



# B. JANE COWIE

## BEAUTIFUL ENTRAPMENT

Janet De Boer

*There are journeys... and then there are JOURNEYS*

IN FEBRUARY OF 2018 I EMBARKED ON A RELATIVELY SIMPLE JOURNEY of organized travel to Laos and Cambodia via the Wild Card, Singapore, my own tourist choice and a place where I had lived for three months in 1968, so yes, fifty years ago – and only three years after that city-state was forming itself under the rule of the well known Lee Kuan Yew.

I was attached to Hewlett-Packard at the time and you can imagine how excited they were by the promises Singapore was making – and keeping. I remember being less excited about a city changing itself so swiftly; nor was I fond of the endless heat and humidity. But oh, the street food... Nevertheless I could not begin to imagine making a home there without drastically changing my notion of 'home'.

For my recent return, I was deeply curious about two things: seeing how the city of the Merlion had aged; and finding out more about this 'glass person'. B. Jane Cowie had turned up on my doorstep in Brisbane in 2014 when I was offering workshops with Ruth Hadlow at Gallery 159, a venue I had managed since building it with my husband in 2003. I came to know Barbara Jane Cowie as Jane so that's how I reference her in this article.

Jane was living in Singapore and keen to experience a week's Master Class with Ruth Hadlow, in this case titled 'Ideas Development' - an intensive workshop advertised as cross-disciplinary. However most of the other participants were from the world of the Textile Arts and we were slightly mystified to have someone arrive for this week's intensive from another

(to page 28)

Above: *Palimpsest* 2009, B. Jane Cowie and Noriko Suzuki-Bosco; Glass house H500mm x W350mm x D380mm. Waterjet cut glass, assembled and 1000 folded paper cranes. Photo Chris Yap

Noriko Suzuki-Bosco: 'When I first saw the glass house exhibited in Jane's solo exhibition, I was struck by its shrine-like quality. It sat on the pedestal, lit up, beautiful and silent... When I was given the opportunity to work with this glass house as a palimpsest, I jumped at the idea....

'It is a beautiful piece but it feels skeletal and bare. The transparent glass quality and the ornate holes cut out by water jet cutting perhaps add to the vacantness. I felt a strong desire to fill the empty space and to give the house a more solid presence.

'After some consideration I decided to fill the house with 1000 folded paper birds. These birds are called Senbazuru, and in Japan the act of folding 1000 paper cranes is commonly thought of as making one's wish come true. Traditionally origami papers are used to make the little folded birds but I chose to use adverts that are inserted in local Japanese newspapers instead....

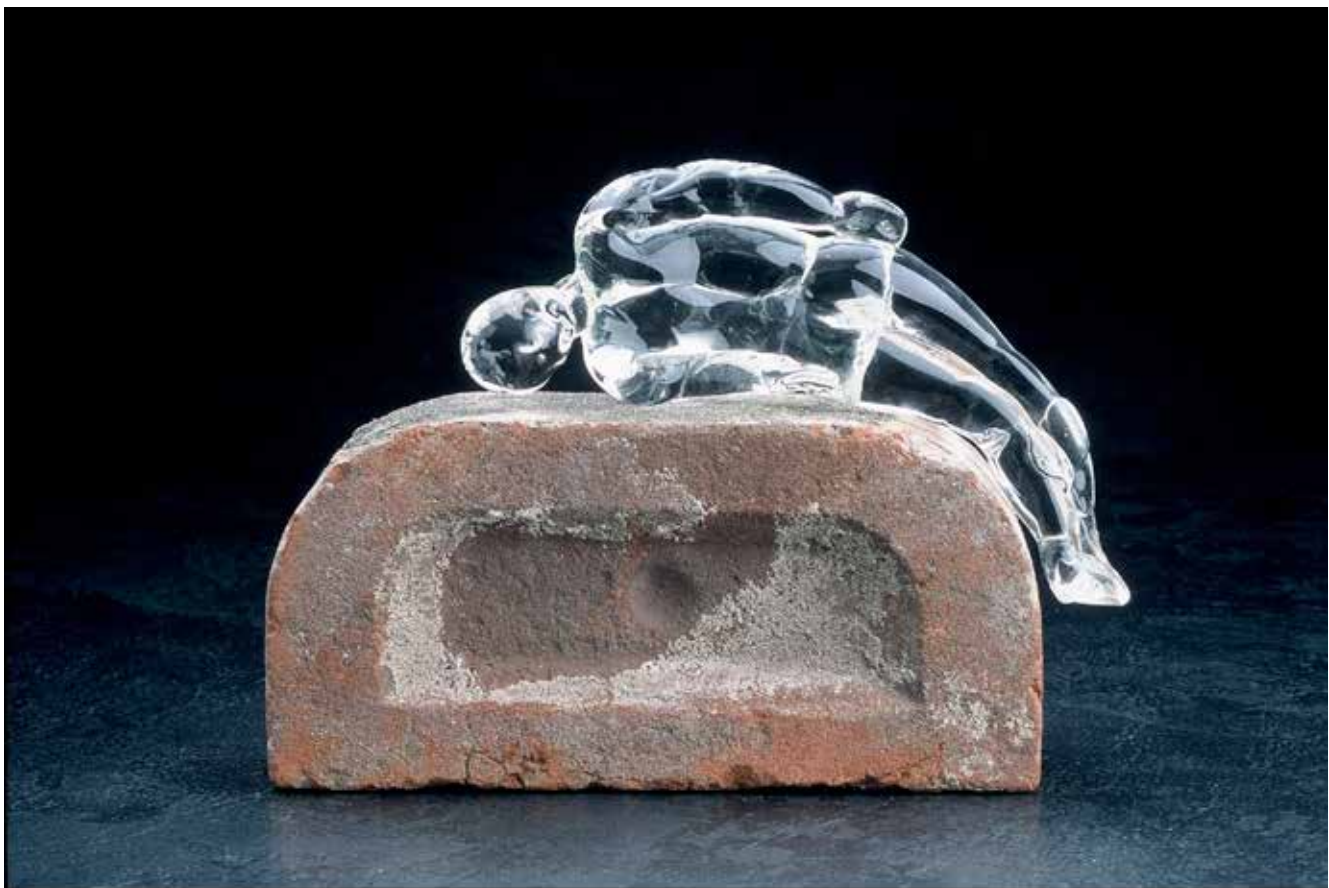
'Now the beautiful glass house, encasing the birds made of cheap throw away paper, looks very different from how it was originally presented. Stripped of its shrine-like quality, I am hoping it will now speak of the fundamental qualities of a house and home.... That it can be a place where human dramas unfold, where memories are created.'



Above: *Covered* 2002. Hot sculptured glass and house brick, 26 x 10 x 20cm

Below: *With you, at Home* 2002. Hot sculptured glass and house brick, 26 x 10 x 20cm

'In Adelaide I bought a house and removed a wall—the wall was made of bricks which became the metaphor for place. Up until then I had always travelled... the suitcase was my home—now I had a home that was heavy, solid, fixed...'



*GN*





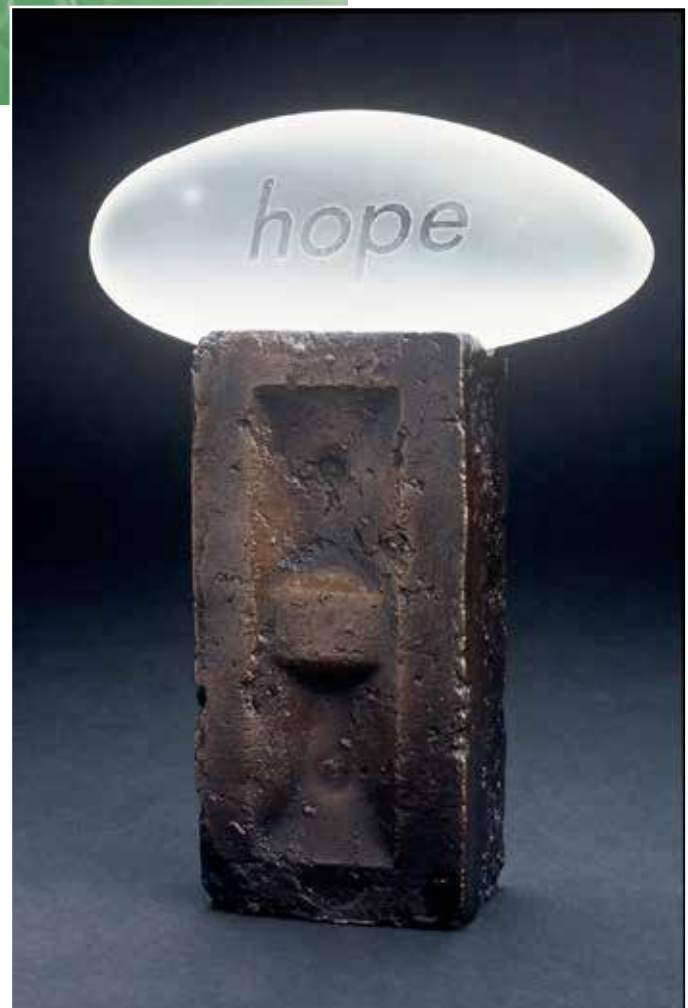
Left: Detail of *Things said, things left unsaid*, Glass Houses exhibition; heights various to 150mm; cast recycled float glass Photo Christ Yap

Below left: *Together* from the 2005 exhibition *Memento*, H400mm x W400mm x D50mm, laminated wallpaper and hot sculptured figures. Cowie says: 'I am not sure why I am fascinated by wallpaper – something to do with the notion of the perfect house with the perfect life, with the perfect domestic bliss...'

Below: *Hope* from the exhibition *Luggage, collected and carried*, 1999 H400mm x W300mm x D100mm. Hot sculptured glass, sand engraved and cast bronze.

Photo Michael Haines

*Hope* is about the hopes and dreams and the future – raised up with the ephemerality of translucent glass – this 'hope' appears light but is actually heavy. So heavy it weighs down on the cast bronze brick of home...



(from page 25)

country and indeed another world as it were: the Glass Arts. Despite Jane's returning to Gallery 159 in 2015 (for another of Hadlow's Master Classes, 'Research Methodology') it took me some four years to get any real notion of her Journey – one which astounds me and one which strongly confirms her need for the occasional contemplative break. Especially if the goal is time to examine and reinvigorate a personal art practice. Research and Methodology are not strangers to Jane who received a Degree in Visual Arts from Sydney College of the Arts in 1983 majoring in Glass and Sculpture.

After many adventures and a great deal of glass practice, she went to work on her Masters in Visual Arts at the University of South Australia, a degree she completed in 2005 having chosen to focus on a glassmaker's perspective: 'History and Practice of Studio Glassmaking in South Australia 1970 to 2000'. She literally re-made iconic artworks to gain an experiential relationship with them, uniquely different from the observer's perspective.

Adelaide was in fact a place of great friendships, community and contact for a glass artist of Jane's commitment and talent. It was her home base from 1990 after years of travel in England, Europe and the USA where she was able to add considerably to her skills base through having direct contact with many studios and artists. She describes herself during the Adelaide years as a self-employed glassmaker and designer as she built and operated Spinifex Glass Studio for three years (1992-95); served on the Ausglass National Board; was a tenant at the famed Jam Factory Craft and Design Centre (and served on their Board for 6 years); served as a Director for what was then CraftSouth; and was a Lecturer and Research Fellow and founding member of *blue pony glass studio*, South Australia.

All this and much more. Her recently uploaded website ([bjanecowie.com](http://bjanecowie.com)) is extensive. It speaks of energy and commitment as well as providing a long list of exhibitions, commissions and installations and travel—even before The Journey to living in Singapore.

It follows that Jane had the appropriate skills to become a founding member of the Singapore Glass Art Society in 2004, having started the process of relocating herself to a place that, unlike South Australia, had no trace of professional art glass practice.

An offer in 2003 from Singapore's LASALLE College of the Arts to work as a full-time lecturer provided motivation for this extraordinary step in The Journey. However, the lecturing position was short-lived as the glass program had a brief life and became defunct, motivating Jane to accept an offer to manage Singapore's first hot glass studio at Synergraphic Design Pte Ltd, a commercial architectural glass company. Her four years with the company as consultant, artist/designer and glassmaker provided a different approach to making. Rather than creating 100

things and selling them one by one, she became involved in designing and making larger installations, basically creating 100 pieces and selling all as one. When working at Synergraphic it became clear to her that "this is what I want to do" – to make large composite based installation artworks that respond to a space, create an energy within the space and enable a suitable ambience for the users of the space.

Moreover, the years at Synergraphic gave Jane a chance to adjust to life in Singapore and the salaried job meant she had 'free time' to explore her own creative ideas outside of 'work time'. Further, during this time she had the opportunity to work collaboratively on designing and making projects.

Neil Riley's article on B. Jane Cowie for 'Craft Arts International' (Shifting Glass Houses, issue no. 72), published in 2008, covered Jane's history up until that time along with examples of personal exhibition work and its rationale. Himself an ex-pat, Riley commented that he, like Jane, struggled 'to feel at home in this tropical city-state.... At times we feel stateless, lose our bearings, yet strangely only then can we begin to find ourselves anew'.

The search for 'home,' with both metaphorical and practical implications, underpins much of Jane's exhibition practice. She managed to set up a physical home in a lingering Singapore neighbourhood of bungalows in Kuo Chuan Avenue described by Riley as 'a wonderful street in the Katong area.... Increasingly an anomaly in Singapore's pervasive high-rise housing environment... the residents of Kuo Chuan Avenue are living with the threat of imminent displacement.'

Ten years later I was pleased to find Jane still in her rented home, a rare 'landed property' - single-storey houses on the ground - also commonly known as 'black and white bungalows' because they usually had dark timber beams and whitewashed walls. They represent a style once commonly used to house European families in tropical climates. However, the Kuo Chuan Avenue bungalows may not prevail for much longer as a new MRT line approaches. It did come as an utter surprise to me to find such places still existed in a rapidly changing city and, like Jane, I responded strongly to this wonderful street, 'my home, a green sanctuary, peaceful and comfortable, a place to think, make and talk about art.'

And as I came to understand the scope of Jane's Journey and the complexities of the largescale work she has undertaken in particular, I could fully grasp the need of a sanctuary. Moreover, her ample yard and large bungalow provide space for some of the complex tools of her trade, especially as her commissions have grown in size and scope. Plenty of external factory space is also required for large projects which she has sourced in Malaysia, Australia, Singapore and (most often) in China.





Above: New Majestic Hotel  
Lobby Stairwell installation  
2006 and hotel at right

Top right: Stamford Café  
Buffet Flowers 2006

Cowie says: *I think these two installations are important for me as they were the first time I had the chance to design larger artworks and were the beginning of the expansion of my work and the first steps to create larger works, designing, making and commissioning others to assist me ...*





At the time of my visit Jane was packing numerous boxes for her entry in the 2018 Sculpture by the Sea event held in Cottesloe, WA from 3-12 March. Creating and amassing all the elements needed, getting them on their way, then flying off to meet them on the beach to supervise the construction of the stainless steel dome that supports the art-glass 'swirling surrounds' of fish - seemed a huge and unwieldy set of tasks to me in all regards. But Jane takes these things in her stride and knows what needs to be done. And if the work is not purchased she must find the resilience to make tough decisions about how and where to store it, recycle the components and/or find a buyer to justify costs.

With her commissioned works there is certainly an array of frustrations as well: design confirmation, budget justifications that can be delicate and lengthy negotiations with clients, architects, interior designers, contractors and arts consultants. But at least, with the commission works, there is a contract and/or confirmed sale. Jane says that with these larger projects the years pass quickly as one project may take up to 2-3 years to complete project may take up to 2-3 years to complete.

Since launching her own company ArtGlass Solutions Pte Ltd in 2008, Jane's output of commissioned artworks has been prolific. My journey to Singapore last February

meant I could view a number of her large installations - in situ - so they are the focus of this article, starting with Sentosa Island and the recently installed 'Flowering Trees', described by an accompanying storyboard as follows: *'Inspired by the mathematical patterns found in nature, the Artist created a cluster of sculptural inflorescence to reference tropical flowering trees... This artwork installation gracefully heightens our awareness of the beautiful and unique natural surroundings in Sentosa.'*

I was beginning to at least partially grasp the complications of these installations and the usefulness of 'artglass', a composite resin based material that weighs much less than glass but displays similar qualities; how fibre optics are employed within the flower shapes; how deeply and firmly the stainless steel must be embedded in the ground, and a hundred other design and construction restraints that I would not begin to know how to tackle – but which seem to have great appeal to Jane and her engineering mind.

Jane then took me to see the substantial and ambitious 'Complex Simplicity' at Raffles Place and described in detail what it means to create a wall of this nature and then insert all the fish, one piece at a time - which is a shamefully limited description of the actual work involved.

Opposite and below: Views of *Swirling Surrounds* on the beach at Cottesloe, WA in March 2018 Sculpture by the Sea, Winner of the People's Choice Award (photos C.Yee and Jessica Wyld)







*Moving together like a school of fish, the global community ultimately becomes one entity which is much greater than the sum of its parts.*





Much of this took place in China where they were able to deal with the size and scale of production – casting the glass fish from lead crystal glass and creating the wall in clay, full size, before making the moulds and then casting from in a marble composite material.

The rationale: The school of fish metaphor connects (Jane's) ideas about culture and community, collaboration and consensus, as fundamental aspects for our survival as the human collective... Moving together like a school of fish, the global community ultimately becomes one entity which is much greater than the sum of its parts.

The very elegant installations comprising 'Towards Wealth' and 'Prosperity' (Republic Plaza, Singapore, 2010) were a strong reminder of the compelling opportunities that Jane has encountered in Singapore,

allowing her to gild the birds with 24 carat gold leaf and 100% pure silver leaf. 'The artworks welcome increased activity, new opportunities and good fortune to all who enter and work within this office building. 'Towards Wealth' is located in the 'wealth' position of the architecture, encouraging new development, success and growth. 'Prosperity', a more intimate and precious artwork, is located in a small space at the 2nd level lift lobby, gilded entirely with 24 carat gold leaf. (This information is quoted from Jane's booklet, a selected portfolio of completed projects, 2008-2015).

This page: Jane then took me to Merrill Lynch HarbourFront to see a 2008 signature installation piece found at the driveway entrance pond of this large office building's atrium. The work is comprised of huge organic pastel-coloured flowers supported on elegant 2.5 metre











*This page: Views of 'Complex Simplicity' Ocean Financial Centre, Raffles Place, CBD Singapore, 2014. Public artwork commissioned by 'Keppel Land' in 2011 from B.Jane Cowie in association with 'Art-2 Gallery.' Cast lead-crystal glass, stainless steel and marble composite materials.*

metal stems. The hand-blown and hot sculptured glass flower forms were created by B. Jane Cowie and a team of glassmakers at the Canberra Glassworks in Australia. The metalwork and installation was carried out by Moki Marine, a company based in Singapore. The blooms, exposed to the equatorial wind and rain, sway gently above the rippling surface of the reflective pond. For me this was a very poetic installation, enhanced by the reflections in the pond.

Jane's installations are found in places other than Singapore of course, including China, Malaysia, Macau.... Just when I thought I had seen the last of what I could manage for her Singapore installations, and was back at Changi Airport preparing for the flight home, Jane hinted that I would find something of interest in the departures area in Terminal 2 that I was about to enter. I was not prepared for the scope of 'Enchanted Garden' – bouquet shaped sculptures decorated with brightly coloured glass mosaics, sparkling mirror accents and sculptural stained glass petals.

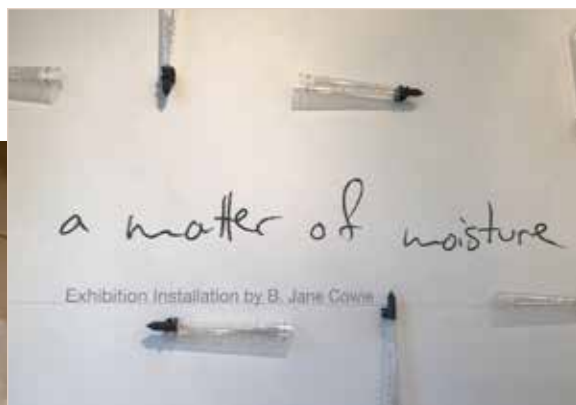
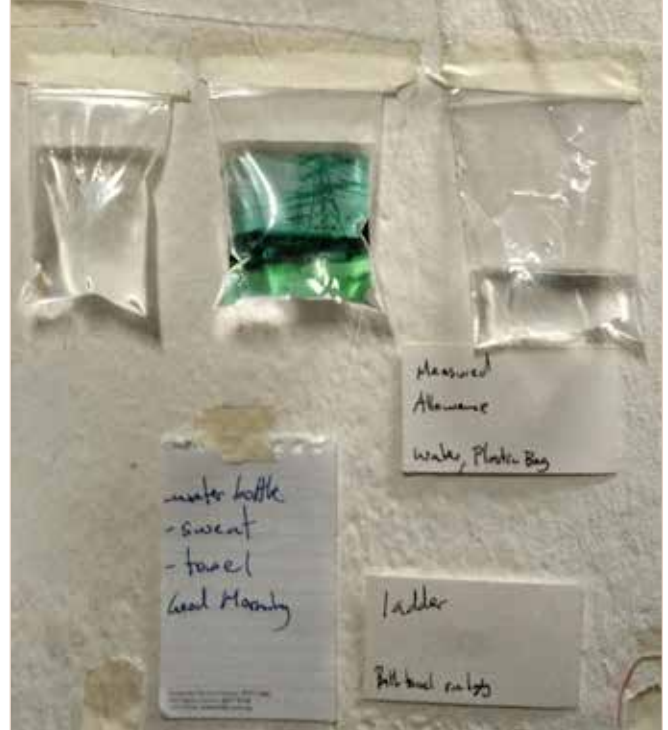




'Referencing abundance and beauty, these bouquets are filled with fresh cut flowers.' And are they popular! Few can resist the chance for family photos and selfies. Jane assisted Kingsmen Creatives in the colour designing and fabrication of the bouquets: 'Like dressmakers we sculpted the concrete forms in polystyrene foam and then hand drew the 20,000 individual glass shapes that created the design onto paper which covered the forms - just as dressmakers clothe their models. These paper patterns were used to then individually hand cut and assemble each piece of glass onto fabric matting so the bouquets could be carefully 'dressed' with a bright coat of colour ... A massive undertaking...'

Jane is able to access a number of different visual languages which is essential in her pursuit of commissions, a kind of entrapment in itself with all the associated issues but one where she always aims, as she says, 'to create objects of intent, meaning and beauty'. Loving a challenge as she does, and able to 'think big', she has had to position herself in Asia where 'the projects are massive and plentiful as they are constantly tearing down the past and rebuilding the future'.

At the same time Jane continues to express herself in a much more personal way and has recently pursued opportunities to exhibit in Australia. In 2017, as part of a residency at Sturt Craft Centre, Mittagong NSW, she created *Gauge... a matter of moisture*, an exhibition/





installation unlike anything tried in their gallery before: 'Using thread, woven mesh, heat, plastic borosilicate glass, time, water and space, B. Jane Cowie has created an immersive installation at Sturt Gallery investigating the collection and creation of water and rainfall within different lived environments...' This included creating 'an environment within a gallery space as a pleasant, comforting, soft place, almost ethereal in nature' which allowed viewers to interact with the work.

In August 2018 Jane is offering a Masterclass series and exhibition of new works at Canberra Glassworks. She says: 'Jane Crush's invitation to exhibit during the Floriade Festival was immediately appealing to me as much of my commission-based practice references nature, forms and structures found in plant and tree forms. For this exhibition 'A Profusion of Plumes' I reference flowers as a

metaphor for life's expectations, rituals and rites of passage. Expected expectations. Offering my own perspective - the things I have and the things I have not - the work will be a series of installations addressing notions of gender, expectation and time past.'

And as projects appear to be slowing down in Singapore for now, Jane finds she has some time to indulge in dreaming: 'I've been so busy working so hard for so long - it's good to be able to look up and see the horizon again.' Opportunities arise in China where dramatic growth remains the norm.

Obsessions with the nature of 'home' persist for Jane, and may be exacerbated by finally learning that the black and white bungalows of Kuo Chuan Avenue will yield to the rapacious redevelopment that continues to characterize Singapore. For all that, as we toured the city together, she

was pleased to discover how much it had become a part of her, along with the impact her installations have had on this city's development of visual culture.

I like the way Mathew Bell of Colosoul magazine describes 'Swirling by the Sea', the work that was finding its way to Cottesloe Beach in W.A. as I was ending my Singapore journey and returning to Australia: 'A Surreal school of sunlit fish... the smooth, scaled creatures swim beyond the sand, above our stance and surface and into the sky.... B. Jane's artwork is about moving together as one and forming elaborate motions... Swim with the crowd for safety or stray and be singled out for better or worse.'

My journey had an unexpected aspect to it, beyond re-living Singapore. Through my time with B. Jane Cowie I regained a sense of enchantment with glass which she describes as a 'fluid, hot, dangerous and seductive material' and one that she clearly loves for its beautiful entrapments.

**Janet De Boer**



*Left:*

*The very elegant installations comprising 'Towards Wealth' and 'Prosperity' (Republic Plaza, Singapore, 2010) are a strong reminder of the compelling opportunities that Jane has encountered in Singapore, allowing her to gild the birds with 24 carat gold leaf and 100% pure silver leaf. The artworks welcome increased activity, new opportunities and good fortune to all who enter and work within this office building. At left, Prosperity, the more intimate and precious artwork, is located in a small space at the 2nd level lift lobby, gilded entirely with 24 carat gold leaf.*





Top:  
*'Illuminated Connections:  
 Family'* is found on Sentosa  
 Island. Laser cut aluminum,  
 hand sculptured acrylic,  
 welded stainless steel and  
 optic fibre. 4000mm x  
 10,000mm x 18,000mm.

The works are placed  
 outside the Palawan Kidz  
 City which houses the  
 Kidzania Indoor Theme  
 Park. They suggest the way  
 families cluster together  
 to create a space of  
 protection and support.

Centre and below:  
*'Creative Fecundity:  
 Flowering Trees'*: kiln cast  
 glass flowers; hand blown  
 glass flower buds; rolled  
 and welded stainless steel  
 and rubber. H4000mm x  
 W9000m x L36,000mm





*'Enchanted Garden' at Changi Airport*

*Referencing abundance and beauty, these bouquets are filled with fresh cut flowers. And are they popular! Few can resist the chance for family photos and selfies. Jane assisted Kingsmen Creatives in the colour designing and fabrication of the bouquets:*

*"Like dressmakers we sculpted the concrete forms in polystyrene foam and then hand drew the 20,000 individual glass shapes that created the design onto paper which covered the forms—just as dressmakers clothe their models. These paper patterns were used to then individually hand cut and assemble each piece of glass onto fabric matting so the bouquets could be carefully 'dressed' with a bright coat of colour ... A massive undertaking..."*





