

He's hoping his work won't be a smash

Louise Schwartzkoff
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IN THE old days Venetian glassmakers would kill any foreigner who discovered their secrets. This was not a comforting thought for the young Australian glassblower Andrew Lavery when he set off to learn from the Italian masters.

"The Venetians were paranoid I was a glassmaker from a rival factory who was going to nick off with their ideas," he says. "I had to offer them money before they let me in, and when I arrived they interrogated me. Who are you? Where do you work? What do you want?"

He wanted to learn the techniques that would transform him from a craftsman into an artist. Eventually he won their trust and is showing his skills in Sydney at his solo exhibition, *Another Day*.

It is not a show for those with a liking for coloured vases and decorative glass butterflies. Lavery has moulded his fragile medium into transparent skateboards and mutated Coca-Cola bottles.

In *Coat of Arms* he takes a sly jab at Australian blokes by transforming several long-neck beer bottles into brains and a football.

"As a craftsman, your work has to be pretty and functional," he says. "I've received quite a bit of acclaim for making things like that, but I wanted to break the mould. In this show I'm not so concerned about the way things look. I'm manipulating the glass to reveal its symbolic meaning."

Lavery has been honing his craft since high school, when a glassmaker visited his school, and he has never lost his fascination with its "remarkable expressive range."

"Glass is transparent and it carries light," he says. "It locks out atmosphere and it's fragile. It's everywhere around us. When you look at it, it's almost as if it doesn't exist. So there are some great metaphors you can explore when you use glass."

The other advantage of glass is that it sells. In an Australia Council survey into the financial circumstances of Australian artists, glass sculptors were ranked among the top earners. Lavery's



Brainy ... Andrew Lavery's *Coat of Arms* takes a sly jab at Australian blokes.

Photo: Marco del Grande

work sells for up to \$6000 a pop.

"People are always looking for beautiful glass," he says. "But of course there's a fair bit of skill involved. You need to have your concentration in place. It's a physical process because you need to understand your machinery."

Despite his expertise, Lavery is all too familiar with the sound of breaking glass. He spent hours shaping and polishing the skateboards for his exhibition, but as he was bolting one of them together, it shattered.

"Glassmakers get a bit blase about breakages," he says. "We work with a material that is fragile, so when something like that happens, you try to keep your cool. But yes, on that occasion, there was some swearing."

Another Day is at the Gaffa Gallery in Surry Hills until Tuesday.

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