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AQUA®

The Business Magazine for Spa & Pool Professionals

THE BEAUTY OF TILE

BOOST PROFITS WITH CHEMICAL SERVICES

HOW TO HIRE (BETTER) SUMMER HELP



Courtesy: Aquapix Tile

features

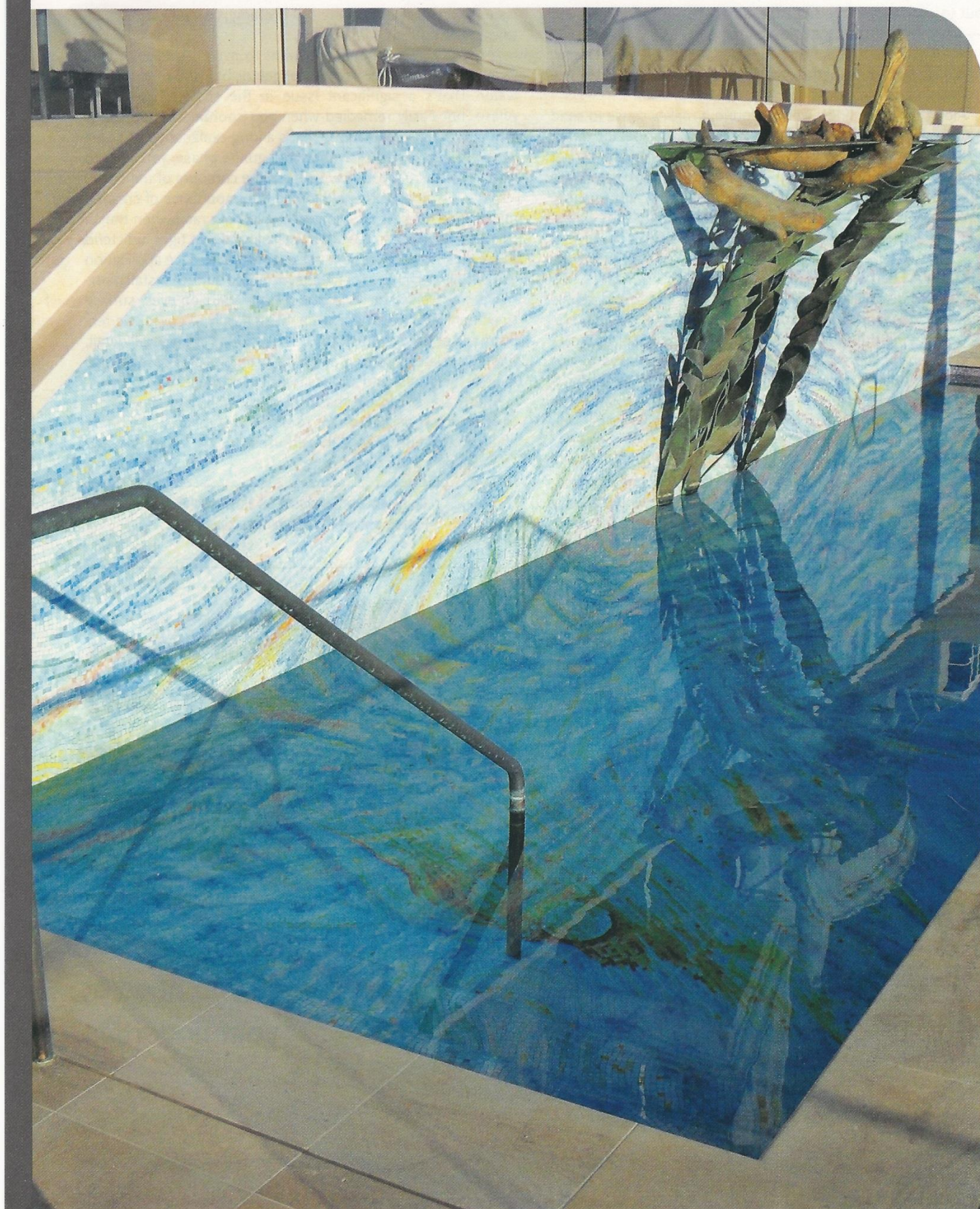
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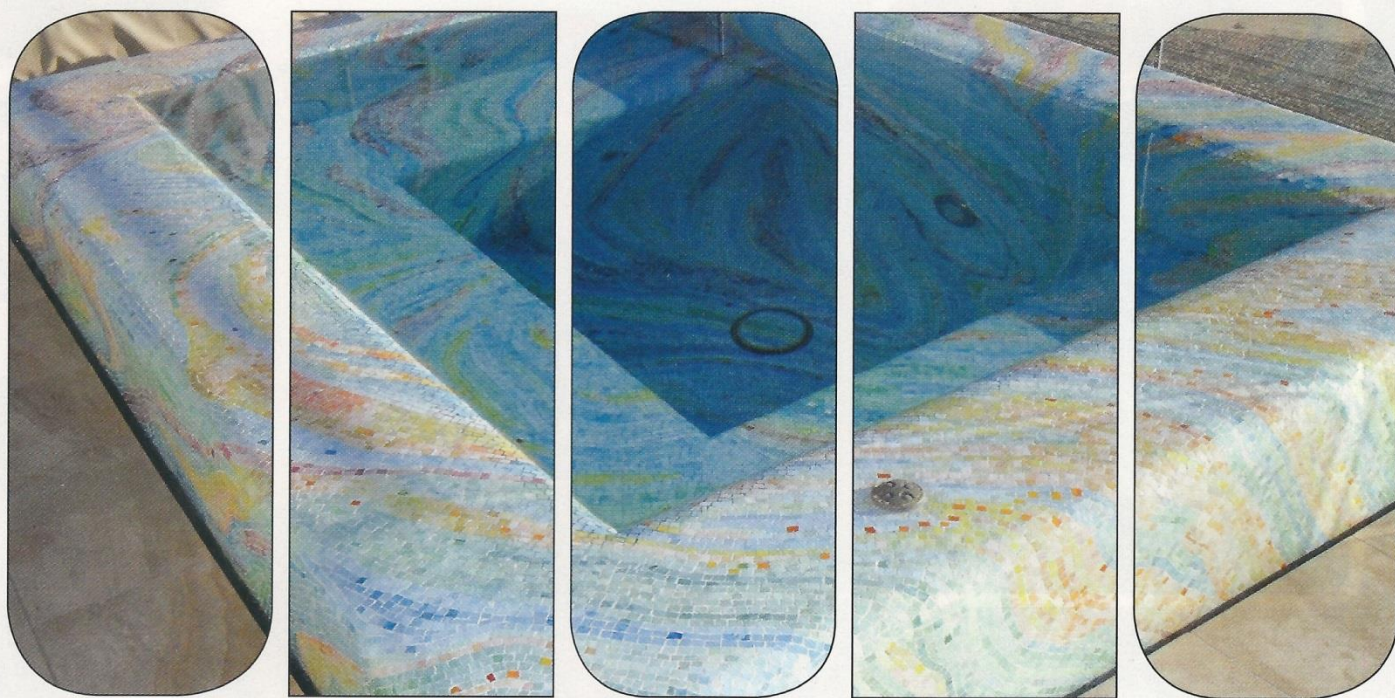
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Photos courtesy of Aquap Tile



Beyond the Surface

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHANIE DITTRICK OF AGAPE TILE

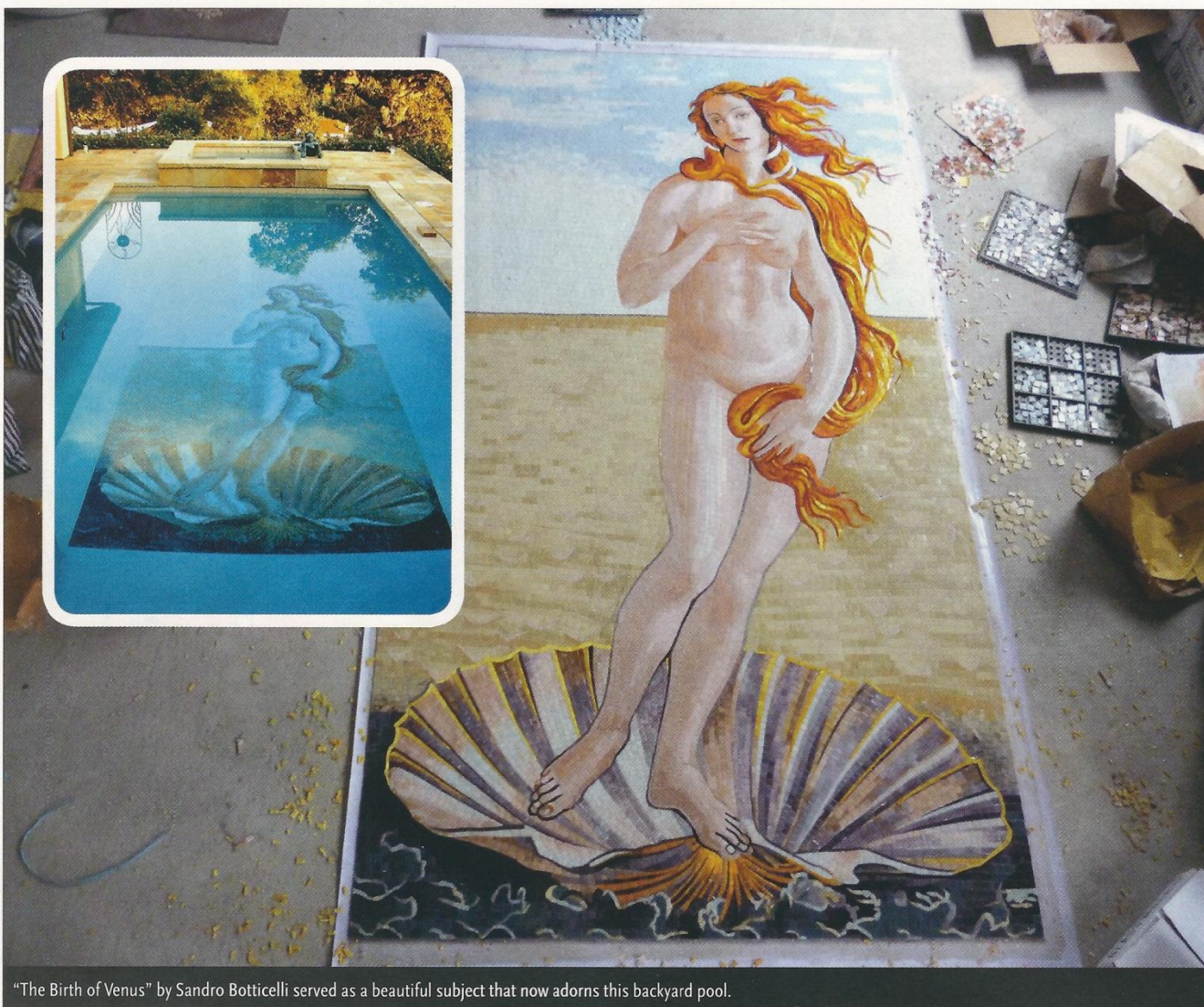
BY ERIC HERMAN

Since 1984, Stephanie Dittrick and her firm Agape Tile, LLC (Fort Myers, Fla.), have created visual works of tremendous artistic range and power. Although her work spans a broad range of settings, the vast majority of her projects are in conjunction with swimming pools. Over the years, Agape Tile has garnered widespread press coverage, prestigious clients, a reputation for sensitivity to the setting and a willingness to take on the most daring of projects. Agape Tile was a first place winner of the Spectrum Award for Excellence in Design.

WHY DID YOU START AGAPE TILE?

I was living near Cherry Point Air Station, on the Neuse River, and our neighbors wanted a tile mural in their house. So I created a lovely mural of an Indian on horseback in underglazes. It was such a success, I went on to complete two bathrooms that were absolutely beautiful. One was a quilt on tile in

overglaze. The other was a boat on the sand encircled by ropes with a shell backsplash. It was then that I decided to create a mural for our newly remodeled dining room facing the water. The mural was a failure. Many of the glazes ran together, so, much to my neighbors amazement, I did it a second time. I have a background in printing, so I went to a printer's shop



"The Birth of Venus" by Sandro Botticelli served as a beautiful subject that now adorns this backyard pool.

nearby and purchased printer's carbon, a heavy carbon paper that's not on the market anymore. Using the original artwork on paper, I traced the lines onto the tile, then glazed in between the lines, fired it in a kiln, and it worked.

That is when I decided to found Agape Tile. I chose the name "Agape" because it's Greek for love. That was in 1984.

WHY TILE?

Tile, to me, includes *all* of the materials we offer, not just ceramic tile. Working in so many varied materials and material combinations further enhances our artistic possibilities. We believe in using only materials that last a lifetime. If they don't, we do not offer them. That is why, for example, we do not produce image sublimation murals or use seashells for swimming pool environments. We want the work to look brand new 40 years down the line, just like it did the day it was installed.

IS THAT TO SAY THAT YOU'RE ALWAYS CONSIDERING THE EXPERIENCE SOMEONE HAS VIEWING YOUR WORK?

Yes, it's all about generating a truly positive experience. As

artists, all we can ever do is our very best. Every client is different. Some like to interact with us down to the finest detail while others just let us run with it. We work with the images or themes that they have in mind. It's always nice when they have a theme as it makes a good starting point. At the same time, we always strive to exceed their expectations. That's how we make people happy, and hopefully create repeat customers and referrals.

HOW DO YOU LIKE WORKING WITH POOL BUILDERS?

I think they're wonderful people, and over the years we've established some great relationships. That said, they're not typically the ones doing the buying because they are concerned about meeting their deadline for pool completion. What most do not realize is that for a four week wait time they could have a knock-out pool!

For us, it's almost always the customers themselves who purchase directly from us. We often receive calls from clients saying their pool is almost done and now they would like to order the art to go into it. This limits what can be produced in a short period of time. It is always better to plan ahead.

For the most part, the interaction we have with pool and



A variety of detailed oceanic images against striking blue field tile transform this pool into a celebration of aquatic life.

spa builders is about the installation process. If they have no one to install murals, we offer a crew to do so. We typically do not discuss a custom waterline or mosaic artwork as most of the time, the pool is already finished or close to it.

WHAT PERCENTAGE OF YOUR PROJECTS ARE IN CONJUNCTION WITH POOLS?

Around 80 percent, whether it's field tile, a custom waterline, an all-tile pool with or without custom artwork, a large mural on the pool bottom or an entertainment area adjacent to the pool. Of course, we do other things, such as custom kitchen backsplashes and baths and custom countertops. We are currently nearing completion on an all-tile pool in Florida that is over 2,100 square feet in size that features over 1,000 square feet of our custom artwork in glass mosaic.

DESCRIBE YOUR PROCESS WORKING WITH CLIENTS. HOW DO YOU DETERMINE WHAT THEY WANT?

It's all about asking questions to discover their needs. Some clients have very specific ideas, while with others you have to discover what subject excites them.

It's also very important to talk about budget; after all, you can't give someone something they can't afford. We give them all of their options and the price for each. A low-budget

pool and spa would entail a custom waterline and perhaps step and swimout inserts, while a medium budget pool would be one with a pool bottom mural and custom waterline. Only the wealthy can afford an all-tile pool.

When a homeowner calls, they have already decided that we are the company to do their pool and spa. It is never a sales call, it is a question call: What are their needs and ideas? When do they wish the project to be completed? Do they have a favorite style of artwork or a theme in mind? What is their budget? The end result should be a happy pool owner whether the project is \$1,500 or \$400,000.

YOUR WORK COVERS A BROAD RANGE OF SUBJECTS AND STYLES. IS IT CHALLENGING TO WORK ACROSS SUCH A BROAD ARTISTIC BANDWIDTH?

Not really. It all comes naturally. Having studied art from early childhood on through high school and college, I have never been daunted by any subject matter, whether it is portraiture or an entire in-depth theme, such as the pool we are creating now. We invest innumerable hours in research for a themed pool.

For me, it all starts with portraiture. I believe if you can create a portrait, then you can should be able to create artwork of any subject. At least that's the way I see it, there are others who might disagree.



But to answer your question, we create art for an almost infinite range of subjects. This is one of the factors that sets us apart. Customer satisfaction has always been our motivating factor — it's not about the money. We offer them a unique artwork that is all their own at the best price, in the best quality coupled with our extensive expertise.

If I were creating in a vacuum, without customer input, I would create my own personal style of swimming pool. It would definitely not be the norm. Instead, the motivational factor is another's vision. Of course, they may have no particular vision, in which case, it is my goal to paint one for them in their mind.

DOES IT REQUIRE A GREAT DEAL OF RESEARCH ON YOUR PART TO CREATE A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT?

Depending on the subject, developing the design can require a tremendous amount of research. One of our early pools was created for a client on St. Maarten who wanted a Mayan design. We spent many hours at the library researching old artist renderings of Mayan temples. When spreading the innumerable pages of the artwork out in our studio/warehouse floor, we discovered that many of the fragments matched. The end result was a duplicate of the original temple artwork, including the original colors! The pool owner was amazed, and so were we. It was sort of a miracle how that came together and it would've been absolutely impossible without all that vast research.

Other styles are simple or familiar so it doesn't always take that much time. Either way, an education in art history is crucial to being able to work with so many different styles and design traditions. Creativity is an ongoing process where the subject matter drives you to constantly educate yourself. It never stops.

DO YOU ENJOY CREATING ARTWORK THAT IS SUBMERGED IN WATER?

Yes. Whether or not it's submerged and at what depth definitely influences the design. If someone wants an 18-inch medallion in the shallow end of the pool, they are in trouble because a medallion of this size is too small to see on the pool floor, at any depth, unless you are viewing it underwater. So, something as basic as size is heavily influenced by the work's location underwater.

You have to keep in mind scale, the colors you're using, contrast and the level of detail, and how the depth of the water influences all those things. Generally speaking, for images that are viewed through water, we use bright colors and/or strong contrast. In those situations, subtle details are wasted, unless you're swimming underwater.

IS IT FAIR TO SAY YOU LOOK AT WORKING IN AQUATIC ENVIRONMENTS AS A PURELY PRACTICAL MATTER?

Water means more than that to me because water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. When you read the Bible, it talks about that. Water is symbolic — it carries a deeper meaning. Water cleanses; it's a source of blessing. It has energy, and it's alive. —

For more information on Agape Tile's custom swimming pools and spas go to www.agapepoolsandspas.com.

