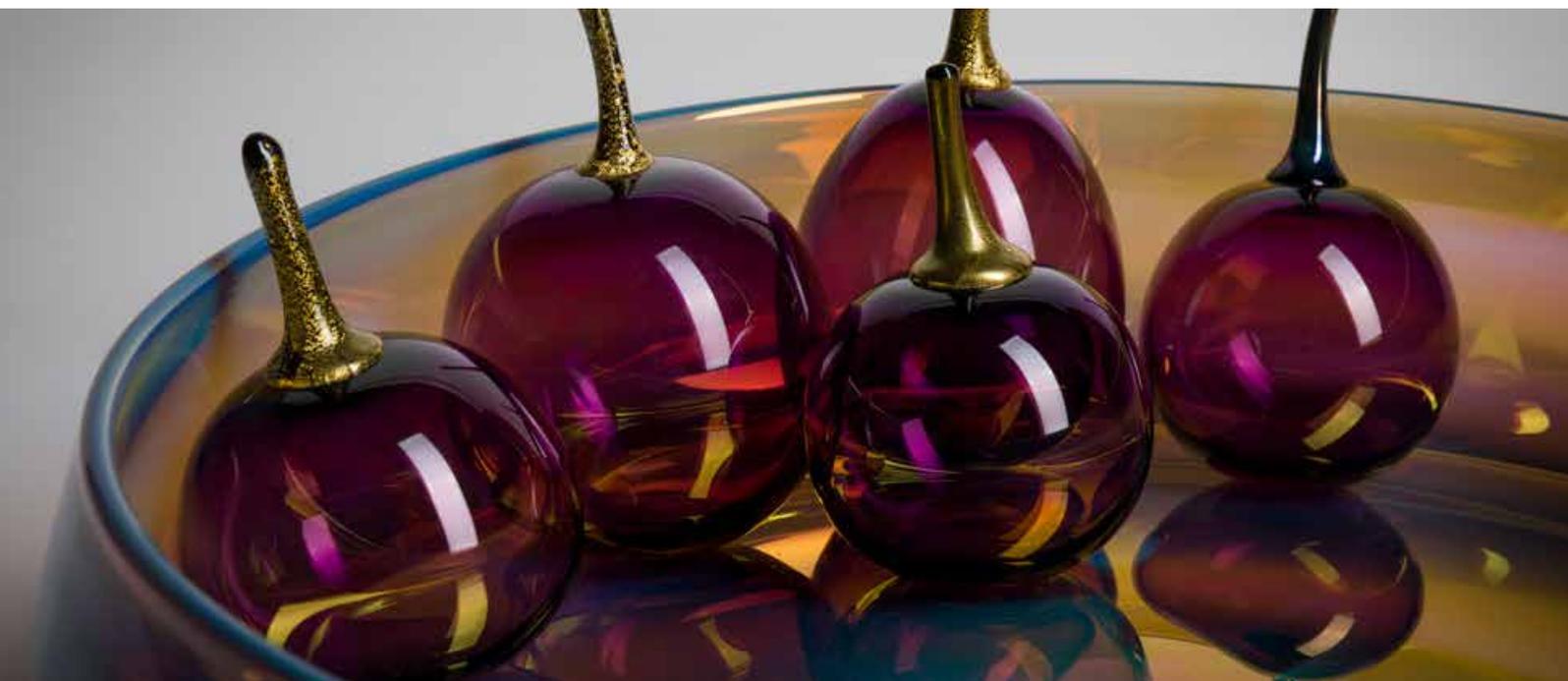




NEIL WILKIN & RACHAEL WOODMAN





Neil Wilkin, *Colour Catcher – green & yellow* (detail), 2019

cover, top: Neil Wilkin, *Colour Catcher – yellow & orange* (detail), 2022. bottom: Rachael Woodman, *Fruit Bowl – purple lustre* (detail), 2022



Neil Wilkin, *Colour Catcher – orange*, 2022

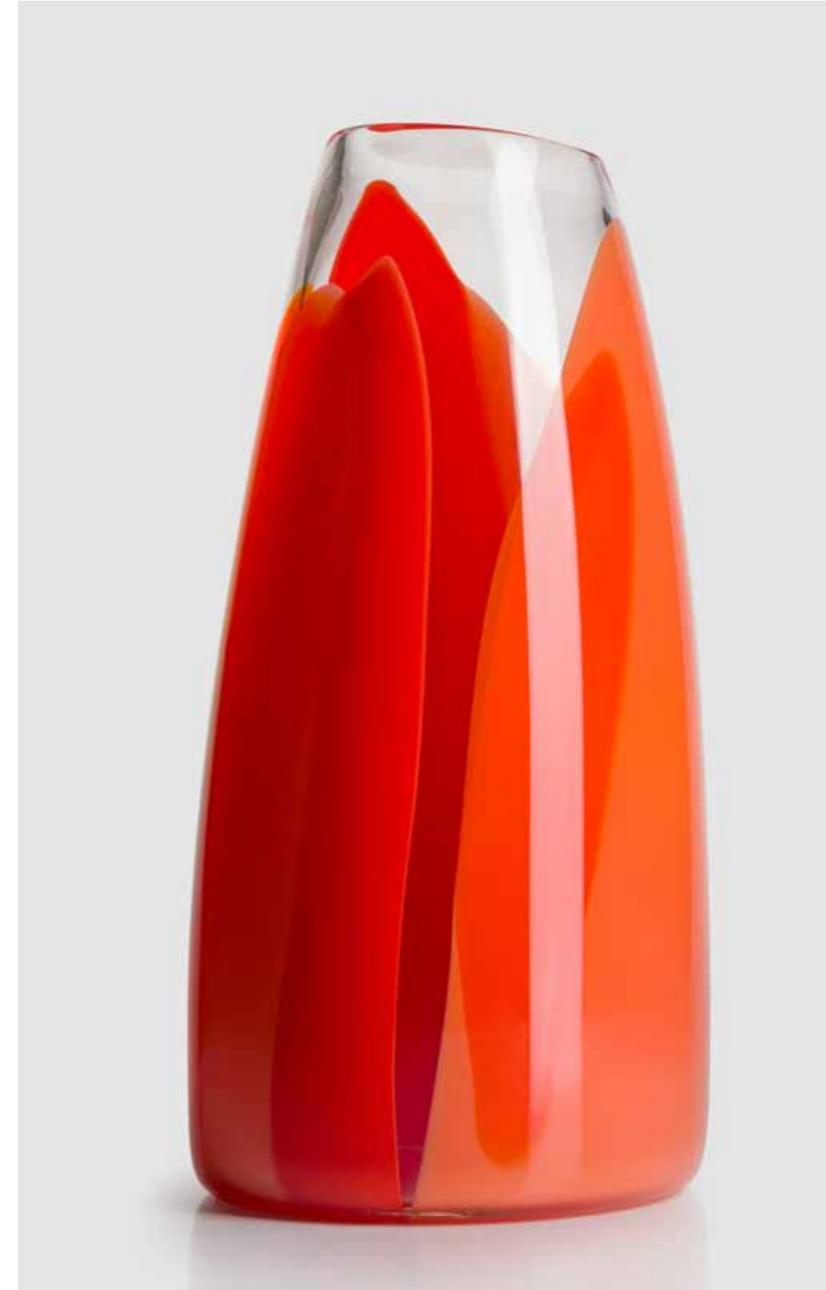
Introduction

Cynhaeaf: Casglu Ffrwythau / Harvest: Fruit Gathering presents the work of two outstanding and distinctive glassmakers, Neil Wilkin and Rachael Woodman. In nearly forty years of collaborating, this is their first opportunity to exhibit together. The glass presented here builds on earlier work, revisiting themes and ideas that have emerged over the decades; most of it has never been publicly seen, nor has either artist had the opportunity to present such a comprehensive body of work before.

They first met in the late 1970s as students on the BA Glass course at North Staffordshire Polytechnic in Stoke-on-Trent (now Staffordshire University), cementing their friendship in 1983 on Jersey as assistants at a summer glass-making facility run by respected glassmaker, Charlie Meaker (1946–2011). In 1984 they set up their own workshop in Bath, initially forming a business partnership that evolved to become a long standing and unique working relationship. Wilkin has blown Woodman's glass ever since, while in turn, Woodman has been his creative mentor, encouraging explorations of colour and form. Many studios in numerous locations have come and gone yet their mutual respect for each other's work and synchronised steps in front of the furnace have endured.



Neil Wilkin, *Chameleon Bowl*, 2022



Neil Wilkin, *Double Orange Vase*, 2022

Neil Wilkin

"It's a respect for material. I don't try to master it. I'm seeking a balance between control and freedom."

From the outset, Wilkin has worked independently on pieces as well as collaboratively with artists and designers. This capacity to cooperate has honed his skills. Each artist has distinct ambitions for their work and he needs to be prepared for multiple demands on his abilities and capacity. The 1990s became a proving ground, seeing him work extensively with a range of artists and designers from the UK and abroad. He provided each with a blank canvas through which they could realise their visions, pushing his and their boundaries of what was possible in glass. Embracing these skills in his own work saw early experiments in bold colours, fluid forms and the use of stainless steel, culminating in the dramatic flower heads and asymmetrical bowls in the exhibition.

Informed by plants and geological processes, underlying rock and environmental action, soil and microbes, flora and fauna, he draws on a rich source of inspiration. A passion for trees and permaculture, gardens of fruits, flowers and vegetables, nourish his ideas. Working with glassmaking teams, with artists, with engineers, enables him to achieve far more than as a solo practitioner, reflecting a long tradition in Western art to realise ambitious pieces through collective endeavour.



Neil Wilkin, *Large Orange Oval Bowl*, 2021



Neil Wilkin, *Orange & Primrose Oval Bowl*, 2022



NEIL WILKIN & RACHAEL WOODMAN

Cynhaeaf: Casglu Ffrwythau / Harvest: Fruit Gathering

The work of Neil Wilkin and Rachael Woodman is about love – of materials; of process; of natural and spiritual worlds. As makers they have committed their lives to a pursuit of perfection in form and colour, harnessing the unique optical and physical qualities of glass. Almost forty years since initiating their collaborative venture in Bath in 1984, *Cynhaeaf: Casglu Ffrwythau / Harvest: Fruit Gathering* is their first opportunity to present their distinctive bodies of work together.

During four decades, Wilkin has focused on blowing forms to his own designs and those of others whilst Woodman has

focused on design and being fully involved as part of the glass blowing team. Studio glass making has been described by many as a choreographed dance where each performer must know their steps; seeing them work together is to witness their intuitive understanding of what each needs at any given moment, a look or a nod enough to determine the progress of each piece. Coordinated timing is crucial in bringing any glass object into being. Despite the apparent need for speed (malleability is counted in seconds rather than minutes), blowing requires gentleness, coaxing the material to take form, only occasionally needing to be firm

while making full use of gravity in the way hot glass flows. The dance with colour is often wayward, behaving differently when heat is applied or when it meets a different hue, generating a constant flux between pliability and rigidity. Managing this tension has become Wilkin's and Woodman's watchword; each maker has developed a distinct vocabulary of colours and a set of forms they instinctively return to.

Wilkin is driven by nature's abundance, producing exuberant forms in bold colours that draw the eye, while Woodman's has been a more spiritual journey, influenced by her Christian faith

in an exploration of what it means to be human in the presence of the divine. The exhibition embraces these concepts with areas of bold forms and colours contrasting Wilkin's *Sun Catchers* and asymmetrical bowls with Woodman's quieter, more contemplative pieces, where viewers are invited to consider groupings such as *Offering* and *Safe Within*. Philip Hughes, Director of Ruthin Crafts Centre described their creative relationship as: "Two distinctly different voices yet singing in harmony."

Wilkin began working on a larger scale in 2002 when he was invited to exhibit in the Westonbirt International Festival of Gardens at The National Arboretum in Gloucestershire where he created a large installation of *Sun Catchers*, forming an avenue of glass and stainless steel. He is not fazed by challenge regularly pushing boundaries and expectations of himself and others, recently embracing design technology and virtual reality to share his ideas with clients, hiring larger studios and more makers, such as Devereux and Huskie in Hillperton, when the need arises. It is this capacity for challenge that underpins Wilkin's parallel journey as a maker of work for others. It is a collaborative process with another creative person, a symbiotic relationship to bring an idea to fruition, while enabling it to speak in that artist's unique voice.

Woodman continues to be his most regular collaborator. An experienced glassmaker who followed her undergraduate years at Stoke on Trent, where Wilkin also studied, with a year at the Orrefors Glass School in Sweden, where she honed her hot and cold working skills before embarking on a Masters Degree at the Royal College of Art in London, she has a deep understanding of how glass behaves. Winning the RSA Dartington Glass Award during her final year at the RCA enabled her to work directly with glassmakers on the factory floor in north Devon, directing their actions to realise her ideas, a skill she simultaneously developed in her collaborations with Wilkin who has been her principal glass blower throughout. She describes it as a cyclical process where ideas begin with drawings which are then developed at the furnace followed by more drawing and more making to refine the pieces. Once the glass has been blown and carefully cooled, Woodman begins a second collaboration with master cold worker¹, Steve Frey. Through her direction he cuts, grinds and polishes each element, shaping it to reveal the inherent qualities she wants to present, whether smooth or patterned, shiny or sandblasted, adding further depth to her palette.

For Wilkin and Woodman, this exhibition is more than a long overdue opportunity to show what they have done and continue to do, it is also a call to arms for the craft. Many of the techniques and skills demonstrated in the exhibition are at risk of being lost. The sheer joy of working hot glass and collaborating with others is becoming more difficult for today's students and emerging practitioners as courses close and pressures mount to find climate friendly alternatives for gas to fuel furnaces. A subject dear to his heart, Wilkin has spent a life time striving to reduce his carbon footprint. Discussions with industrial equipment manufacturers producing electric glass furnaces in response to climate change, is driving innovation for small scale studio producers that will enable him to continue making astonishing objects of his own design and that of others, long into the future.

Sara Bowler,
Artist and lapsed glassmaker

¹ A specialist versed in processes applied to glass once it has completely cooled.

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Rachael Woodman, *Gathering: Joyful Assembly*, 2020



Rachael Woodman, *Watchmen – blue, green, grey*, 2022

Rachael Woodman

“I dream in glass, and whatever the dream, this material is rich and versatile enough to give it form”.

Woodman has successfully combined a career as a designer for the glass industry with her personal explorations of this extraordinary material. Working as principal designer at Dartington Glass throughout the 1980s and ‘90s, cultivated her command of design in tandem with her ability to collaborate with glassblowers to realise the forms she has conceived. First-hand knowledge of how the material behaves and the need to be present during the blowing process enables her to directly influence how each piece evolves.

Where Wilkin’s inspiration is taken directly from the natural world, Woodman’s is a more internal, spiritual journey. Drawing on her love of glass and its extraordinary qualities, and influenced by her Christian faith, she explores concepts of what it means to be human in the presence of the divine, producing contemplative works that invite the viewer to spend time with them. Her titles reflect the dreams that influence the work – *Offering*; *Watchmen*; *Safe Within* – words alluding to themes of being held, safely, on life’s journeys. The collections of small, intimate objects within a larger form are carefully considered; each piece reflects the uniqueness of individuals, bound by a presence larger than themselves.



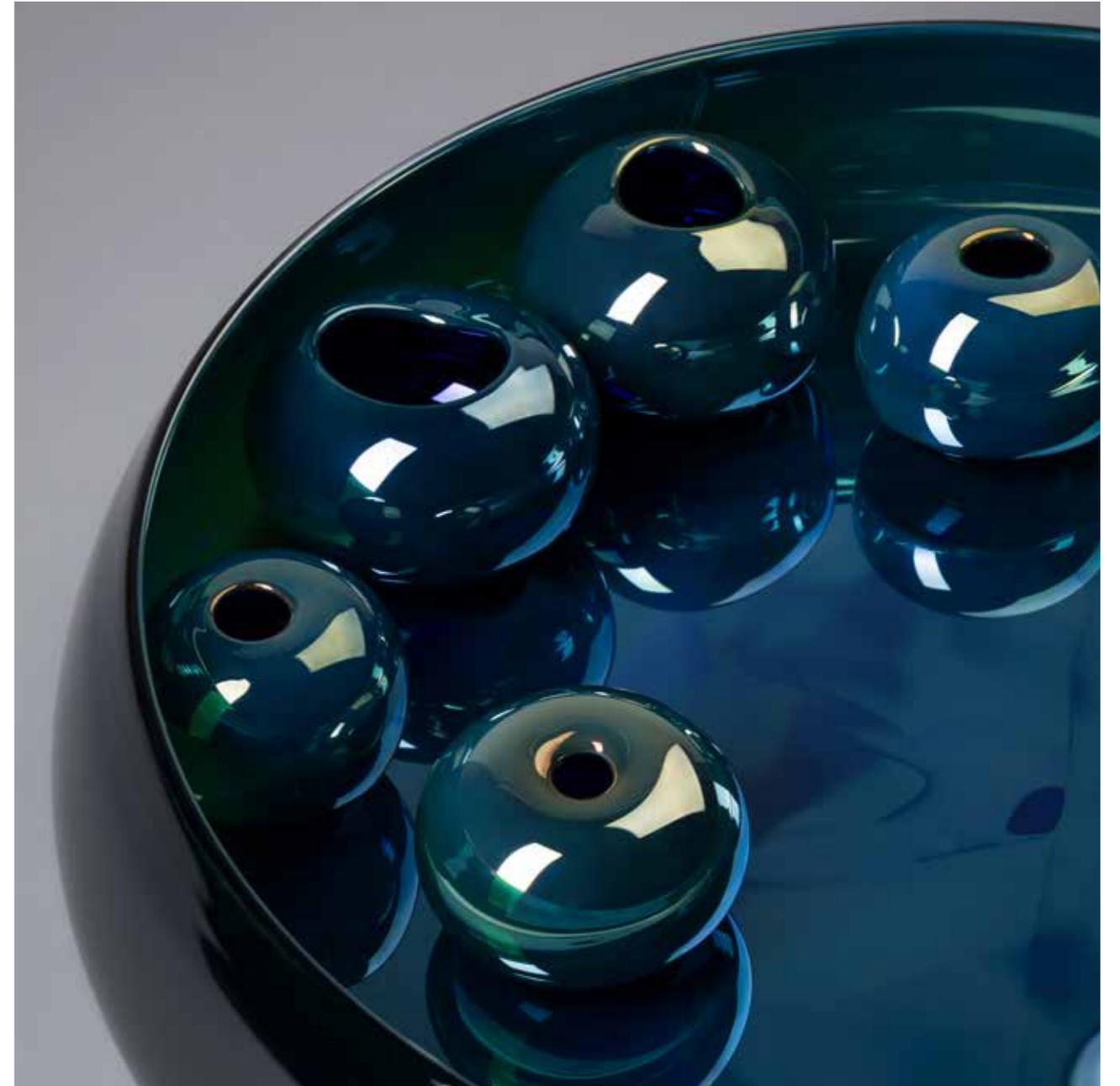
Rachael Woodman, *Fruit Bowl – black lustre with dark fruits*, 2022



Rachael Woodman, *Ghost Offering*, 2022



Rachael Woodman, *Fruit Bowl* – red lustre with clear & orange fruits, 2022



Rachael Woodman, *Fruit Bowl* – silver-blue lustre, 2022

back cover, top: Neil Wilkin, *Chameleon Bowl* (detail), 2022. bottom: Rachael Woodman, *Gathering: Joyful Assembly* (detail), 2020

