to take a cold shower. The Bullseye Master Classes are now a regular feature at North Lands. Lani and Dan have since become 'addicts' to the point where they are now part-time Caithness residents in a splendid 'Manse' overlooking a wide expanse of coast line. Religious artefacts that might once have graced a vicar's home have been replaced by contemporary glass, much of it by Bullseye artists who have been lured to Caithness over the years: Jessica Lauglin, Klaus Moje, Richard Whiteley and others. Mark Zirpel, who did a North Lands residency in 2004, made a body of work inspired by the Caithness landscape which was exhibited at the Bullseye Connection Gallery in Portland, OR. As a result of the Bullseye connection with North Lands, Lani McGregor was invited to join the board this year.

On September 1, 2006 a new era begins for us with the appointment of Peter Aldridge as Chief Executive. He and his wife Jane Osborn Smith, a gifted potter and painter,

have decided to return home to Britain after spending 27 years in America living in Corning, NY. Peter has been involved with Steuben Glass both as a designer and as an executive as well as doing freelance design. His first visit to North Lands was in 2005 and it seems fitting to conclude with his feelings about coming to Caithness.

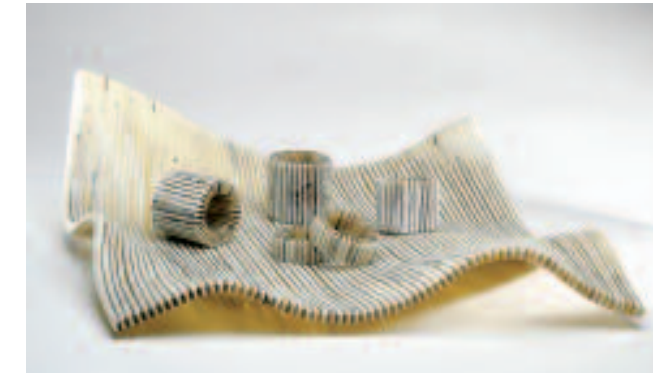
"It seems like everyone who goes to North Lands comes through the experience feeling 'changed' in some way. I was no exception. Maybe, compared to the frenetic pace of our contemporary life there is something precious about the ageless isolation in that part of Scotland that universally focuses the awareness and somehow stills the mind to question, to make new connections.

Certainly, there is an immense power in the quality of light that illuminates the sea and surrounding landscape, which makes it a magical and inspirational place to be.

The thing that further sets North Lands apart from most successful glass schools is not just great facilities and informed technique. Those requirements go without saying these days. It has attracted some of the most outstanding practitioners from around the world not just to have students emulate their technique but because there is a mature dialogue central to every course, which brings about individual growth regardless of where a person may be in their professional life."

Dan Klein is known internationally as a writer, curator and collector of contemporary glass. After many years first as a dealer (1975-1985) and later as an auction house expert (1985-2002) he now has an interest in the secondary market and continues to be actively involved in the world of contemporary glass in a variety of ways. He was a founding director of North Lands Creative Glass and is Chairman of their advisory board. He is also a trustee of the National Glass Centre in Sunderland and visiting professor at the University of Sunderland.

Published in honor of the 10th anniversary of North Lands Creative Glass in Lybster, Scotland. Artworks by 15 artists using Bullseye Glass, who have visited the Centre are exhibited by The Bullseye Gallery at SOFA CHICAGO 2006.



J.



K.

G.
Land, sea and sky
near Lybster

H.
Bales of hay in a
Caithness Field

I.
April Surgent
More Than You
2006
fused and cameo-engraved glass
18 x 17.875 x 2.25
photo: R. Watson

J.
Steve Klein
Lybster Field
Cast glass sculpture
based on a Caithness
landscape with bales
of hay

K.
The hot shop at the Alastair
Pikington Workshop