

AIR Artisan



IN GOOD  
**HANDS**



**Sculptor**  
**Jane Valentine**

is an artist working in a revered art form, crafting the marble of Michelangelo and the inspiration of ancient Egypt and Renaissance Italy into a 21st-century statement.

~ *Words* ASHLEY HAY ~

Previous page:  
*Return To Beauty*,  
2010, Italian  
statuario marble on  
stainless steel base  
by Jane Valentine  
(opposite).

IN THE DIM LIGHT of the downstairs room in Jane Valentine's house, the two marble boats glow with such a clean, pure whiteness that they seem to float just above the shelf that holds them. Scale-model maquettes, they're small enough to be cupped in two hands, large enough to convey the delicacy, the elegance of a later, final, form. The marble – "it's perfect," says Valentine – is Italian statuario, sliced off a block and then ground down and polished to create these exquisite objects. The texture is so smooth it feels malleable and so cool it feels like your hands have been in water. "I made them out in the garden," she says, gesturing towards a terrace perched high in Queensland's Sunshine Coast hinterland.

Valentine is 42, brightly blonde and seductively ebullient. One of Australia's pre-eminent – and rare – marble sculptors, she moved north more than a year ago now. She is represented by Australian Art Resources, whose gallery, Axia Modern Art, is in Melbourne; her personal stash of marble blocks agisted in a field on the edge of Sydney. She works on the other side of the world: most usually in the Italian village of Pietrasanta, where Michelangelo sourced his marble; sometimes in Xiamen, in the south-east of China; most recently in Cairo. "As a carver, the scale in Egypt is unbelievable. Something as little as 10cm is so incredibly beautiful and contains as much essence as something that's five metres tall. The history, the culture: it's everywhere. You could live in the Cairo museum, it's amazing. And when I saw the pyramids, I cried."

One of the earliest art forms, sculpture still carries the imprint of artisan knowledge passed down through centuries. Yet while Valentine's practice honours and continues many traditional methods, she is very much a 21st-century practitioner, excited by technology and operating globally, sourcing her materials, her working spaces and conversations all over the world.

Take *Surrender*, a finalist in this year's McClelland Sculpture Survey – Australia's richest – with an award of \$100,000 for the artist whose work is chosen from 36 accepted submissions. An installation of three ladies' fans – one intact, two disintegrating, and all more than a metre high by about two metres wide – drew on her quest to "get to an essence of something that's pure, fragile and feminine".

"Fans are such incredible symbols of femininity. They seem to embody it," she says. "They evoke myriad qualities associated with feminine communication – mystique, flirtatiousness, seduction; there's a whole language in how you hold your fan. So the idea behind the piece is a return – or a surrendering – to a >





Valentine's studio away from home: Studio Nicola Stagetti in Pietrasanta, Tuscany.

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more gently flirtatious representation of femininity in contrast to the explicit sexual representations more prevalent today. There's been an incredible surge back to beauty: art for so long was so enraptured with being shocking and I was very bored with that. With the fans, I wanted to get back to femininity; I wanted to get back to beauty. These things seemed important to state now."

After researching the history of fans, and studying "hundreds" of examples of styles and structures, she began to sketch, generating images first by hand, then on computer, in consultation with her partner, an architect – "I'll sit with him for a week, saying, 'how do we make it work? How do we get there?'" – then with an engineer. Marble was sourced from Carrara, in Italy, and shipped to a studio in Cairo where it could be cut into the individual blades – just 20mm thick – that Valentine envisaged, then the patterning water-cut on each. "So these pieces are designed and manufactured, where others aren't," she says. "I work with whatever technology I can take; and I work some pieces just by hand. That's amazing – and even more beautiful when you're working more intuitively and you don't know what the end product is going to be."

Now, she says, working like that is "something that I give myself as a gift". With two small children to take into account, "I have to be much more aware of my time constraints – I am trying to juggle all my lives." Moving from Sydney was about children and time, although there are undoubtedly other gifts in living in this place, such as swimming in the ocean and watching the sunrise.

"Part of my artistic practice tries to get to the essence of things and that's often a pure, fragile, feminine essence." A contradiction to the sense of solidity and grandeur often associated with marble? "Yes, and with marble you have a sense of immortality, too – a memorial aspect. To get to an essence, to immortalise it, that's essentially what I'm doing. It's a beautiful juxtaposition."

Leafing through the catalogue for Valentine's last show, mounted in August, those beautiful juxtapositions are obvious. Two exquisite statuario discs a metre high, inscribed with hundreds of concentric circles 4mm deep, are *Fragile*. A series of half-ellipses in arabescato marble – its white traced with fine silvery grey lines – is *Shelter*.

A pair of angel's wings, their statuario perfectly white, seems to hover and rise. "I find marble so sensual, so >



warm and fragile,” says Valentine. “And I try to bring out those elements.” She pauses at the wings, talks about their power as an image, about seeing the famous *Winged Victory Of Samothrace* in the Louvre “20 years ago now”, and knowing she wanted to make her own wings one day.

Her conversation loops around ideas of quiet stillness, of peace, as often as her warm laughter rings out. Always confident she’d be an artist – “it was the only thing I was good at, at school” – Valentine majored in painting at the Sydney College of the Arts. On graduation, she won a scholarship to Florence, only to find herself overwhelmed trying to work in “this ancient, culturally rich city”. The epiphany came on an excursion to Pietrasanta: Valentine saw a girl working in one of the studios and knew instantly what she wanted to do next. “The first time I worked with marble was like watching black-and-white television turn into colour,” she says. Valentine never painted again.

“The technique I use is subtractive: give 30 students a block of clay, 28 will put little pieces of it together to assemble a shape – only a couple will start subtracting pieces of the clay to find something. That’s working in negative space, and I found that language very intuitive. It was the first time I calmed down. Sculpting is very meditative and I’m very lively, always thinking 20, 30 different things. Sculpture lets me have that thinking space, and all those ideas, but it lets me quieten my voice and get to the essence of what I’m trying to say.”

CONTEMPORARIES she finds admirable, inspiring, include “Anish Kapoor, of course, Isamu Noguchi, Peter Randall-Page, Antony Gormley – people you return to just for the simplicity of falling in love with their work.” Then there are women such as the late Louise Bourgeois and Australian artists such as Marea Gazzard and Inge King. “They arose within their media within such a difficult age of being.”

She spent eight years in Pietrasanta – a long apprenticeship, she concedes, but one she couldn’t have undertaken anywhere else.

“It’s a melting pot of artists from all round the world, from very significant artists to people working on their first pieces. It’s a beautiful amalgamation of ideas and cultures. After work, you’d go to the bar, have a coffee or a glass of wine, covered in marble dust, then you’d eat together – people from five or six different countries, maybe a writer or a dancer. It’s the only place I’ve ever found like that.” It still draws her: last year, she spent five months overseas on three different trips. “Being in Europe

and working there now is not just about my work. It's about reclaiming myself as a person. When I go, a different person comes out; she's younger, she's more vivacious, she's happier. Sometimes I wonder if Europe is actually my real home."

Her first major exhibition was representing Australia in the 1999 International Sculpture Symposium in Changchun, China.

There's a famous Michelangelo quote about the statue concealed in each block of stone and the sculptor's task of revealing it. In Valentine's concentration as she listens – leaning in to catch anything obscured beneath the stones of a conversation's words – you sense the focus with which she seeks out her marble and its internal potential. "It's better to go when it's just been raining and there's early morning light," she says of these excursions. "You have to tap it – when you tap marble, it sings, so you're looking for the appropriate pitch." It's a sensual step in a very physical process: work with marble is work of heft, with cranes and grinders, tractors and hoists. The tallest of the exquisite teardrops Valentine made recently for Victoria's Chadstone Shopping Centre is three metres high – and the hunt for their stone took six solid weeks.

All of which creates its own economies of scale: the crafting of a maquette might take six weeks – "although that includes the time you are thinking about it while you're peeling the potatoes" – a work the size of the Chadstone piece, *Origins*, required a year from start to finish. Then there is the cost of the raw materials she uses: a marble block can cost her as much as \$40,000.

In her hilltop house, its surfaces smooth and unblemished – glass, wood, polished concrete – as if they had already achieved the essential that her work often seeks, Valentine might be a long way from her gallery, her audience, her Italian studio and her stone, but she is never disconnected from her passion. "Seeing a piece of art that affects you is like receiving a love letter. It might be from Michelangelo; it might be from me. And if you accept the letter, you fall in love with the piece."

Outside, as the sun moves, the horizon's line firms and the sky's colour deepens. As the moon rises higher against the darkening blue, its white face glows brighter and brighter, illuminated like a beacon. By the evening, it has become a marble boat, gleaming and perfect; travelling with Valentine towards their next day. ❖

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McClelland Sculpture Survey, Langwarrin, Victoria. November 21, 2010-July 17, 2011. [www.mcclellandgallery.com](http://www.mcclellandgallery.com)



*Fragile #1*, 2010, Italian statuario marble on black granite base; detail from *Wings Of Victory*, 2010 (opposite).