

Mel Douglas

Out of Line

Lux Index

Chiaroscuro is a portmanteau of two Italian words: *chiaro*, 'light', and *scuro*, 'dark', referring to the technique of interplaying or juxtaposing contrasts of light and shadow in a painting. Chiaroscuro is most commonly associated with Renaissance and Baroque-era painting, notably in the works of Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi.¹ Figures are often partially bathed in light while the background recedes, focusing the viewer's attention, and creating sculptural volume on a two-dimensional surface.

In the early seventeenth century painting *Salome receives the head of John the Baptist* 1609–10, Caravaggio depicts a New Testament biblical narrative of the killing of John the Baptist; the truncated head of John the Baptist is delivered to Salome on a platter, held aloft by his hair. An evocative and emotional painting of a ghastly story, chiaroscuro techniques of the Baroque era were used to enhance emotional affect and narrative drama.

Chiaroscuro is also used in cinema; through high contrast cinematic lighting, the interplay between light and dark is used to create emotion or suspense. German Expressionist cinema and Film Noir are renowned for their dramatic use of light and shadow, while a contemporary example is the rich cinematic lighting techniques of David Lynch's 2001 film *Mulholland Drive*. Luxurious shadows and illumination are suggestive, enhancing the sense of mystery and drama in this enigmatic film.²

Mel Douglas' use of chiaroscuro in her body of work 'Out of Line' springs from robust and deliberate formal experimentation. In her work *Tonal Value (1–9)* 2019, Douglas' chiaroscuro is iterative, delicate, and beautiful; a mapping of light and luminosity through an orderly sequence of nine vessels. The title *Tonal Value* refers to the scale used by painters that maps a gradation of tones from white to black, or light to dark. Douglas uses chiaroscuro to contemplative effect; the vessels are freed from the seduction of colour,

enabling the transparent and translucent qualities of light to be clearly observed.

The nine vessels are inscribed with lines engraved by the artist onto the interior and exterior surfaces, creating an integration of two-dimensional effects onto three-dimensional objects or vessels. Informed by the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold, Douglas explores the relationship and possibilities between line and surface.³ Douglas' enquiry is involved with line or mark-making derived from drawing processes, and bringing the possibilities this suggests into a studio glassmaking practice.

Complexity in her thinking around studio glassmaking has led Douglas to an experimental enquiry into drawing and the line, and to conceptualise glass forms as drawings. This is both an additive process, through a layering of materials or threads of glass, or a reductive process, through the intimate process of engraving or removing the formed glass. Two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects flip and exchange, and hold seemingly contradictory properties:

Using line as a way to inform, define and enable three-dimensional space, through incorporating concepts within geometry, drawing, printmaking, and philosophy to support my exploration, my research uses the unique properties of glass to move line through surfaces to connect and subvert space. Developing objects, in both two and three dimensions which spatially merge surface and drawing, where the form is not a support but a three-dimensional drawing itself.⁴

Douglas describes her works as occupying a liminal space between the familiar and the unknown, holding a moment in time between 'what was' and 'what is next'. Consistent and in-depth research alongside studio-based material investigation articulates the artist's inquiry into what she describes as a 'third space'.⁵ For Douglas, the strategies and aesthetics of drawing and object-making come together to define space and volume.

Placed in an adjacent relationship, *Perception of Depth* 2022 is a new work developed for this exhibition. In this work, form and colour

interact to overlap and transform the objects. Drawing on geometry, Douglas subverts its rigid rules by placing her three-dimensional works on a flat plane, setting the objects into a unique rhythm and dynamism. Her radiant wall works *Lumen I* 2022 and *Lumen II* 2022 continue this exchange between light and dark, exploring lightness and transparency with central areas highlighted and concentrated. The use of light and dark both reveals and conceals, building dimension and volume within the works. Complex and experimental, Douglas' delicate translucent objects demand our attention, enacting a dynamic interplay and exchange upon each other and through the space they define.

Presented in a low-lit space at UNSW Galleries, the transparent and luminescent objects glow through the darkness in a deliberately minimal exhibition. The four bodies of work in the large gallery allow the works to breathe, and to be observed in a contemplative environment. Bold, delicate, and rigorous, Douglas' works present a dialectical conversation where two seemingly opposed elements are true at the same time, and where two dimensions become three and back again. These refined and dynamic works invite us to consider the rigorous experimentation and deep exploration through which they have been realised.

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- 1 Both Caravaggio, byname of Michelangelo Merisi, (1571–1610) and Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1656) are Italian painters known for their work in the Baroque in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.
- 2 *Mulholland Drive* 2001 is a film directed by David Lynch, with cinematography by Peter Deming.
- 3 Tim Ingold 'Transformations of the Line: Traces, Threads and Surfaces', *TEXTILE*, vol 8, no 1, 2010, pp 10–35.
- 4 Conversation with the artist, 28 September 2022.
- 5 *Ibid.*