

# craft arts

I N T E R N A T I O N A L



**GLASS BY GALIA AMSEL, WOOD BY ANDI WOLFE,  
CERAMICS BY SHIGEKAZU NAGAE, BARK PAINTING BY  
JOHN MAWURNDJUL, TEXTILES BY PTOLEMY MANN,  
STEEL SCULPTURE BY MICHAEL LE GRAND**

**83**



'Southern Spring', 2004, cast rhubarb glass, polished with sandblasted relief, diam. 60 x 10 cm



'West Coast Surf 17', 2008, cast emerald and pale jade Gaffer glass, sandblasted, acid etched and polished, 77 x 54 x 17 cm

## Departure Points

### ABSTRACT GLASS SCULPTURE BY GALIA AMSEL

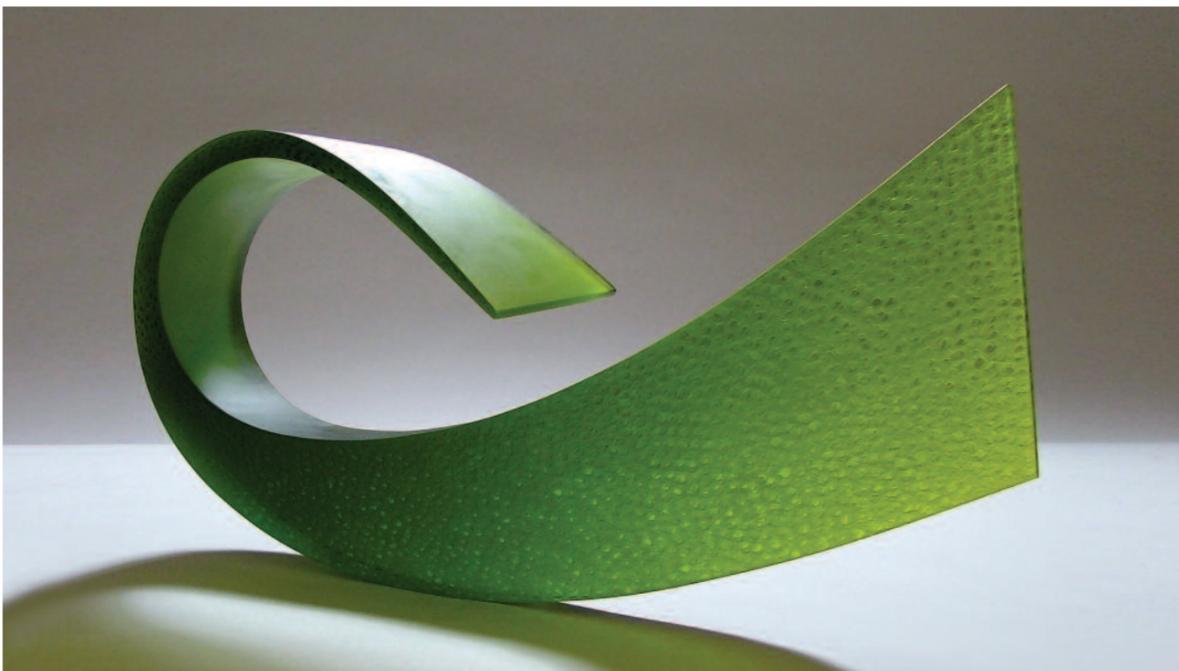
The current work of Galia Amsel's combines the formal traditions of her established practice with new conceptual concerns which provide considerable scope for future exploration and development. Text by Lucy Hammonds.

**I**N 2003 British glass artist Galia Amsel transported her studio and family from South London to the rural fringes of West Auckland, New Zealand. Like Amsel's work itself, the move was a bold one; completely recontextualising her practice on little more than a passing knowledge of New Zealand gleaned from conversations with fellow artist Ann Robinson – and the promise of adventure for her family.

Amsel arrived in New Zealand with a well-established practice. Her training at Middlesex Polytechnic and later the Royal College of Art had made way for an active

exhibiting career in England, Europe and the US and she had developed a strong formal language based on geometry, tension and control of her medium. Amsel's work immediately found a unique position within the context of New Zealand glass – her dramatic and precise curving and architectural forms provided a contrast to much of what was being produced in New Zealand at the time.

Unsurprisingly, the relocation to New Zealand had a major impact on Amsel's work. Where her interest in tension and the dynamic between surface and internal space had taken earlier work towards an industrial aesthetic, Amsel's



'Emerge', 2005, cast olive green glass, polished with sandblasted relief, 40 x 75 x 12 cm



'Sundowner 12', 2006, cast amber and clear Bullseye glass, polished with handsmoothed finish, 60 x 54 x 15 cm

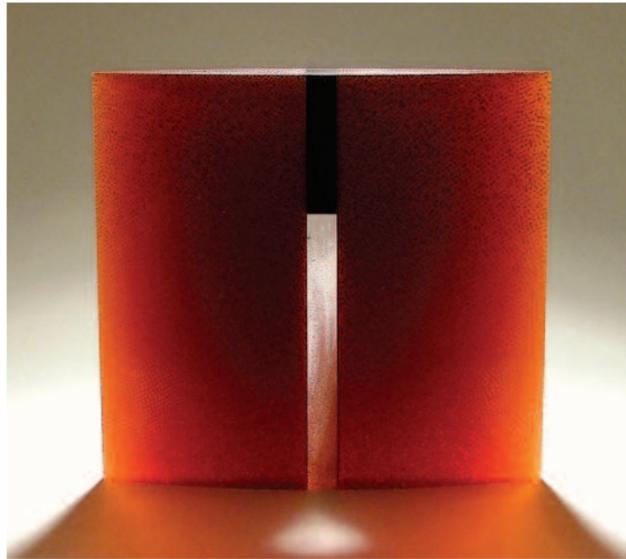
New Zealand works adopted a more poetic, atmospheric approach. Her new environment was translated into a language of new rhythms, patterns and colours as well as surface and light effects, often incorporated into the large, circular forms that reoccur throughout Amsel's practice. Pieces such as *Southern Spring* and the series *West Coast Surf* took direct cues from the New Zealand context, with a sense of the artist revelling in her new experiences clearly evident.

Fast-forward to 2011 and Amsel's initially observational approach is gradually making way for a more complex body of work. Whereas her initial New Zealand series might be seen as the result of processing the changes in her life and environment, her focus is now moving beyond this, becoming more multifaceted in the interaction of form, medium and concept. Her earlier interests in structural and architectural tension have again come to the fore – still drawing on her new vocabulary of colour and pattern, but extending this into works that offer significant challenge to the artist.

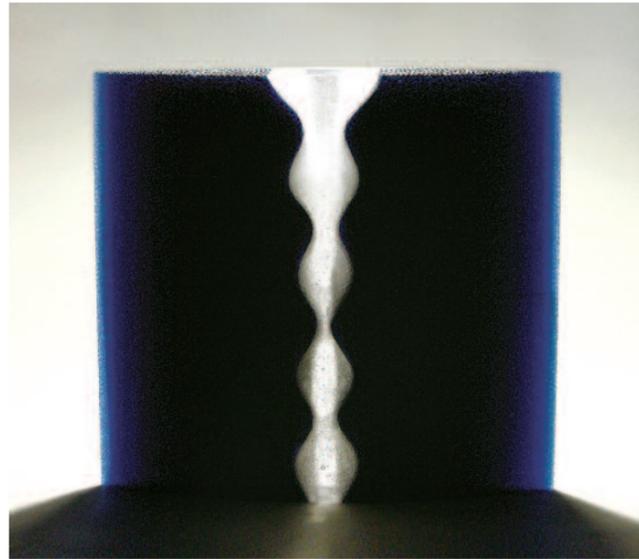
This new phase of Amsel's work has been in development for several years. In 2009, now a New Zealand resident, Amsel successfully applied to Creative New Zealand for funding support towards the development of a new body

of work. Reflecting the conceptual underpinning of this new series, her proposal outlined a research and development program which explored notions of connection, separation, similarity and difference – all relating to her interest in the trajectory and sway of the British Empire. This starting point stemmed from Amsel's experiences as a migrant, both in New Zealand as an adult and from childhood years spent living in Hong Kong. Unfortunately this course of research was almost immediately interrupted by the death of Amsel's husband – also a major contributor to her workshop – leaving her to reformulate both the direction and nature of her working practice.

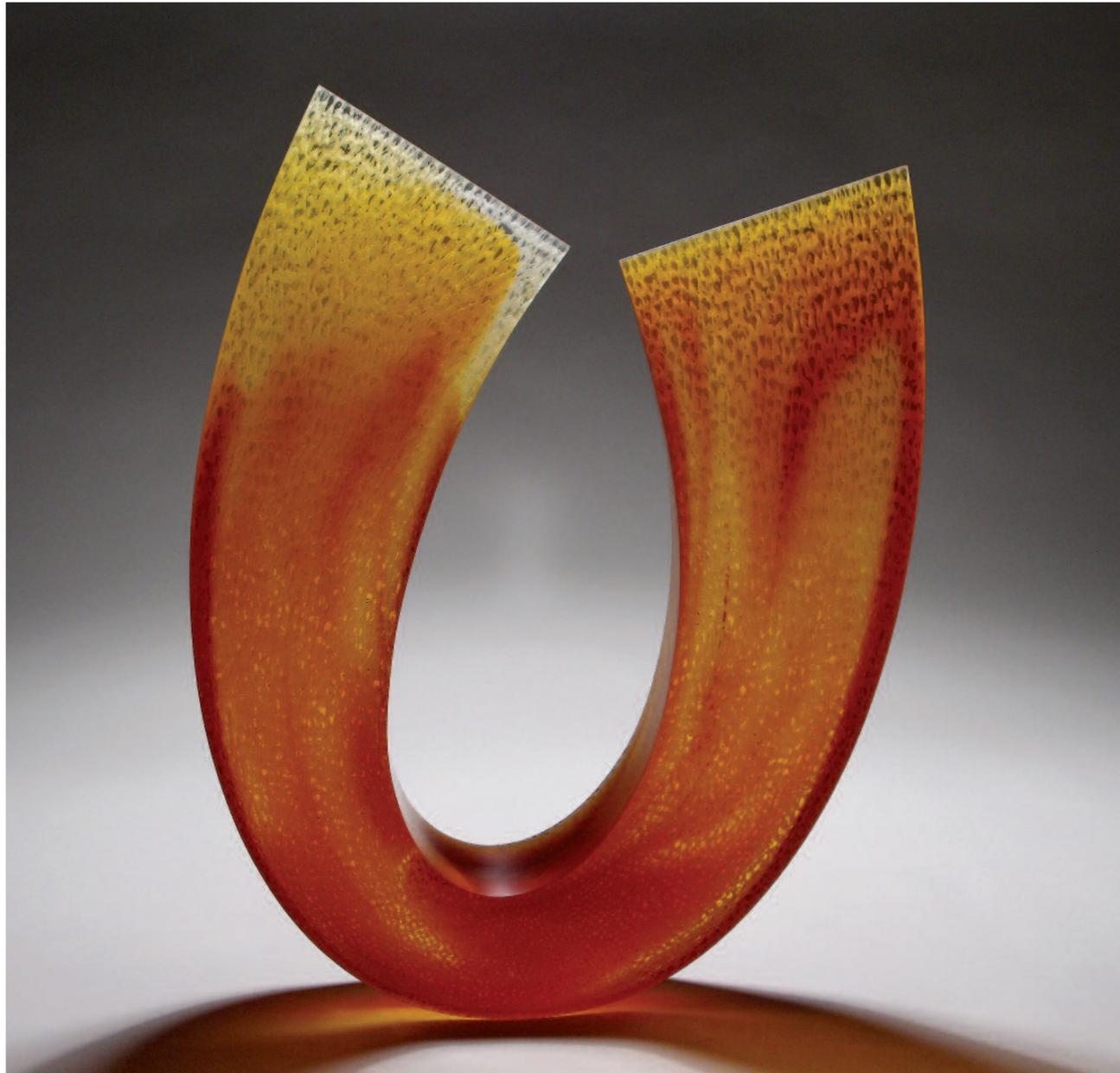
Despite facing such a profound hurdle, over time Amsel persevered with her research program, realising that the ideas that had driven her initial proposal still continued to feed into her thinking. Working through her ideas, she realised that the legacies of the British Empire that had provided an initial inspiration – elements such as the transmission of language and shared and/or disconnected symbolism – remained a relevant point of departure for her newest body of work. As an abstract artist, she resists inserting literal reference points, instead progressing her ideas through sculptural form. Recent works such as *Blew* (2011) and the series *Blossom* and *Inner Spirit* (2010) see



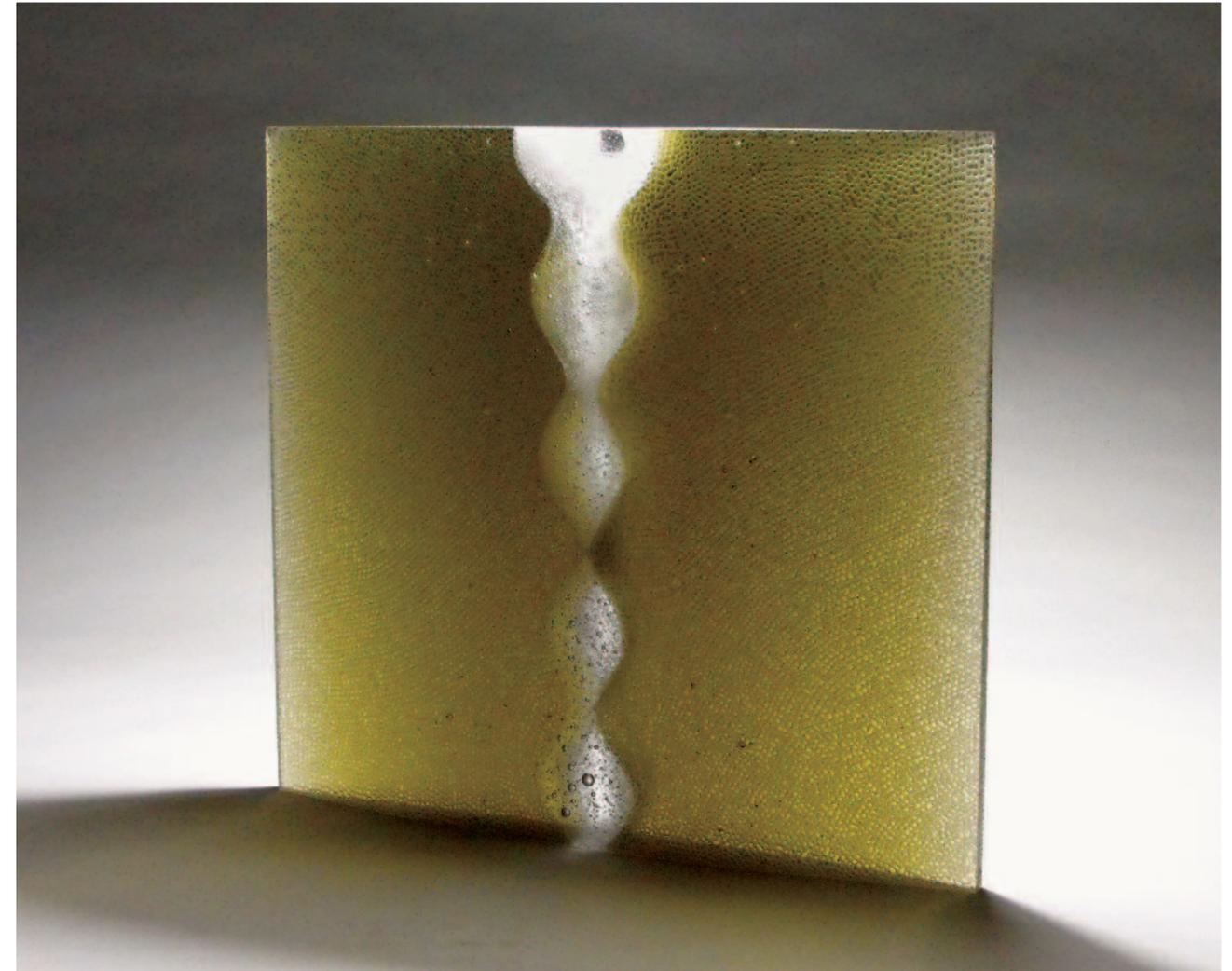
'Passage 13', 2008, cast Bullseye burnt scarlet, light grey, clear and rhabarb glass, sandblasted texture and polished, 34.2 x 39 x 6.3 cm



'Inner Spirit 2', 2010, cast Bullseye blue and clear glass, sandblasted texture, acid etched and polished, 34.5 x 38 x 5.5 cm



'Blossom 5', 2008, cast Gaffer yellow and amber glass, sandblasted, acid etched, handsmoothed and polished, 49 x 36.5 x 8 cm



'Inner Spirit', 2010, cast Bullseye olive and clear glass, sandblasted and acid etched texture, polished, 38 x 34 x 5.8 cm

her explore connection and separation in different ways, maintaining continuity with earlier works while pushing forward into new and challenging territory.

*Blew* is one of the first works in a series that extends the dramatic curves of Amsel's signature works. Whereas her earlier works, such as *Emerge* or the *Spring* series, operated around the sense of the frozen moment, *Blew* instead hinges on maintaining a sense of movement. Rather than following the same curve, the two planes of the form simultaneously move toward and retreat from the viewer. In moving around the piece this undulating form becomes more evident, creating a sense of tension between sweeping curve and twisting plane. Her intention is to further explore these ideas of movement through manipulating colour and density via the flow of glass during the firing process. Amsel's early experiments have worked around using colour as a means of creating space and mass; harnessing these qualities as a means of amplifying the sense of motion captured within the form. Although still very much in development in this series, Amsel's interest in the properties and possibilities of glass reflect the engagement with this medium that has characterised her work over the duration of her career.

Although they bear a close connection to earlier forms, *Blew*, and the preceding *Blossom* series, signal a shift in Amsel's working process. The precision planning of her circle and curve forms, which have been generally resolved

'Blew', 2011, cast Gaffer blue and clear glass, sandblasted, acid etched, handsmoothed and polished, 52 x 38 x 8 cm





'Blossom 6', 2011, cast Gaffer gold ruby and pink glass, sandblasted, acid etched and polished, 43 x 36.5 x 8.5 cm



'Fresh', 2011, cast Gaffer emerald green and clear glass, sandblasted and acid etched texture, handsmoothed and polished, 38 x 53 x 8 cm



'Sinew', 2010, cast gaffer rubarb and clear glass, sandblasted and acid etched texture, handsmoothed and polished, 67 x 46 x 10 cm

prior to firing, has made way for more of a process of evolution. In keeping with the increasing fluidity of these shapes, significant decisions about the final forms are kept until the cold-working phase – drawing on a more reductive sculpting process which allows greater scope for forms to be altered and manipulated to meet Amsel's vision. It is a shift that has undoubtedly made the works more labour intensive, yet as she describes: 'It has been quite liberating to be working in a more spontaneous way, and allowing the meaning behind the piece dictate the process.'

The second series to emerge over the past year, titled *Inner Spirit*, sees Amsel utilising the contrast between solid and fluid that is inherent to glass. Conceptually the series was motivated by an interest in exploring the relationship between spiritual and physical, drawing on the conflicting properties of glass as a metaphor for the tangible and intangible. Formally the works capture the tension between these two ideas, with the light and ephemeral movement at the centre of the piece resisting against or rising through a dark, physical mass of glass. In one of the earliest of this series, *Inner Spirit 2* (2010), she harnesses the pressure between light and dark, hard and soft, mass and space – not overstating her motivation, but instead creating a meditative space for her ideas.

The *Inner Spirit* works have developed out of Amsel's ongoing series of abstract, architectural forms – series such as *View* and *Passage* – in which she skillfully controls the properties of the material to her own end. This thread of Amsel's practice has been challenging both to artist and audience, moving away from the high drama of colour-filled sweeping curves and instead offering a more restricted exploration of medium and form. These are pieces that reward the viewer however, with the effect of a sharp slice of light cutting through a patterned, opaque surface succinctly capturing the language of glass in way few artists have been able to achieve. With *Inner Spirit* Amsel begins to bring together the two key threads of her practice – the combination of fluid curves and restricted geometry – offering a starting point for a new direction in her work.

Since arriving in New Zealand, Amsel has become an important artist within the national context. Her austere approach and technical virtuosity have made a valuable contribution to the select group of New Zealand artists working on an international level, while at the same time setting a benchmark for emerging artists as to the possibilities of the medium. From a viewer's perspective, Amsel's developing practice has provided an engaging sense of her own journey, charting the process of migration that New Zealand is largely founded upon. The colours, patterns and rhythms of early work offered an insight into the excitement and sometimes overwhelming sensation of discovering a new home, culture and environment. More recent changes in her works move beyond this first flush of discovery. Instead Galia Amsel's current series offer a more complex view; combining the formal traditions of her practice with new conceptual concerns, which together provide considerable scope for future development.

#### Lucy Hammonds

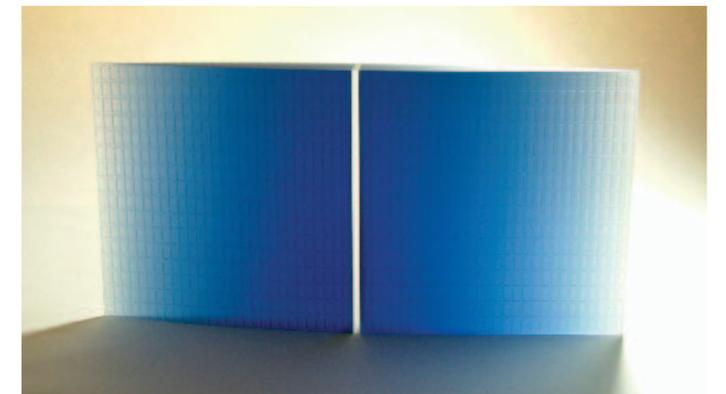
Lucy Hammonds is the Curator of Design Collections at the Hawke's Bay Museum and Art Gallery, Napier, New Zealand.

Galia Amsel is represented in Australia by Sabbia Gallery, Sydney. Her next exhibition at Sabbia Gallery will be held in June, 2012.

Michael Taylor, the artist's husband working on a piece that was subsequently called 'Last Autumn'. He died suddenly in May, 2009. Michael made a massive contribution to Galia Amsel's life and work for more than 16 years. He is hugely loved and missed.



'Blossom 4', 2011, cast Gaffer gold amethyst hyacinth and lilac glass, sandblasted texture, acid etched and polished, 42 x 34.5 x 8 cm



'View 9', 2006, cast steel blue and clear glass, sandblasted, 34.2 x 58.5 x 5 cm

