

Katie's Mirrored light shade has a cut-and-polished finish. It reflects the sitting-room of her Whanganui villa.



WHAT KATIE DOES

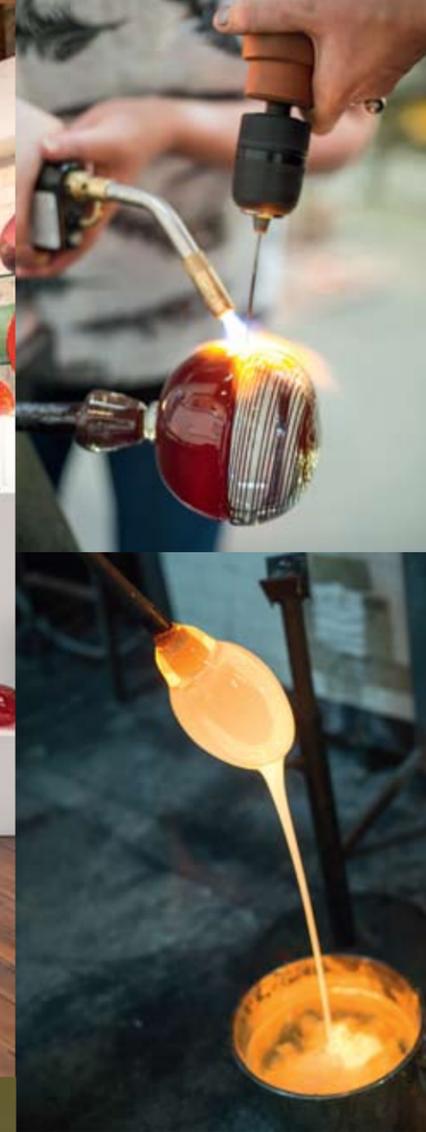
SHE'S TURNED ON ITS HEAD THE BELIEF THAT GLASS-BLOWING IS ONLY FOR MEN AND PROVED THAT HER PROFESSIONALISM AND HER ARTISTRY CAN TAKE HER TO THE TOP

WORDS ANN WARNOCK PHOTOGRAPHS MIKE HEYDON

heart & soul



Katie heats up her tools (called jacks) used for cutting and shaping glass. She's about to pull out the neck on a tall red-and-black Incalmo vessel. "Glass is like a foreign language. It takes a while to learn how to read it."



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Working down in The Pit, Katie shapes a gather of hot glass, the beginnings of one of her Incalmo vessels, on a steel table called a marver. She's assisted by British glass artist Dr Kathryn Wightman, a tutor at Wanganui Glass School, and Chronicle Glass assistant Brendon Sole; the mezzanine floor is rimu. It took 18 months to convert the old newspaper building into Chronicle Glass. "I love the idea of having an historic building with shiny new glass in it"; Katie uses a drill to change the axis of a vessel; molten glass is drained into a metal container during glass-blowing; Katie's Cut Incalmo vessels; the coloured works are Katie's Aroha vessels; Katie and Lyndsay Patterson; Katie holds her White Cane Roll Up vessel.

THE STUDIO

► **Chronicle Glass Studio** in Whanganui is co-owned by Katie Brown and Lyndsay Patterson. It's been operating since 2005. Each glass artist has a different line of work.

► It's housed in an historic building, the former *Wanganui Chronicle* premises. The old printing-press annexe is now a large-scale workshop with furnaces. Visitors can view glass-blowing from above; there is also a mezzanine retail gallery space.

► **What is glass-blowing?** A blowpipe – a long steel rod – is used to gather liquid glass (special melted sand) from a furnace; it's a bit like winding honey onto a spoon. The glass-blower blows air into one end of the blowpipe which causes an air bubble to form a centre in the blob of molten glass. It's the start of an object.

Tools and equipment are used to press, pull, squeeze and twist the glass. It's fast and hot work. Assistants often help the glass-blower at this stage. Cooling the finished object is crucial; it's heated and cooled repeatedly to prevent shattering.



"WHATEVER'S INSIDE ME IS COMING OUT AND IS AN EXTENSION THROUGH MY HAND INTO THE GLASS"



WHEN KATIE BROWN, one of New Zealand's foremost female glass-blowers, visited the ancient glass-making island of Murano off Venice some time ago, her introductory line went down like a lead balloon. "Historically, glass has been a blokes' thing. Its roots are in Syria around 100BC and until recently women have rarely been involved. When I said to the Murano craftsmen 'I'm Katie Brown from New Zealand; I'm a glass-blower', they replied 'No, no, no'. There was no way those Italian men were going to accept that a woman could blow glass. In the end I gave up arguing."

In attempting to crack entrenched attitudes she may well have thrown in the towel but fortitude, determination and dripping sweat are essential elements in the success story of Katie Brown of Manawatu, Whanganui, Massachusetts, Somerset, London and back to Whanganui. "When I worked for Josh Simpson (internationally renowned US-based glass artist) for three years I was the only female in his glass-blowing team of 11 assistants. It was tough, I was 23 years old and sometimes I cried. But I stuck it out. I was determined to earn the respect of those boys. Glass-blowing requires lots of physical strength and a strong upper body. I go to the gym and do yoga to keep fit. But it's no longer just a male medium – things are changing."

On a weekday morning at Chronicle Glass Studio in Whanganui's historic precinct a block away from the river, our woman glass-blower is checking the temperature of the furnace with a local gas-fitter, sipping coffee, liaising on her iPhone, greeting her administration manager Maureen Bamber, finalizing a shipment of her Globe lights to an apartment in Perth and explaining the empowerment of music. ►



The lyrics of Kiwi musician Age Pryor are pumping out from the studio's hot-glass workshop, nicknamed The Pit. "We always play Kiwi music as we work – lots of Fat Freddy's Drop. It brings good energy. Glass-blowing is draining because whatever's inside me is coming out and is an extension through my hand into the glass. I've got to give it all I've got. Music helps me into the frame."

Katie's contented childhood was spent on the outskirts of Palmerston North at Kairanga where her family had a lifestyle block with donkeys and geese and where she grew up "building huts outside and not watching TV. Dad was a builder which is creative in itself and Mum was a nurse but also an artist; she was always drawing and painting at the kitchen table." Her teenage years were bumpy. "It was challenging; I was very distracted by the whole growing-up thing. Mum stuck by me. I came through it because it was my time to show her that I could make a go of things."

Artistic pursuits were always on Katie's agenda. After leaving school she dabbled in a short-term visual arts course at the then Manawatu Polytechnic. After a rejection for photography school in Christchurch and a stint in a delicatessen, acceptance came for three diploma courses in the arts, one of them in Glass Design and Production at Wanganui Regional Community Polytechnic (now Whanganui UCOL). "I was intrigued by the medium. My brother Ewan, who's an architect, had a collection of glass goblets by Peter Viesnik. They were fluid in form and full of movement. I had always thought 'How? Why?' Mum drove me to Whanganui to visit the glass school. When I saw hot glass in action it was game on."

Post-graduation she packaged up a set of goals. "I wanted to succeed and I knew it wasn't a case of two years as a glass-blower and \$50K in your lap. I was aware there was a journey ahead." After a year of "harassing" Josh Simpson for a job at his large-scale Massachusetts studio – as a student she'd met him when he visited New Zealand – she struck success. Katie was his inaugural student intern with a plane ticket, lodgings and a car thrown in. Later she moved to England where she was tutored by "a selection of glass gods" including Neil Wilkin in Frome with whom she worked. "Glass is so historic that it's all been done before. As artists we manipulate the past. From each of those glass gods I took something away and then added my own form."



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Glass Pods by New Zealand artist Dominic Burrell; the collection of striped wine glasses belonged to Katie's mother; lights in the hallway were bought from a second-hand shop in Carterton; Katie's Coloured Cut light shades in her kitchen; Katie's Mosaic Lady is by Jade Turner; the mirrors are from Goodscore in Wellington; the mirrors behind the dining-table is *Glassy Girls I Know*, sandblasted and painted panels by Whanganui artist Sarah Courtney-Plant.



Aged 28, with growing sales in Somerset, she toyed with the idea of a studio in London. "I was revved up to make a business of glass-blowing but back here I had the support of my family and in Whanganui there's a real energy for glass and technical knowledge. I came back and found that Lyndsay Patterson, who'd been ahead of me at glass school, had his eye on an old building." Game on again as Katie joined forces with Lyndsay and then third partner, glass artist Karen Ellett, to set up Chronicle Glass Studio.

Katie says some people thought she was dreaming. "I thought 'just watch me'. It fired my resolve. I had nothing to lose." A newspaper article inviting interested parties to come on board brought 15 investors who each gave \$2000 in return for glass art. Their support pushed the project over the starting line. The bank manager "saw our vision and backed us" and the historic building was secured for a tidy sum. "Being in Whanganui it was do-able. I couldn't imagine surviving this in a major city."

Then out of the blue Katie had a windfall. "I had an aunty who died and left me some funds. It allowed me to add my share to the project. Her gift came at such a crucial point in my life and I'll never forget it. It's made me very determined to always give back to others." ▶





Katie has collected retro items since her student days. She bought the radiogram in 1997. The cushion on the bed was a gift from good friend Lynne Vinsen. BELOW: Katie at the old Wanganui railway station on Taupo Quay.



KATIE ON LIFE

► In 2011 Katie and her mother Mandy established Katie Brown Glass, a gallery in the Horowhenua township of Shannon, housed in an old butcher's shop. Katie's contemporary chandelier lights hang from the trusses where meat was once cured. katiebrownglass.co.nz

► Katie on Shannon: "I call it Shan Francisco. It's the Parnell of the lower North Island. We were tempted to name the gallery Double Brown. I've been very blessed to have Mandy as my mum. She always backed me to go into the arts. I was never told to 'get a real job!'"

► On Whanganui: "The glass school has a global reputation. It's been a major influence on the evolution of the glass movement in New Zealand and it's the only place in the country where you can study glass. We'd have 50 glass students and glass professionals living in the city. Rentals are lower, the buildings are

historic, there are no traffic jams and we pull in visitors wanting to see and buy glass."

► On snowboarding: "I'm absolutely passionate. A day snowboarding at Mt Ruapehu is a mental-health day."

► On food: "We keep the fridge well stocked at Chronicle Glass because you get so hungry when you're glass-blowing. I'm not much of a cook. Thankfully, my boyfriend is great."

► Katie teaches glass-blowing at a tertiary college in Alberta, Canada each year. She also flies to a glass workshop somewhere in the world each year to "keep me fizzing".

► She's represented by *Essenze* (Auckland), *REAL Aotearoa* (Auckland, Wellington), *The Poi Room* (Auckland), *Piece Gallery* (Matakana), *Taylor Jensen Fine Arts* (Palmerston North), *Te Papa Store* (Wellington), *Vesta Design* (Queenstown) and *Quadrant Gallery* (Dunedin).

Eight years on Chronicle Glass is "humming along" and so too are the home and working life of Katie Brown. Four years ago she purchased a handsome 100-year-old villa in a leafy suburban street. It's a short drive from home to work in her 1967 baby-blue Ford Anglia. "I learnt to drive in my grandma's Anglia in a paddock at Kairanga when I was eight years old, as you did back then. I bought mine three years ago. It's full of childhood memories."

At Chronicle Glass Katie and Lyndsay employ three full-time staff and four part-time hot-shop and cold-glass assistants. "I'm a businesswoman really. If you are a serious artist you have to back yourself. Professionalism is paramount. It adds to artistic success." From 9.30am to 1.00pm each weekday she's in The Pit, clad in chunky safety eyewear and special heat-protection gloves, plunging the blowpipe from the crucible of molten glass in the furnace to the glory hole and out again. "I don't like being too blokey so I enjoy dressing nicely when I'm working. In the summer the sweat just pours off. When you cool down it forms salt crystals on your arms."

She'll create up to eight pieces in a shift, often switching forms from lights to platters and flatten vases "to keep my staff enthused as well as myself". Those eight pieces are generally made to order. These days, with a raft of commissions and "massive" overheads, there is little time to play. The gas-fired furnace runs at 1100°C for 24 hours and glass sand, known as batch, is imported from Australia.

Recently Whanganui-based ergonomics specialist Professor Terry Cunniffe designed the custom-made workstation where Katie sits during the demanding process of glass-blowing. "It's an awkward pose and I've got a bad back. Terry came to see how I was working and was mortified. The result is a sort of mobile barbecue with a saddle seat and hip support."

Five years ago a substantial commission for lights at Auckland restaurant Clooney sparked her new range of contemporary chandeliers. Her Coloured Cut, Bubble Waterfall, Clooneys, Globe and Stalagmite lights have since become hot property. "If I wasn't a glass-blower I'd be an electrician. It's that attention to detail and applying a set of skills. I love the engineering facet of lights, the wiring and fittings." In collaboration with Auckland-based Fearon Hay Architects and several interior designers, she's recently undertaken domestic lighting projects here and in Australia, New York, Sweden and Singapore.

Katie says in Europe and the US the global recession has triggered the downsizing and closure of several internationally renowned glass studios. Such adversity is a timely reminder to "not get too big and to keep things real". Keeping it real for Katie is her daily routine at Chronicle Glass – those adrenalin-fuelled dealings with "seductive, exciting and hot molten glass that just wants to fall on the floor. There are those moments in The Pit where everyone is helping to get the result. You design a form, you create it and then someone walks in and buys it. Words can't describe the feeling. You think 'OK, I'm on the right pathway here.'" 