

## *West End Word*

### **“Pieces of art”**

(by Matt Blickenstaff - July 22, 2009)



Sitting in her above-garage ceramics studio, Nicole Lemkemeier enjoys an idyllic view. Out of one window, decades-old trees tower and sway in the breeze; out of another, Lemkemeier’s two children climb on a wooden jungle gym.

“It’s kind of my treehouse,” Lemkemeier said.

In her treehouse studio she crafts intricate tile murals modeled after scenes from the natural world, featuring hundreds of individually cut and richly painted pieces, assembled to create whimsical depictions of trees, streams and landscapes. Her labor-intensive installations can take weeks to produce as each piece is textured, painted and glazed.

While Lemkemeier’s work shares some similarities with traditional mosaics, her artwork is far more than a collection of tiny square tiles.

“When you say mosaics most people think of plates you break up and stick on garden balls,” she said. “There’s a little more going on.”

However she describes it, Lemkemeier’s art earned the 2009 Grand Center Visionary Award for Emerging Artist earlier this summer.

“I had no idea I was nominated and I was really floored,” Lemkemeier said. “It was a wonderful honor.”

Lemkemeier had little experience with ceramics when she graduated in 1998 from Washington University with a degree in art and art history. Her emphasis was originally in printmaking, but after leaving school and deciding to stay in St. Louis, she found employment at the Hellmuth Dunn Company, a local producer of hand-thrown pottery. She applied her printmaking skills to painting decorative flowers on pots, plates and saucers.

“To be honest I didn’t really know much about ceramics,” Lemkemeier said. “I feel like what I know I’ve learned on the fly through trial and error.”

As her interest grew, Lemkemeier began creating her own work and taking it to Krueger Pottery in Webster Groves for firing, until her longtime boyfriend bought her an extravagant gift — a new kiln. Keen to not let this present sit idle, Lemkemeier started

experimenting.

“It gave me an enormous amount of freedom to try out new things,” she said.

Lemkemeier married that generous boyfriend and their new home was the perfect canvas for her expanding talents: she created a kitchen backsplash adorned with budding dogwood branches and then moved on to a fireplace featuring a panoramic landscape of Colorado mountains.

After the birth of her first son, Nathan, in 2004, Lemkemeier’s work took a fanciful twist. She created a sweeping tile tree at the back entrance of her house. The “Mudroom Tree” came complete with beady-eyed woodland creatures and fluttering butterflies.

Lemkemeier turned her homespun talent into a profession in 2006, when The Magic House commissioned her to create a series of hopscotch courts in their outdoor play garden. The courts each represent a different country and their unique hopscotch style. Children can jump and skip to the customs of China, Nigeria, El Salvador or Italy.

Since then, Lemkemeier has been invited back to the Magic House as part of its Visiting Artist Series. She enlisted the help of the young workshop attendees to paint nearly 200 clay leaves and then used the pieces as the canopy for an 11-foot tall ceramic tree.

“I really love kids’ creativity, which sounds a little cheesy, but it definitely helps to free up my own creativity,” Lemkemeier said. “It always makes me reevaluate what I’m doing or what I’d like to do.”

In 2007, her second son, Simon, was born and she received another commission, this time from the City Academy in North St. Louis. The two mosaic murals she designed for the school span over 70 square feet. She pieced the murals together with every free moment, sneaking away to her studio whenever the boys were taking a nap or playing in the backyard, but she had a little help.

“Nathan is totally my art guy and I love it,” Lemkemeier said as Nathan fiddled with a tape measure, letting it clatter to the floor. “I’m not pushing it, but he’s completely creatively bent and it’s really fun to have his interest level there.”

He brings up little bits of backyard debris and never hesitates to give his opinion on his mother’s latest project.

“I’m a good craft maker too,” Nathan said, holding a metal tray full of twigs and florescent green walnuts. “I make big ones.”

Although some of her larger works are decidedly kid-oriented, Lemkemeier’s creations aren’t limited to playrooms and blacktops. Her one-woman company, Mirthworks Tiles, also produces custom kitchen backsplashes, fireplace surrounds and individually-framed abstract tile pieces.

The demand for Lemkemeier's work has slowed along with the economy but she's busy looking after her two sons, helping Nathan expand his portfolio on a kitchen bulletin board and donating some of her work to charity auctions around town. In the meantime, as she waits for new projects to roll in, Lemkemeier gathers a little creative inspiration from her treehouse studio view.