



Kevin Lockau, *Coyote*, sand-cast glass, tar, fur, 2000, 22 (H) x 32"



Jim Dennison and Leanne Williams, *Slaughtered ME42*, cast glass, steel, silicone, 2003, 141 x 35 x 44 cm, Photo by Leigh Mitchel-Anyon

DEMO: SWEET AS

JIM DENNISON AND LEANNE WILLIAMS

As artist practitioners, we have had a collaborative practice for the last six years. Prior to this, we each had our own separate career paths (Leanne was a painter-sculptor and Jim as a glass artist). Through the process of assisting each other in individual projects, a collaborative practice was born with a combination of each other's personal practices, but brought together in an entirely new direction and working method for us both. We approach our collaborative practice with a conceptual and theoretical grounding first, and then determine the most appropriate method, technique, material, etc., to successfully convey our ideas. The development of the concept is often a long, drawn out affair where essentially we pitch our ideas and reasoning to each other for dissection, testing, and debate. We proceed to the making phase, when we come to some agreement on the validity of the proposed work. This construction stage is also heavily collaborative. Since we each have certain strengths and weaknesses, we exploit the strengths for the best possible outcome.

For our lecture-demo, we concentrated on the methodology behind our icing sugar roses and how we put this into context. Leanne began using edible icing for cake

decoration in her 2001 installations. The work involved literally applying large scale decorative motifs to gallery walls. Jim, who acted as a technician, assisted Leanne by supplying quantities of the royal icing, as she applied the icing while moved up and down the scaffolding. These temporal works lasted from several weeks to a few months. In order to create more permanency, we began experimenting with the use of moulds to recreate the icing rosettes and other forms as cast glass objects. The following year (2002) a call for proposals went out to local glass artists to submit work for a New Zealand glass survey, *Southern Exposure 2003*, which would be held at the Ebeltoft Glass Museum. We saw this as a perfect opportunity to develop our icing compositions in the form of sculptural work for the show. The result was *Slaughtered ME 42*, which consisted of nearly a thousand hand-formed roses fixed to a metal armature shaped like a sheep's carcass.

We felt strongly that the work sent to Europe needed to represent something that could only have come from New Zealand. As a country originally colonised by Europeans over the last three centuries, we still bear the scars of this historical act. European settlers displaced the indigenous



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peoples and proceeded to clear land for agricultural activity. Early in the colonization, sheep were brought for meat production. The domesticated rose provided a romantic reminder of their homeland. We thought it would be fitting to send a bouquet of flowers in the form of a slaughtered sheep, an export lamb, back to Europe. Both had become something for which New Zealand was internationally recognized. In effect, we were politely returning to the colonisers their "means of production" that irreversibly changed the landscape of New Zealand.

The work's concept drove the methodology. We required a large quantity of individually hand-made roses, so we couldn't use wax or clay techniques and relied on the icing roses from Leanne's earlier sculptural work. This proved to be an excellent material. By using commercial cake icing (which became rock-hard when dry) and decorative rose patterns we were able to form hundreds of individual flowers. The icing is easy to handle and nontoxic, but we needed to consider the level of relative humidity to ensure that the roses hardened properly, rather than soaking up moisture from the air. This often dictated when the roses were made, since those piped in the evening were often better and dried more quickly.

To facilitate the firing process each rose was secured to a small plastic cup used as the pottle to act as the sprue (in the mould) for the rose. About 40 to 50 roses were then invested collectively within an adjustable box frame. The investing process is simple but requires a couple of important steps. First, the pottle and rose must be stuck to a sheet of glass by molten wax inside the box frame. This holds them enough to ensure the investment mix doesn't knock them off their perch. The investment is a standard Plaster of Paris-style mix (by weight of 1 part water : 1 part plaster : 1 part silica). Slight adjustments can be made to ensure a good pouring consistency. The roses are covered by approximately 1 cm of

plaster that is poured in two stages. During the initial pour, a small amount of plaster is poured around all the pottles and allowed to firm up. This secures all the pottles so they don't float. The second pour covers the roses to approximately 1 cm above the tallest one. Once the block of plaster has set, the box can be removed, and the removal of the icing forms can commence. The pottles are removed first by prising them out with a knife. Depending on the type of plastic used for the pottles, they can be reuse several times if removed intact. Removing the icing requires patience, dental tools, and lots of water. The bulk of the icing is removed by carefully prying, the edges may require repeated flushing with water before carefully blowing the moulds with a compressed air duster. Once clean, the investment blocks can be loaded with glass for firing.

The frit is first washed to remove any fine particles and then packed into the pottle area of the moulds. Make sure there is about 15% more glass than required, to provide the extra weight that helps force the glass into the narrow cavities of the rose petals. We use Gaffer casting crystal. The moulds are ramped up at 50° C / hr to 600° C where they are held for three hours to ensure all traces of icing are removed from the mould before climbing to the processing temperature of 830° C. The fired roses are unmounted easily. To finish them, we saw off the sprue, sandblast them, and then polish them in a sugar-acid solution.

Although the hand-forming of the icing roses is a laborious process, it produces the right results for us. We could very easily create silicone rubber moulds with some variations but the end result would not be about hand-making the pieces, and the work loses the originality we seek. Creating a variation on the lost-wax process, by royal icing, was our locally inspired way of problem solving to get the results we wanted. For a more comprehensive description of the technical aspects, please refer to our website or email us.

JIM DENNISON AND LEANNE WILLIAMS (www.crystalchaingang.co.nz; dennwill@xtra.co.nz) have been collaborating on glass sculptures since 2003. Their work has been included in all the major New Zealand glass exhibitions, particularly *Southern Exposure* (2003) and the *Glass Invitational 2005*. They were included in *New Glass Review 25* and were feature artists representing New Zealand at the 2005 American Glass Conference in Adelaide. They are Fulbright Scholarship and Creative New Zealand award recipients, and were fellows at the Creative Glass Center of America in Wheaton Village (2007). Both artists, aka The Crystal Chain Gang, live in Martinborough, New Zealand, where they work and teach glass in their studio.