



41 // ELEMENTAL SPIRIT
WORDS // STEPHANIE GARTELMANN
PORTRAIT // MARTIN MISCHKULNIG

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BEACH BABE-TURNED-ARTIST GISELLE COURTNEY TRANSFORMS ICONIC AUSTRALIAN IMAGERY INTO DELICATE GLASS AND METAL SCULPTURES THAT SHE DESCRIBES AS "JEWELLERY FOR BUILDINGS".

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Courtney in her bowerbird-like studio. The gold-plated, curling *Water Pods* (1998) hanging from the ceiling are composed of flameworked glass, electroformed copper and stainless steel cable. The *Water Pods* formed part of a Courtney installation at the International Glass Arts Festival in Taiwan in 2002. The artist has exhibited regularly in Indonesia, Australia, Taiwan, Japan and the USA.

BELLY DANCING AND BENIGN SEAS MAY SEEM AN UNLIKELY PAIR OF MUSES.

Yet the two passions say much about Giselle Courtney's attitude to life and art. There's flamboyance and sociability on the one hand and immersion in nature on the other, with plenty of visual wizardry thrown in. "My life is one of sequins: dance costumes and sparkling glass," jokes the artist, whose lampworked glass sculptures dazzle even while they evoke gentle waves or bamboo leaves.

In her studio, shared with her artist husband and long-time collaborator, Rodney Monk, tiny glass creations pour forth from her lamps before being painstakingly assembled as sculptures and installations. Several hundred glass rods comprise the work *Message for mother* (2006); scores of glass bamboo leaves flow down the vertical light sculpture *Fortune Bamboo* (2006). And the artist works at fever pitch. For all her beach-girl appearance – golden hair and skin, mermaid-like curves – Courtney works with relentless commitment, if only to keep up with demand.

A practising artist since she graduated from Sydney College of the Arts in 1980, Courtney won early recognition for her ocean-inspired wearable art. In the *Underwater* series, squiggly rods of glass backed by electroformed silver-plating are aligned to create bold ribbons for the wrist or throat. For her *Rockpools* (1994), Courtney created multiple shimmering 'pools' of glass backed with

electroformed silver; the *Anemone* (1998) sculptures were creature-like concoctions of glass and gold. She began exhibiting regularly in Australia, and increasingly overseas, beginning with her inclusion in a 1981 show at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo and Kyoto and going on to exhibit in Europe, Asia and the US.

From these smaller pieces grew her sculptures, which Courtney describes as "jewellery for buildings ... I was making metal jewellery and glass sculptures, and the two genres came together because I loved both. Even now, I love doing jewellery because it has so many intimate layers. Jewellery is a good place for me to work out the bigger ideas," Courtney explains.

One of her first big sculptures was *Underwater Line* (1997), a three-metre band of adjacent glass rods evoking a giant, waving tuft of seagrass, which won rave reviews when it was shown at Sydney's (now-closed) Quadrivium Gallery in 1997. *The Australian's* art reviewer described the works as "ethereally beautiful pieces that combine delicacy with strength, and deny the brittle quality of the medium". When *Underwater Line* was installed in the home of a Malibu, California collector, the commissions began flowing in.

In 1999, she and Monk collaborated on a mural for 60 Castlereagh Street in Sydney, a subtle depiction of saltwater ripples in terrazzo and glass.



THIS PAGE Detail from *Water Spirits* (2000) by Giselle Courtney. Flameworked borosilicate glass, electroformed metal, 24-carat gold plated. This commissioned 4.5m light installation flows with glass fish through the centre of a wrought iron circular staircase in a Sydney house. Courtney finds inspiration in water, whether sandy sea ripples, reflections shimmering on a waterhole or the ocean's ebb and flow. Like water, glass captures, throws, refracts and internalises light, creating patterns and colours that change as the observer or the sunlight moves. The rhythms of water are a continuing motif in Courtney's glass art.



JON BADER | MICHAEL CHRISTMAS | GREG PIPER



OPPOSITE *Lotus Pond* light sculpture, 2005, length three metres, width 2.4m, depth 2.1m. Frameworked borosilicate glass, electroformed metal, 24-carat gold plated. One of the commissioned artworks for Courtney's Californian client, whose new house is filled with dazzling Courtney light sculptures – in the ballroom, on the stairwell, in hallways and byways – wall sconces and other pieces of glass art mounted on walls and ceilings. The four-year project concluded in mid-2006. ABOVE LEFT Detail from *Lotus Pond* light sculpture. ABOVE RIGHT Detail from *Fortune Bamboo* light sculpture 2006. "Fish and bamboo are said to bring good fortune into the home", Courtney says, explaining that this is one of the reasons her work has particular appeal to Asian clients.

The work won the couple another high-profile commission in 2000, the terrazzo-and-glass floor mural at the underground entrance to Sydney's Queen Victoria Building.

INSIDE THE STUDIO
The entry to Courtney + Monk Studios in Sydney's Newtown is through a roller door embellished with whimsical bush flora, part of a mural painted by Monk that wraps around the building. Upstairs is the family home – the couple have two children, Milan, 11 and Allegra, 6 – and on ground level is their workshop. Married since 1993, the pair initially met as children, while sailing on Sydney's waterways.

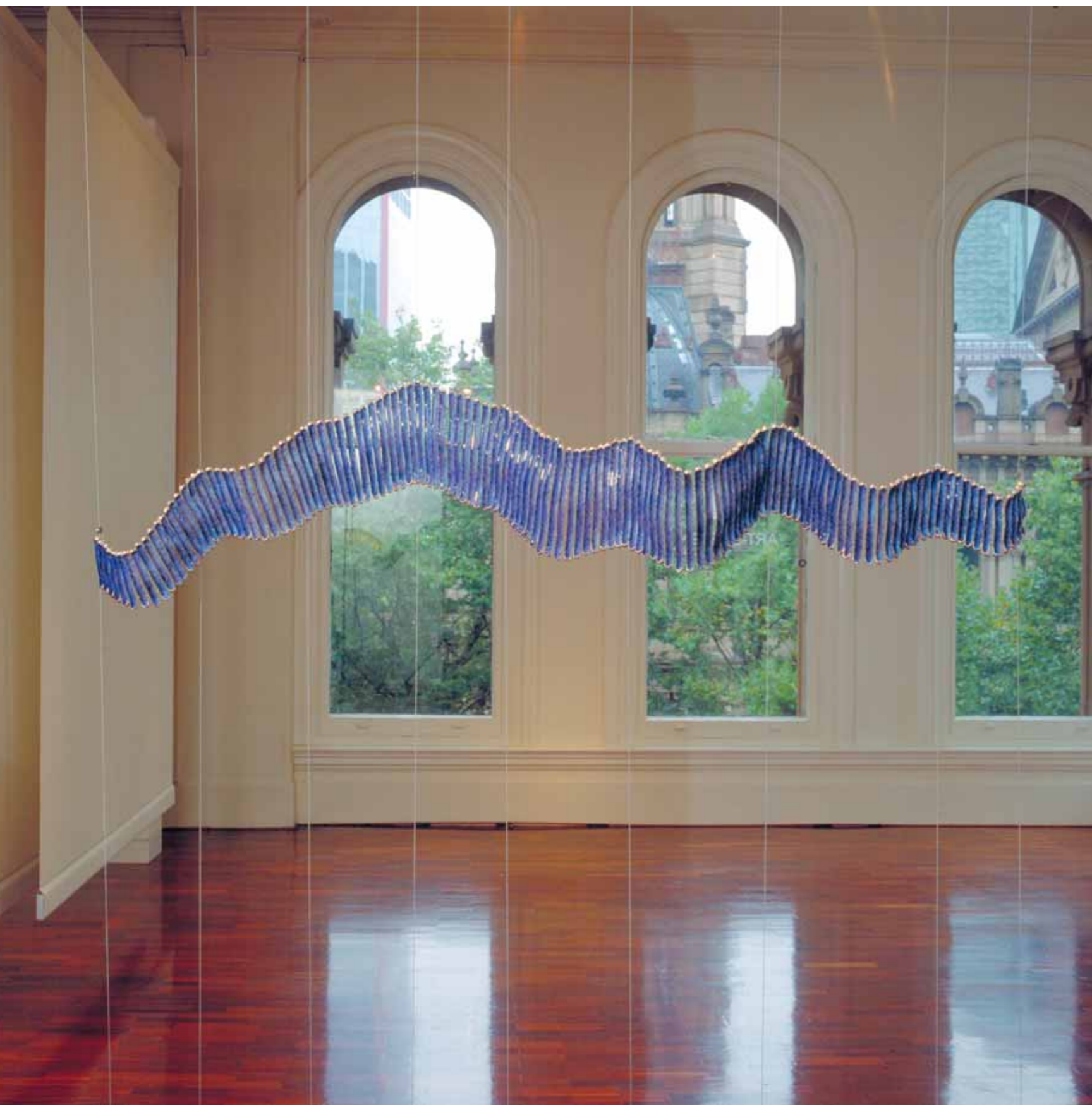
Courtney's half of the airy studio is a shrine to bits and pieces that inspire, its tables and shelves piled with glass objects, tools, jars, a Balinese sculpture or two, the Collins guide to tying knots, gas canisters, blowtorches, string, paintbrushes and papier-mâché birds and horses made by Monk. From the ceiling hang 'lucky' paper pineapples and dragons – souvenirs from her many exhibitions in Asia. An industrial exhaust tube arches across the room to Courtney's

lampworking bench, where a tight, blue gas flame spouts from the opening.

Today, Courtney is sitting at her lampworker's stool, crafting glass bamboo florets for a large light sculpture to hang in a private residence in La Jolla, California. The chandelier is among the last of some 60 pieces commissioned by the client since 2002, part of the reason she hasn't exhibited in Australia for four years. Courtney finishes the floret, about the size of a child's hand, and places it inside an annealing kiln to destress the glass. "Too bad we can't do that to ourselves," she grumbles, before erupting into laughter.

Despite its physically demanding sides, Courtney thrives on the creative process. "Being an artist is something I have to do – I don't know what else I would do. I dream of art. The only other art I enjoy is dancing," says Courtney, an accomplished belly dancer (and teacher) who performs on occasion at parties and fairs.

Much inspiration derives from the art-making process itself. Her husband says, "Giselle has a sketchbook but most of her work emerges under the flame. It's a very organic process." Courtney's art has matured in the same way.



JANE CORDIN | PAUL GREEN

“Glass and metal generally don’t like to go together,” Courtney explains, “so I’ve had to experiment. Through the electroplating process, I basically ‘grow’ metal onto glass.” She favours borosilicate glass, the shatter-proof, ultra-clear glass developed in the early 20th century when boron was added to the traditional glass mix of silicate sand, soda and ground lime. Pyrex is perhaps today’s best known borosilicate brand.

Courtney’s *Message for Mother* installation began as a pile of clear borosilicate rods that are carved, painted with silver, re-carved and sandblasted before being electroplated, turning each rod into a slender mirror, deep blue in colour.

Few developments in lampworked glass – Venetian, Czech or Scandinavian – suggest any precedents to Giselle Courtney. “Her work also sits outside the Australian glass scene, which is best known for its coldworking techniques. And the ornate nature of her work makes it hard to place her in the current art market,” notes Anna Grigson, co-director of Sabbia Gallery in Sydney, which represents glass and ceramic artists.



ABOVE *Water Pod* bracelet, frameworked glass, sterling silver, electroformed, 24-carat gold plated. The luminous ripples inside the elongated tear drops shimmer and sparkle with light. Small scale pieces – necklaces, bracelets – sometimes provide Courtney with the catalyst for large works: what she calls “jewellery for buildings”. This relationship is indicated on the OPPOSITE *Underwater Line*, 1997, frameworked glass, electroformed copper, silver plate.

For their staggering detail and craftsmanship, pieces such as *Anemone* recall Art Nouveau glass. But light installations such as *Fortune Bamboo* have a Modernist architectural essence in spite of their delicate embellishments.

Grigson believes Courtney’s larger-than-life personality adds to her appeal. “When you have a gallery, you need to love the artist’s work but also to have a strong relationship with them,” Grigson says. “The artist needs to be committed and self-critical. Giselle is always over-committed and her work is technically brilliant. Her whole house is an artist’s haven. She’s very single-minded about what she wants to do.”

LIQUID PATTERNS AND LIGHT PLAYS

Courtney gets her greatest creative buzz from nature. Her US agent, the glass art dealer Margaret Berman, lists the Mexican coastline, a Bahamas sailing trip and purple-lipped clams at the Great Barrier Reef among the sights she’s seen Courtney inspired by. She grew up sailing and swimming on Sydney’s waterways, and is



LEFT Lotus light sculpture, 2004, length 4.27m, diameter one metre, frameworked borosilicate glass, electroformed metal, 24-carat gold plated. Delicate, graceful, even ethereal, the lotus flowers seem to float in the air.

deeply moved by the liquid patterns and light-plays she sees on local and tropical waterways. "I can lock my studio door and not talk to anyone for days. When I do go out, I want to look at water, not other glass. I don't look in galleries; I rarely read magazines," she says.

When she travels, which has become harder now with two school-age children, Courtney is a human bowerbird. "On the way back from the 2005 Glass Artists Conference in Adelaide, Giselle had this pink, diamante-studded glass gun she'd bought at a student fair. They wouldn't let her board the flight, and boy did she kick up a scene," Berman recalls. To the amusement of her fellow travellers, Courtney was apprehended by the Federal Police, who considered the frivolous glass gun a replica weapon.

As Courtney's intense, four-year project of chandeliers and wall sconces for her Californian client winds to a close, the artist has begun work on a series of installations she will tour over the next three years in galleries in the US, Asia and, finally, Australia.

Surprisingly, there is no major sabbatical planned; Courtney will continue to work at her own steady pace. "If things take longer, that's that. I would never farm the work out to a factory. I don't ever want to get to the stage where I'm not making the work myself," she says.

'H2O: A Luminous Mystery', an exhibition of glass installations by Giselle Courtney, will be on show at the West Valley Art Museum in Surprise, Arizona, from September 22 to January 7.