

Look Straight Ahead

Celebrating the Glass Art of Judi Elliott



it's a family thing

This exhibition is a story of Australian studio glass, past, present, and future. It reads like a family tree, with each person linked to the next through an ecosystem of learning, making, and ideas. Some connections are formed through sharing, teaching, and collaboration, while others are forged independently, inspiring others through sustained practice.

For more than five decades, Judi Elliott has been a quiet yet formidable presence in Australian contemporary art. Best known for her kiln-formed glass works and distinctive use of colour, Judi's practice centres on architectural forms, houses, walls, and the shadows they create, considering both physical structures and human experience. I might even say, at the risk of overuse, that her work "engages with the phenomenology of light and space," shaped by how we see, feel, and move within structural environments. Put more simply, it is about the difference between houses and homes. While I grapple

with the language that attempts to describe these sensations, I am also reminded of the overwhelming playfulness and joy in Judi's work, an aspect I feel more connected to than academic tongue-ties.

Now based in Wagga Wagga, Judi spent most of her career living and working in Canberra. She came to glass after an established career in ceramics, a background that continues to shape her approach to form and colour, with glass melting and flowing like glaze. Through her training at the Canberra School of Art, she became directly connected to the influential lineage of Klaus Moje, whose pioneering use of kiln-forming and coldworking helped define Australian studio glass. Judi's work is strongly informed by Moje's approach to technique and colour, particularly his use of layered sheet glass, bold chromatic relationships, and the translation of ideas through kiln-based processes.

The importance of skill-building at the Canberra School of Art cannot be overstated, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. The Glass Workshop was established in the early 1980s by then Director Udo Sellbach, a visionary educator whose leadership transformed the school into one of Australia's most progressive art institutions. He championed a workshop-based model that prioritised the human element of making, the slow accumulation

of technical skill, and intellectual freedom, often described as a Bauhaus-style approach. By recruiting Klaus Moje to build and lead the Glass Workshop, Sellbach helped position Canberra as a centre of international significance for contemporary art and glass education.

Judi was the first of many remarkable artists to graduate from this program. Alongside Moje, other influential teachers shared their skills, including Elizabeth McClure, Jane Bruce, and Stephen Proctor. The program also laid the foundations for artists such as Kirstie Rea, who would also become an influential teacher at the school, as well as Kathy Elliott, Jacqueline Knight, and Rose-Mary Faulkner. Each artist followed a distinct conceptual and technical path, yet all are connected through the same multi-generational lineage.

Judi and I are friends, and I value the time we spend together in her studio. We share much in common, a love of 1980s design and a passion for materials, and within this glass family she feels like a grandmother of sorts. She is generous with stories, grounded in experience, and quietly influential across generations. For this reason, I refer to her by her first name, not out of informality or disrespect, but because “Elliott” feels too clinical for a relationship shaped by time spent together, the endurance of her practice, and a shared

exchange with the material we both love. I am in awe that, at 94, she still gets on the diamond saw to cut glass fragments. She paints every day, returning to the work with quiet determination.

While Moje’s legacy is evident in Judi’s technical confidence and use of colour, her work is distinctly her own. Saturated reds, electric blues, and acid yellows dominate her palette, while black introduces shadow within the opaque glass. Embedded within the layers, black and white act like a substrate, allowing colour to sit forward as a veneer. This speaks to her architectural thinking. Judi builds layers of glass to ensure the foundations are solid before applying colour, intentionally making the structure visible along the edge.

Whenever I visit, she tells me how much she misses Canberra. Her house in Wagga has a studio attached that mirrors the one at her former home in Wanniasa, where she lived for almost 30 years, an extraordinary building and studio designed by her friend Enrico Taglietti (1926–2019). Taglietti was one of Australia’s most significant modernist architects. Migrating from Italy to Canberra in the 1950s, he became synonymous with the city’s architectural identity. The houses, churches, and civic buildings he designed are marked by strong geometry, sculptural mass, expressive colour, and a deep sensitivity to

light, landscape, and human scale.

Judi was greatly inspired by Taglietti, and their friendship reflected a mutual respect between art and architecture. Taglietti's use of colour as an integral, structural element, rather than embellishment, resonated strongly with Judi's own approach. For both, colour marks thresholds, emphasises planes, and articulates structure.

Positioned within the history of Australian glass, Judi's contribution feels both foundational and ongoing. When I look at her work, I see a love of boldness that naturally connects with postmodern design and the Memphis Group. Judi, unsurprisingly, arrived at this visual language in the 1980s and has never let it go, somehow keeping it from ever feeling dated. This aesthetic is unapologetic and will not be to everyone's taste. The renewed attention her work has received in recent years, including her 2023 exhibition *A Retrospective* at Sabbia Gallery, affirms something more enduring: that styles come and go, but work grounded in conviction, skill, and material intelligence continues to hold its ground.

What I love most about Judi's work is the density of colour and the way she uses bold blocks, almost like a screen printer or graphic designer. Yet in glass, the colours refuse to sit still. They boil and vibrate within the panels, alive with internal movement, even as the

glass remains brittle and precise. Colour is not only seen, but felt and tasted, carrying the weight of memory. I imagine melted LEGO, Rainbow Paddle Pops, and primary-coloured terrazzo, linked to that Memphis-like sensibility we both love.

Look Straight Ahead, curated by Michael Saccone, brings Judi's work into dialogue with four artists from four generations of Canberra School of Art graduates: Kirstie Rea, Kathy Elliott (with Ben Edols), Jacqueline Knight, and Rose-Mary Faulkner. Their practices intersect with hers in different ways, through bold colour, shared techniques, and recurring ideas of home and comfort. Some connections are direct, others more abstract. Kirstie Rea's work sits in close conversation with Judi's, offering a thoughtful counterpoint that focuses on the outside world, as if opening a window to draw the environment in. It is expansive, marked by a deep awareness of place and presence. Rose-Mary Faulkner and Jacqueline Knight both examine domestic relationships and the dualities often negotiated within the home, particularly from women's perspectives. Their conceptual frameworks can be read as both poetic and quietly sinister, depending on how they are encountered. Kathy Elliott and Ben Edols' work intersects with Judi's through a shared richness of form and detail. Their practice is informed by Italian architectural influences and frequently draws on the history of

glass, particularly the work of Carlo Scarpa (1906–1978), whose architecture is defined by an extraordinary attention to material, pattern, and spatial sensitivity.

Throughout the exhibition, the distinction between house and home becomes clear. A house is a structure, while a home is lived, felt, and experienced. In this context, glass becomes a conduit for those experiences, “pulsating like a heartbeat”¹. For me, what emerges is a community shaped over generations, its survival grounded in shared learning and time spent making. Look Straight Ahead does not offer conclusions so much as orientation, quietly suggesting both a legacy and a future.

Aimee Frodsham, 2026

1 Judi Elliott, interview by Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, video, 2024.