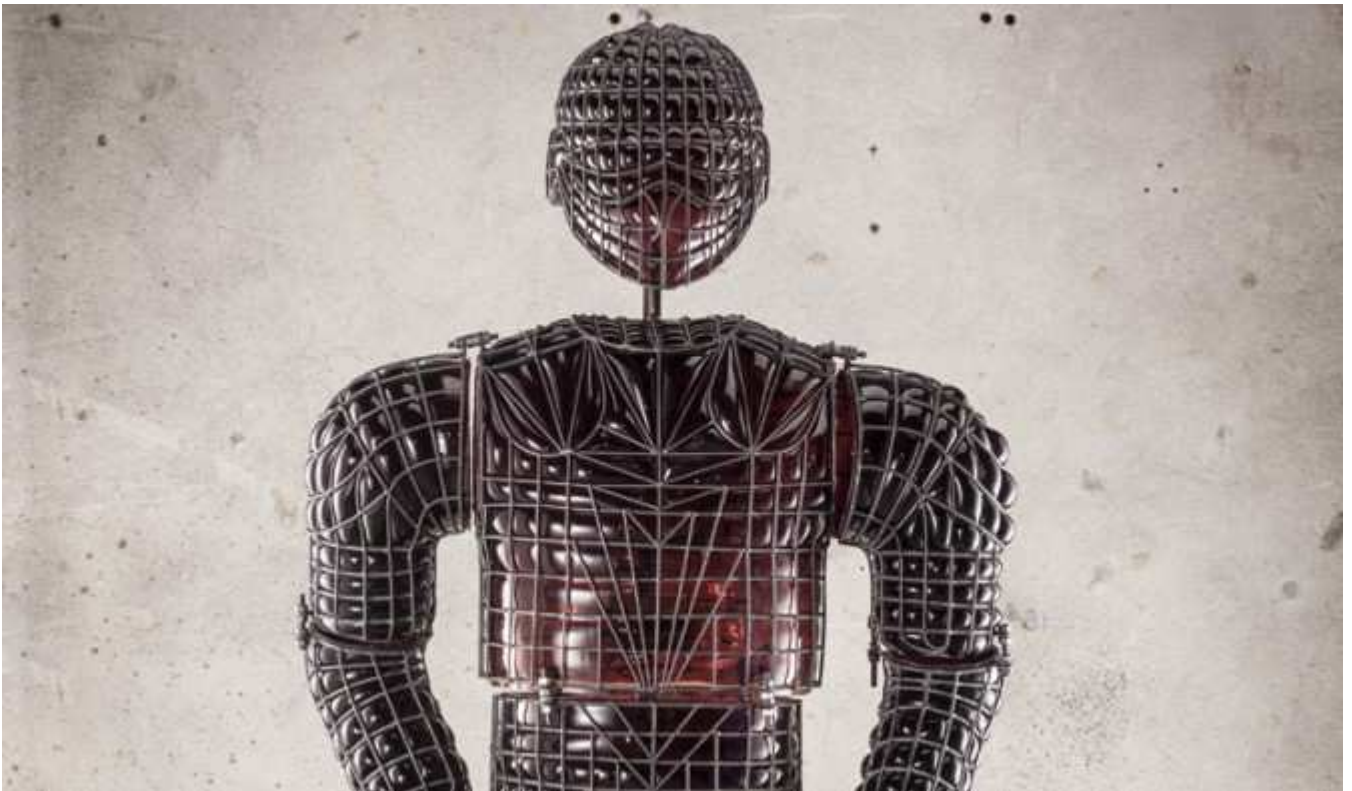


May 26, 2015

## Penny Byrne's knight of glass

Naima Morelli talks to Melbourne artist Penny Byrne about her work in *Glasstress*, an official Venice Biennale satellite exhibition



Penny Byrne, *Hurt Locker* (detail), 2015, Photo: Francesco Allegretto

Melbourne artist **Penny Byrne** is well known for altering and re-contextualising mass-produced porcelain figurines. Her work is characterised by a striking mix of satire and humour. It often confronts political issues, international upheavals and delves into popular culture. Byrne's training as a specialist ceramics conservator informs her craft.

Recently, Byrne has started experimenting with new materials. The chance to work with glass came about when she was invited to take part in the exhibition *Glasstress 2015: Gotika* at Palazzo Franchetti in Venice, an official Venice Biennale satellite event. The exhibition explores the Gothic aesthetic which permeates contemporary society, and the idea that this sensibility develops from feelings of uncertainty driven by conflict and environmental issues.

Responding to this curatorial brief, Byrne studied ancient armour at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. She flew three times to Italy to work closely with local glass artisans. The result is an impressive suit of armour made of glass. With this work, Byrne questions the perception of policemen in

current society and identifies them as modern day knights. Naima Morelli met with Byrne in Venice to discuss this new direction in her work.

### **How did this show in Venice come about?**

A year ago I got this random message on Facebook from a certain Dimitri Ozerkov asking if I wanted to be in an exhibition at the Venice Biennale. I didn't know who this person was and it seemed too good to be true. But then I googled him and I found out he was real. He asked me if I was interested in making an artwork in glass and working with the glass masters in Berengo Studio in Murano. I'd recently had experience working in a team to realise a larger scale work, so I was comfortable in saying yes. I immediately knew I wanted to do a suit of armour for the show. Interestingly the curator had the exact same idea in mind.



Penny Byrne, *Hurt Locker* (detail), 2015, Murano glass Photo: Francesco Allegretto

### **How was the experience of working with glass artisans in Murano?**

It was great. In terms of technique, I was inspired by the ancient Venetian streetlights, which consist of a wire frame into which they blow glass. I made the wirework in Australia and sent it to Venice. The maestro I worked with was called Silvano, a lovely guy. He used to be a heavyweight boxing champion, and his physical strength came in handy in realising the piece. Technically it was difficult to do. The first time everything cracked and we had to start again. We changed technique and we tried different things. Silvano was very determined; he kept on saying: "They'll not beat us! We will make this work!" – and in the end we did.

### **Where did the idea of a suit of armour come from?**

Initially the work was going to be literally a Gothic suit of armour, like the ones I saw at the Victoria & Albert Museum. But then, when the Charlie Hebdo massacre happened, there was that image of the policeman being shot by the terrorist. That image resonated with me to the point that I decided to portray the policeman as a modern-day knight. I see the Special Forces today as knights from the Gothic times. They are the ones wearing the armour, protecting us against terrorism and fighting wars for us.



Penny Byrne, *Hurt Locker*, 2015, Photo: Francesco Allegretto

**It is interesting, the contrast between the fragility of the glass and the strength of a knight.**

Absolutely. Often when we see police all in a row they look anonymous. It's hard to think there is a person under there. And they are often aggressive, brutal and trained to do what they are told. But after Charlie Hebdo there was an interesting shift in the way we see police. Particularly when you are protesting, you don't want the police there. The flip side of that is you do want them to protect you. And it's then that you start to see that there are humans underneath.

**Political content and social satire are always present in your work. Where does this stem from?**

I guess I have always been quite political in my view of the world. Before I became an artist I studied law and I have always been interested in human rights, social justice, the environment. My mother has always been engaged and my father was the Major of Mildura, my hometown. I had a political upbringing, and that comes through in my artwork.



Penny Byrne with her glass sculpture. Photo: Naima Morelli

### **What are your impressions of this year's Venice Biennale?**

It is exciting to be in *Glasstress* together with so many great artists and to get to meet them. The Biennale is such a big deal, but interestingly it feels like the right thing to do. If it was even two or three years ago I wouldn't have been ready for it, but as it is I just am. The Australian Pavilion is fabulous, it was so exciting to be there and to meet Fiona Hall. We had this big photo of all the Australian artists and I had to pinch myself to see if it was really happening. And I did! Look at the bruise! So I keep looking at this bruise and I say yes, it is real.

*Glasstress 2015: Gotika* is showing at *Instituto Veneto di Scienze Lettere e Arti, Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti, Campo Santo Stefano 2847, Venice until 22 November 2015. Participating artists include Penny Byrne, Jake & Dinos Chapman, Tony Cragg, Mat Collishaw, Wim Delvoye, Olafur Eliasson, Erwin Wurm.*