



"I See You're a Bit Nervous":

Silvia Levenson's Glass Art

By Shawn Waggoner

Razor blades imbedded in wedding cakes. Knives hanging precariously above a cozy recliner. Shoes pierced with nails. Silvia Levenson does not claim her work is universal, but rather an intimate reflection of her own feelings about childhood, domesticity, travel and exile.

Though she lives and works in Italy, her work cannot be defined by the usual Italian glass parameters. There's nothing shiny or exclusively beautiful about her mostly tongue-in-cheek cast glass.

As Italian critic Francesca Pasini, explains, "the cruelty" of Levenson's imagery is made digestible by the fabulist rendering of the subject matter. It is made further palatable by the humor beneath the darkness.

Levenson is a survivor, a descendant of Russian Jewish fugitives from the 1904 Revolution, herself an exile from Argentine repression in the 1970s.

"She brings the black humor of the survivor into the domestic arena with a wit that tempers what might at first glance be shrugged off as simply more caustic feminism," says Lani

McGregor, director, *The Bullseye Connection*. "Levenson's is a tango danced by twin outsiders of the Venetian glass community: female artist/ kilcast glass. And to further insult the traditionalists, she concocts her iconoclastic cakes with American glass."

In July 2005, Levenson will teach a workshop in conjunction with BECon, Bullseye's kiln glass conference held in Portland. In September, her exhibition "Little Ulysses" opens at the Arthobler Gallery, Oporto, Portugal. Levenson's exhibition "I See You're a Bit Nervous," opens at the Bullseye Connection, Portland, on October 1 and runs through November 30. The show addresses the tensions of daily life, complete with a pink glass sitting room adorned with pink glass bombs and pink glass guns. You can also see her work at SOFA Chicago, October 28 through 30, with Caterina Tognon Gallery, Italy.

In the following conversation with *Glass Art* magazine, Levenson discusses the evolution of her work from fusing to casting, her casting process and the challenges and rewards of making such personal work.



"Little Girl's Shoes," Silvia Levenson, glass, copper, 2001. PHOTO: Cristiano Vassalli, courtesy Caterina Tognon.



"A Little Darling is Born," Silvia Levenson, 300 x 150 x 2cm, 2001. Cast glass. PHOTO: Cristiano Vassalli, courtesy Caterina Tognon.

GA: You were born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1957. Describe your life there.

SL: My father's family emigrated to Argentina from Russia in the early 1900s. My mother's family was a sort of "country" family. Like America, Argentina was made up of emigrants. I began to be politically involved in a left party at 14 years old. As thousands of Argentinians, I tried to change our society. We lived in a rich country where lots of people died because they didn't have enough to eat.

I was married at age 16, and my daughter Natalia was born when I was 19. I used to live life quickly!

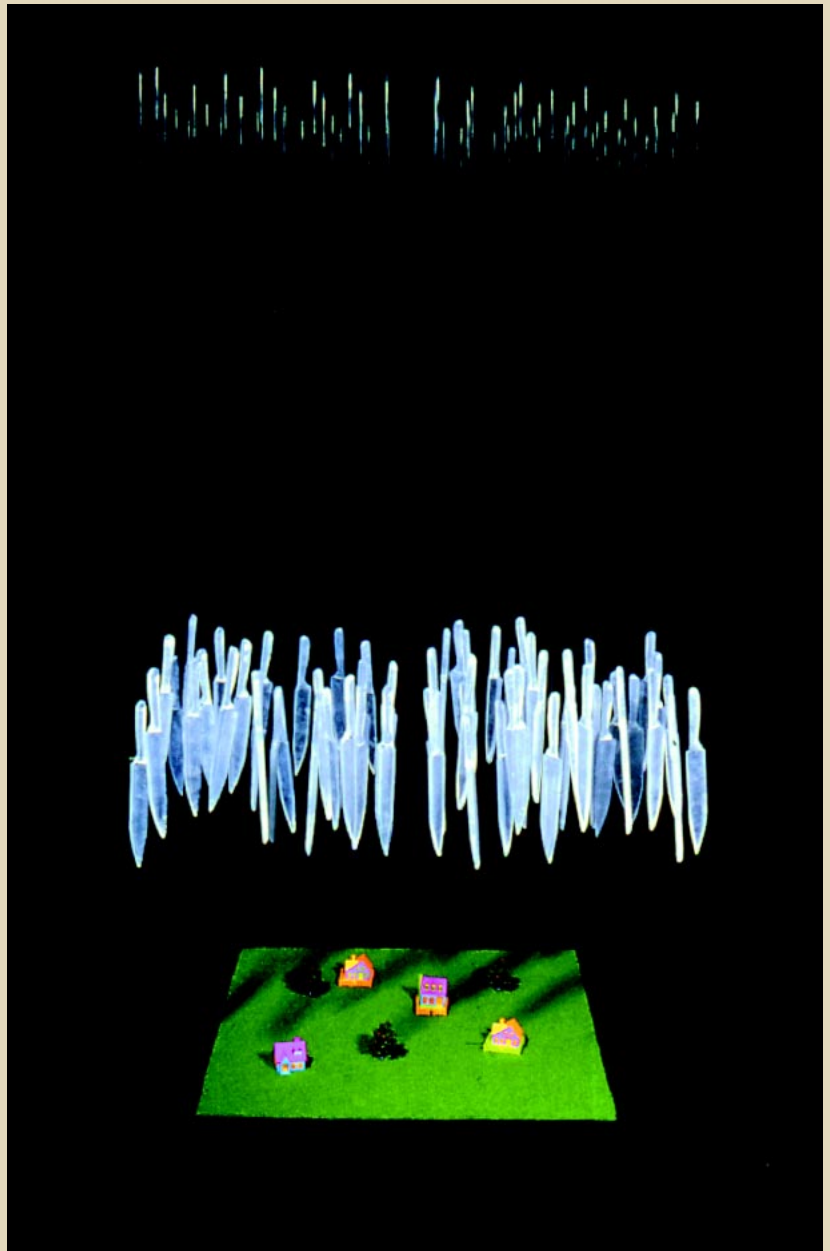
GA: What inspired your move to Italy in 1981? What was the change of culture like for you?

SL: During the dictatorship (from 1976 to 1984) 30,000 people disappeared in Argentina. We call these people "desaparecidos" (missed people), because the military government used to say they didn't know what happened to them. We know now that they were killed. When one of my cousins and my aunt were killed, my husband and I decided to emigrate. I arrived in Italy when I was 23 years old with my two children, Natalia, 3 years and Emilano, 11 months.

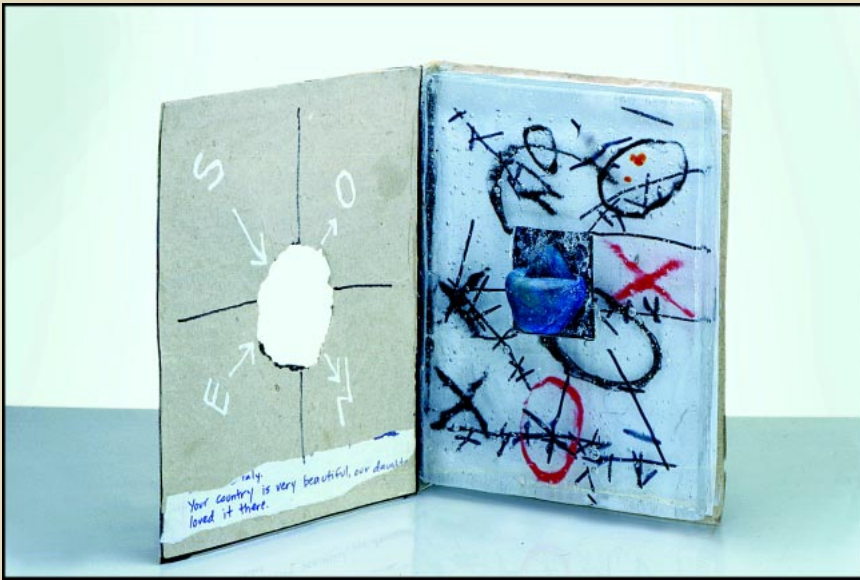
Our original plan was to stay in Italy for a time, then return to Argentina. But I fell in love with Italy and wanted to stay here. I came from a country where feelings are not controlled, where emotions come out very easily. I arrived in Milan and found the Italians to be so elegant, so formal. Also, I was able to see for myself all the artwork I had previously only seen in books. In Rome, Florence, Venice, I came face to face with the history behind the culture.

GA: You studied at Martin Garcia School of Graphic Design in Buenos Aires. When and how did you discover glass?

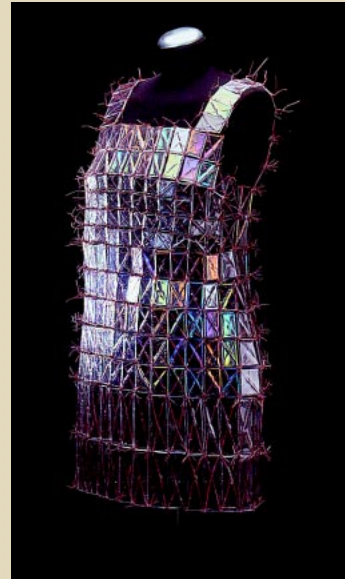
SL: In 1987, I read a book called *Glass Fusing I*, and I discovered that artists were



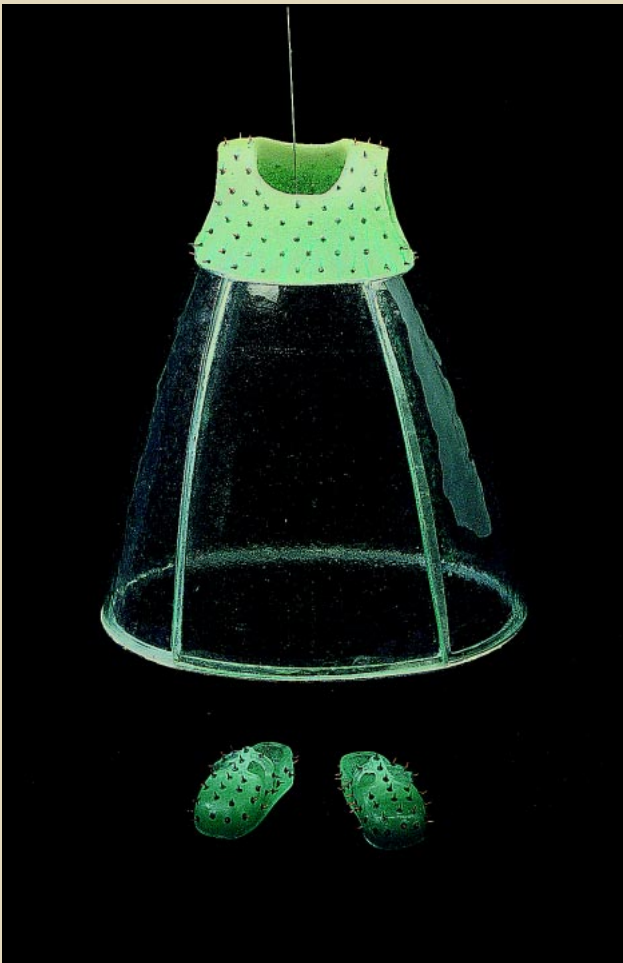
"It's Raining Knives," Silvia Levenson, 120 x 120cm, 1996. Sixty glass knives, artificial grass, plastic little houses. PHOTO: Cristiano Vassalli, courtesy Caterina Tognon.



“Travel Book Series,” Silvia Levenson, 24 x 18 x 4cm, 1994. Cast glass, cardboard. PHOTO: Cristiano Vassalli, courtesy Caterina Tognon.



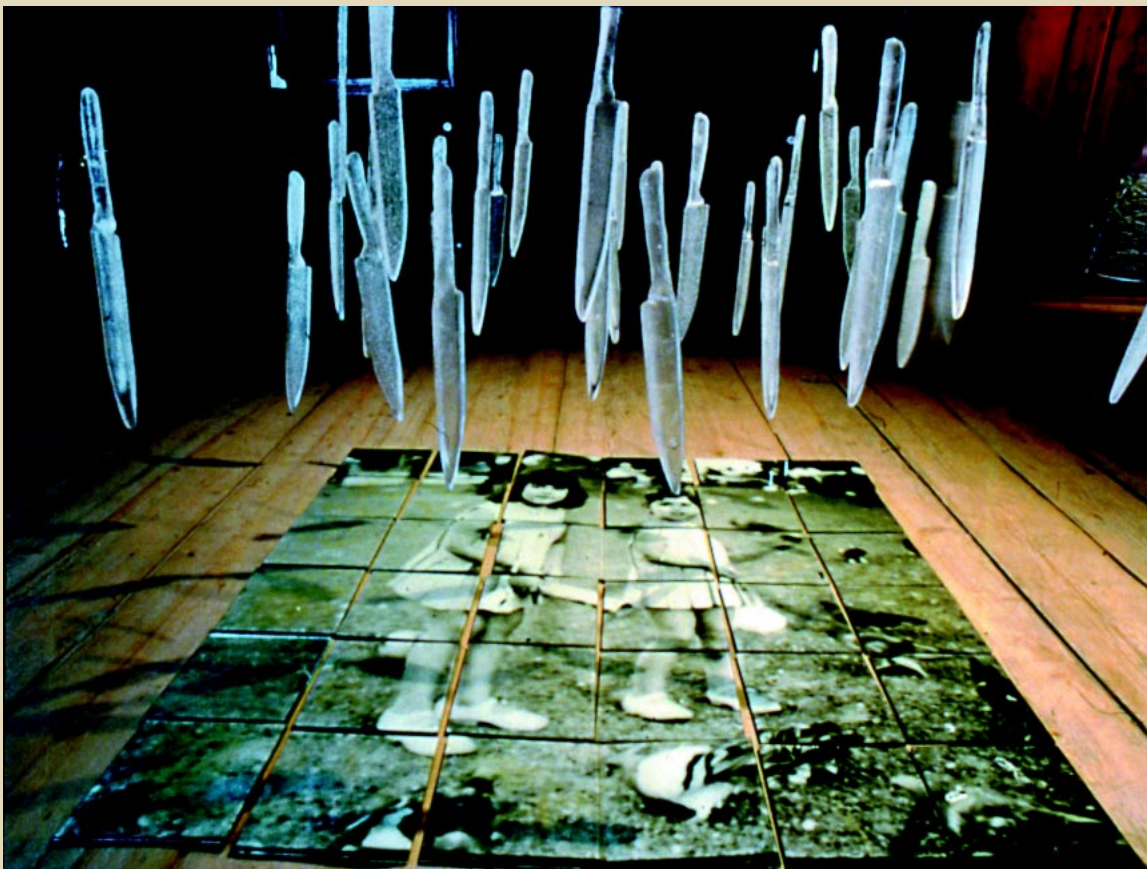
“Goose pimples,” Silvia Levenson, 150 x 33 x 30cm. Fused glass, copper wires, dummy. PHOTO: Cristiano Vassalli, private collection Amsterdam.



“Naughty Girl,” Silvia Levenson, 70 x 60 x 60cm, 2000. Cire perdue melted glass with copper nails, thermoformed glass skirt. PHOTO: Cristiano Vassalli, courtesy Caterina Tognon.



“Christmas with the Family,” Silvia Levenson, 1997. Sixty glass knives, armchair, video. PHOTO: Cristiano Vassalli, courtesy Caterina Tognon.



"Plaza de Mayo," Silvia Levenson, 140 x 140cm, 2001. Thirty cast glass knives, glass, photograph. PHOTO: Cristiano Vassalli, courtesy Caterina Tognon.

able to work in glass on their own. In Italy, the tradition is that people work in glass only in Murano and only blown glass. At this time, I also attended Bertil Vallien's exhibition in New York City and was again surprised by the potential of the medium. I went on to study in short workshops at Creative Glass, Switzerland, and Sars Poteries, France.

GA: When did you open your own studio? Describe your early work.

SL: I opened my own studio in 1990, but my first works were just studies about technique. I was fascinated, not only with the beauty of glass, but with the fact that glass is a material used in our daily lives. I do not believe the more complex the technique, the better the result. I think that a good piece begins with a good idea. I don't like virtuosity in art. I love feelings, pathos, intuitions. Being a slave to technique is boring.

GA: What about the process of casting or the look of the finished work appealed to you as an artist? Do you now and have you always combined fusing and casting?

I love the slow process of casting and pate de verre. I need time to understand what I am making! I like the skin of the pieces when they come out of the mold. When I began to work in glass, I used the technique of glass fusing, but now the bulk of my work is cast glass.

GA: Describe your casting process. Do you begin with a drawing, a dream?

SL: Usually I work in a series. Sometimes I use clay for the models, and sometimes I use silicon rubber negatives from real objects; it depends. For example, to make the shoes, I make a model in clay. Next, I make the silicon rubber negative from the clay. Then I pour the wax into the negative in order to obtain a wax positive. I retouch the wax and then make the mold using Hydracast. I steam the wax out and finally, I put the glass into the mold and the mold into the kiln for five days. When I open the kiln, sometimes I am happy. If not ...I have to begin again!

GA: What kind of coldworking goes into your work?

As little as possible. Transparency is not important in my work. I work with objects, so I need the eye to remain on the surface of the piece, not move across it.

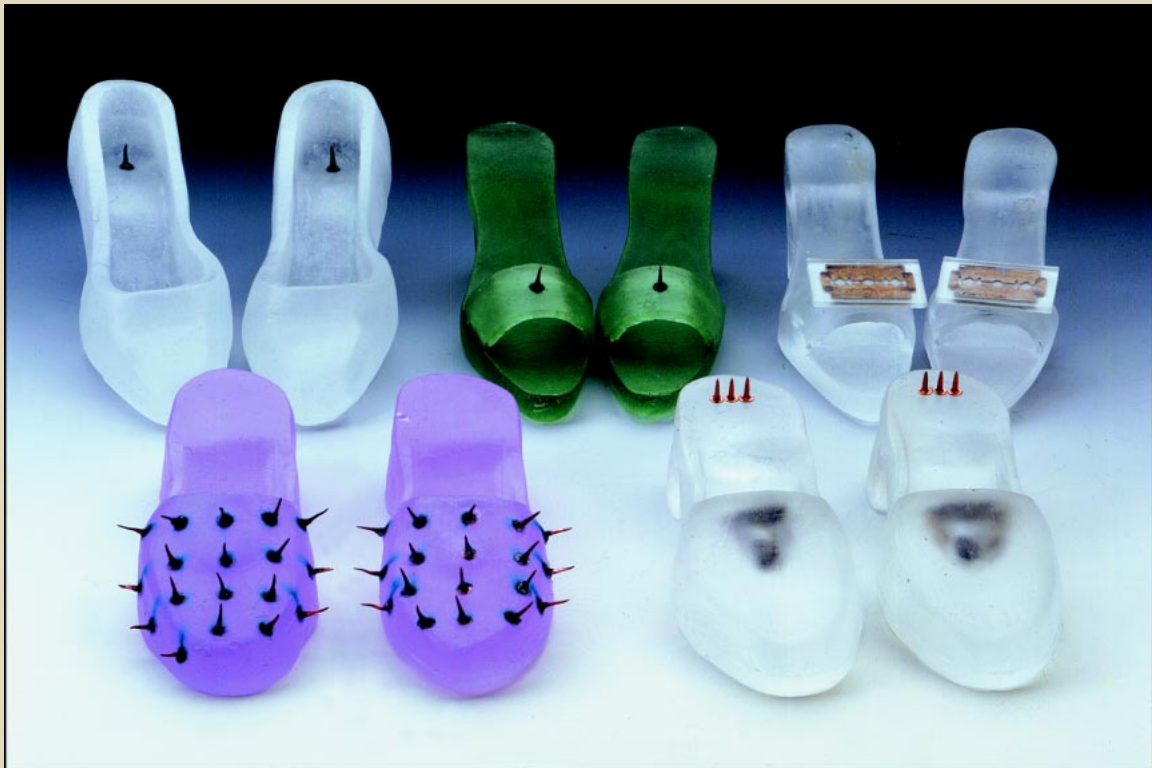
GA: Do you normally make work from your studio in Italy?

SL: Yes. I have two pottery kilns, one sandblaster and some coldworking equipment. I work with assistants, depending upon the work. Over the last several years, I have found that I need assistants to organize my work, answer mail, prepare presentations, pack exhibitions, organize transportation and things like that. And I work with people who help make the molds, and the wood or metal parts. It's very enjoyable working with all these different people. But when I have an exhibition, I work with other artists in the making of the work.

For example, in April I was an Artist in Residence at Corning. My friend and assistant, Alessandra Piazza, made



“Take Care of Yourself!” Silvia Levenson, 180 x 300cm, 2004. Glass fused/copper wire. PHOTO: Natalia Saurin, courtesy Caterina Tognon.



“Shoes,” Silvia Levenson, 1999. Cire perdue melted glass. PHOTO: Cristiano Vassalli, courtesy Caterina Tognon.

most of the fused pieces, and I made the pate de verre and cast pieces. I arrived at the Corning Studio with a project I wanted to make for my upcoming Bullseye Connection exhibition in October. I cast lots of pink glass bombs, pink glass table cloths and pink kitchen pots.

GA: You have a special relationship with Bullseye Glass Co. When and how was that established?

SL: Primarily I use Bullseye glass in my work, because in my experience it is the best glass for kilnforming. I was an Artist in Residence at the factory in 1995, and since then, they have given me their full support. During this residency, I made the pieces for my first exhibition in US. I made knives, books and suitcases. For me this was fantastic! I couldn't believe that I had access to all the glass I needed for my pieces. They believed in me, and of course, I loved it.

When I received the 2004 Rakow Commission from the Corning Museum of Glass, the first congratulatory E-mail was from Lani McGregor. So my relationship with this company is both personal and professional.

GA: What did you create for the Rakow Commission?

SL: Each year the Corning Museum commissions an artist to make a piece for the Museum. Mine was 'It's Raining Knives.'

GA: What inspired this piece?

SL: 'It's Raining Knives' is about danger. But the knives are transparent, so it's about the danger we can feel or imagine, but cannot see. It's like seeing green landscape, blue skies and smiling families; meanwhile our world is being polluted. The water is full of arsenic and the earth tainted by chemicals.

GA: Describe your work in the mid- to late 1990s, both

aesthetically and technically. Are most of these works pate de verre?

SL: As I said, my first pieces were fused. But after awhile, I became focused on the inside of the pieces. I used to place several sheets of glass in a mold in order to have pieces of colored glass floating on the transparency. My early work was more focused on color — water color effects. But I eventually began to work thicker. Step by step I began to be more involved with three-dimensional objects so I needed to learn to work with wax and pate de verre.

Early on, my work was decorative; now the pieces are more narrative. For example, in 1994, I created the Travel Series. I began to think about my family emigrating from Russia because they wanted to have a better life. Then some years later, I had to emigrate, too. This series spoke about emigration and exiles, but also about the idea of traveling. I made a lot of suitcases and travel books.

GA: Some of your current work is autobiographical, like "Plaza de Mayo."

SL: Yes. 'Plaza de Mayo' is the most autobiographical piece I have done to date. On the floor you see a photo of me and my sister Bibi. When we were children, we used to go to play at the Playa de Mayo square. Over the photo some glass knives are hanging.

In the 1970s, we went to the same place to protest the government, and in the 1980s, the mothers of desaparecidos went there to ask for their children.

I love this photo, because we passed across all this history, Bibi and me. We are here. We survived, and sometimes we feel like children.

I think I am very lucky. As an artist I can continue playing the game, even when I touch sadness. Through my work I am able to reflect about my life and the lives of people I have known.

GA: One of your trademark images is the shoe. Can you talk about the significance of this object and how you use it in your art?

SL: Cinderella inspired me to use the shoe. When I put a nail in it, I'm reflecting on the impossibility of Cinderella's dream: to have money, social status, happiness through marriage alone.

When I was a child in Argentina, my mother used to buy us one pair of shoes each year. One time, a nail came through one of my shoes. I remember trying to hammer it back in, but when I did, it came up through the top. This is a metaphor for life: I have to walk, even if sometimes I feel a little pain.

Shoes are important. They represent connection with the earth.

GA: You use all kinds of found objects as subjects for your art.

SL: Yes. For 'A Little Darling is Born,' I used real baby clothes as a model to make the molds. This piece is about protection. Sometimes adults are not able to protect children. The little clothes are beautiful, but fragile.

GA: "Take Care of Yourself" revisits your days of fusing glass, leaving casting behind.

SL: I made the blanket with lots of little pieces of fused glass with a copper glass inside.

I began to think about how people have the tendency to repeat the mistakes of their parents.

GA: Much of your work speaks to the more vulnerable and sad aspect of childhood. Do you find addressing such a sensitive topic difficult in terms of marketing your work or stirring up gallery interest.

SL: You are right; it's not easy, because most glass collectors are focused on the decorative quality of glass, on its beauty. But I think the mystery of art is that we can touch people on different levels. For example, when I created the 'Little Bad Girl' dresses in 2001 (made in glass and barbed wire), I didn't have any expectation about sales. I made them because I felt I had to. I was so surprised when I sold them all!

I am represented in the US by Bullseye Connection Gallery, by Caterina Tognon gallery and also by other galleries in France and Portugal where I am the only artist working with glass. If you look at what is happening in a contemporary art context, my work doesn't look so aggressive. ♦