

# COCKPIT ARTS 3

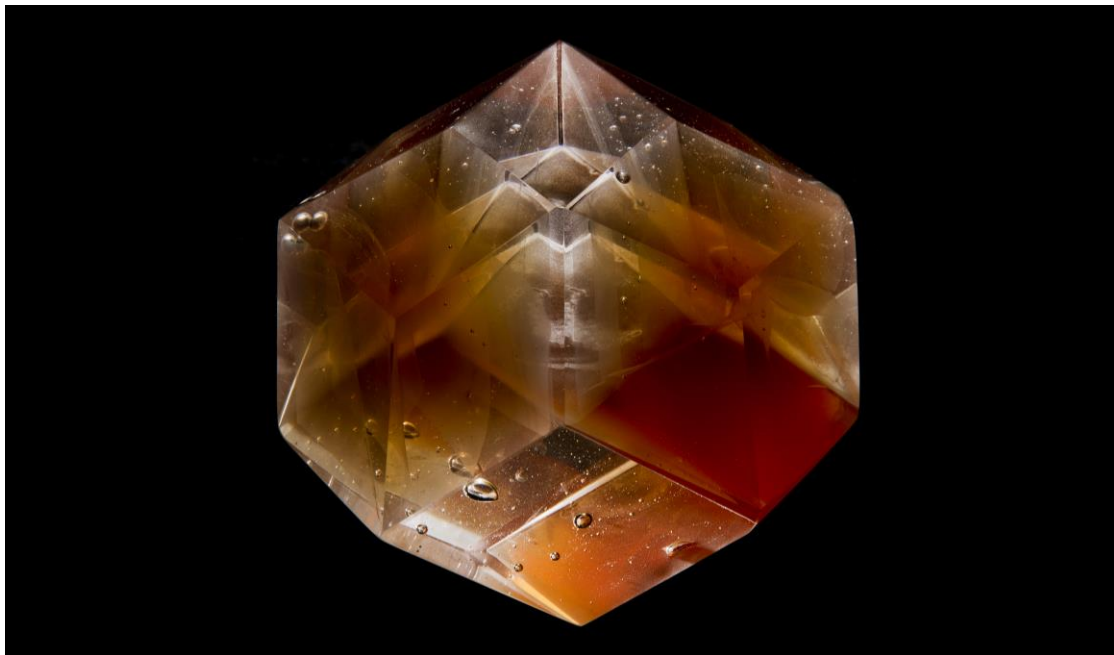
## Shelley James

- *Glass artist*



Shelley James makes extraordinary glass objects that play with our perceptions of light and space, creating beautiful optical illusions. Trained in textiles at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, Shelley pursued a career in corporate design before deciding to study printmaking at the University of the West of England. Here, she developed new techniques for encapsulating prints in glass with support from the National Glass Centre in Sunderland and Arts Council England. An ongoing residency with the Bristol Eye Hospital and PhD research at the Royal College of Art in London led to a number of collaborative projects with scientists, exploring the intersection between material and virtual space. Exhibitions include the Medical Research Centre's centenary exhibition at Somerset House and the 'Illusions' exhibition at the Science Gallery in Dublin. She was selected for the prestigious

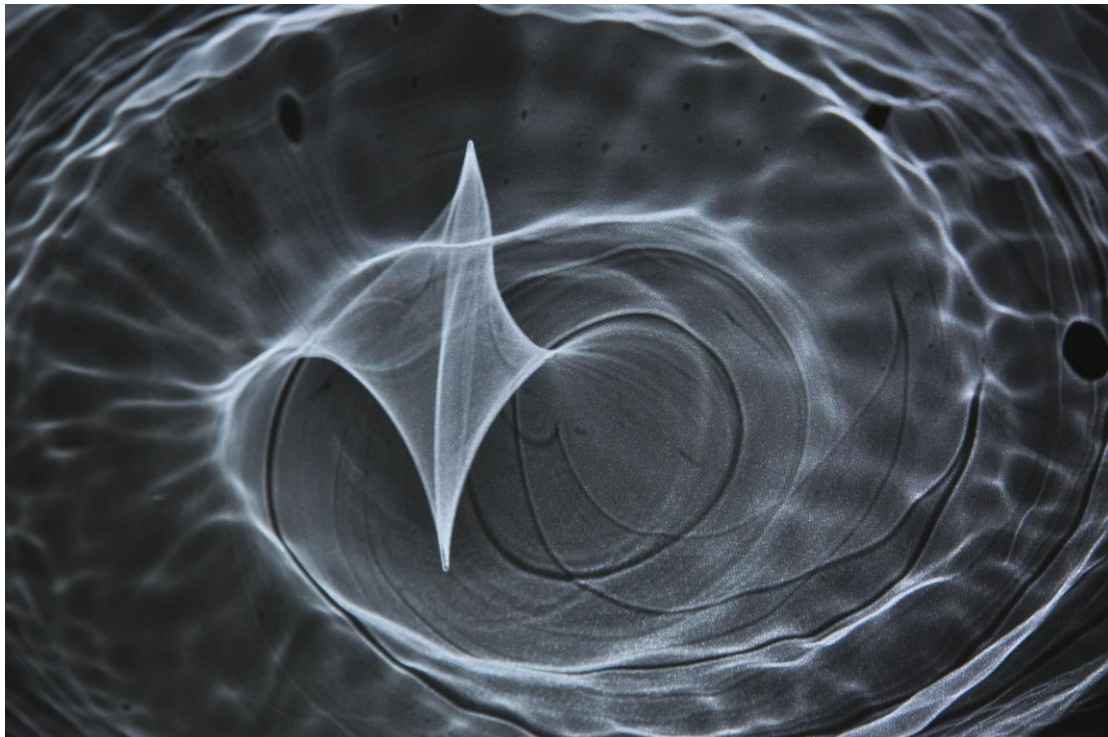
Jerwood Maker's Award and is currently working towards an installation of new work in the Project Space at COLLECT 2017.



Shelley first arrived at Cockpit Arts in 2013 shortly after finishing her PhD at the Royal College of Art. "I had just been awarded a Jerwood Makers commission and I couldn't work out how I was going to make that happen," she explains. "I'd been using the workshops at the RCA, but the kind of work I do is not something you can easily carry out at the kitchen table!"

Shelley thought about moving her practice to Somerset, where she lives, but was also weighing up the value of needing to be based in London. "I needed to keep building on the connections I had been making during my time at the RCA," she says. "It takes time to build a network of suppliers, friends and supporters that you know and trust. London is a very vibrant and exciting place to be. I had tried selling my work at a local show in Somerset, but there just wasn't the market for it. The same piece sold for ten times the price in London."

Through one of her connections, Shelley went to visit Cockpit alumna, silversmith Ndidi Ekubia, who at the time had a studio at Cockpit Arts Deptford. "As soon as I walked through the door, I thought 'I can see myself here'," she enthuses. She applied for a studio and says she was "relieved, delighted and proud" to be chosen. "It was a pivotal moment for me, as it came at a time when I was transitioning from an academic to a professional career."



Her immediate connection with Cockpit Arts is the reason why Shelley chose not to rent an industrial unit, which would have better accommodated the type of heavy-duty machinery she uses to produce her work. "There is an infrastructure here at Cockpit that you just wouldn't get on an industrial estate," she explains. "There's someone here running the studios, sorting out the printers, the post, the internet connection, the heating and security – plus the marketing team are great at getting the word out there about events and shows on my behalf. I don't take that for granted. Cockpit provides the emotional and technical support that makes it possible to swim in these choppy waters."

Support has also come from the Business Development Team. In particular, Shelley has used her one-to-one sessions with Business Incubation Programme Manager, Madeleine Furness and Head of Business Incubation, David Crump, to help with writing bids and proposals. "Although I'd previously worked in marketing, it's very different doing these things for yourself," she admits. "Having someone else to bounce ideas off has been invaluable."

With Madeleine's assistance, Shelley submitted a proposal to create new work for the COLLECT Project Space 2017, as well as a successful bid to the Arts Council to fund it. This follows another successful Arts Council bid last year for equipment.. "Having Madeleine and David as an audience in my mind's eye helps me write more clearly and avoid the temptation to go into technical detail," she explains. "Madeleine is someone who I trust to give me thoughtful and constructive feedback, and she always makes the time in her busy schedule to run her eye over something for me."

Shelley also tapped into workshops and talks that were given as part of the New Creative Markets programme last year. Even though she already has a good understanding of how to run a business, she found these sessions useful. "It was a great chance for me to think a bit more reflectively about my business," she says. "I went to a really interesting talk about tax, for instance, and the coaching on Mailchimp was excellent. It was stuff I already knew, but it was good to have a focus. Plus it was a great way to meet some of the other makers at Cockpit."

Cockpit Arts' twice-yearly Open Studios events have also proved invaluable. "Although the things I make are quite expensive and all one-off, I have built up a little network of people who come to the event," Shelley says. "I have sold one of my pieces at every Open Studios I have done so far. It may not necessarily be during the event itself, but it will be from a connection made at Open Studios, out of which comes a commission or collaboration."

In the early years, Shelley occupied a shared space on the second floor of Cockpit's Deptford incubator. But given the nature and scale of her work, she was moved into a more suitable studio on the ground floor. This has a sink and direct access onto the car park, which makes it much easier to unload large palettes. "My studio is very much a working, active craft space," she says. "I've got some heavy duty kit! I have a kiln, a sandblaster, a compressor and a polishing machine - it makes a real racket."

Just along the corridor to Shelley is Eleanor Lakelin's studio, a maker in wood who also works on a large scale with light industrial machinery. "It's great being right next door to Eleanor. We often pop in and see each other with our triumphs and tragedies," she laughs.

But she is also concerned about the dearth of such studio spaces in the heart of London. "I worry that with the gentrification of areas like Deptford, craft practises will be pushed out," she stresses. "We need to make sure there is still space for this kind of noisy, dusty large-scale craft work in London. This is a business. I work night and day and often at weekends too, and I feel there needs to be a greater allowance for crafts people like me who work with light industrial equipment. We can't create the work we do without making a noise!"

During her three years at Cockpit, Shelley says she has grown in confidence and now feels more established as a business. With her latest project for COLLECT, she has recently taken on an assistant for the first time. "The studio is proving quite small for the two of us," she says. "I would like to be able to afford a bigger space and if I secure a big commission in the future, that might be possible. But for now, this space is fine. I'm in the process of reconfiguring the studio, to see how I can make it work better now there are two of us, because I really like it here."

Photos: Elizabeth Loudon

[www.shelleyjames.co.uk](http://www.shelleyjames.co.uk)