

# the Arts page

## When nature and culture collide



Michael Zajac. 2009

Grace Nickel in her Winnipeg studio with "Forked Tree" (porcelain), from her commission for the Beechwood National Memorial Centre in Ottawa. The piece is one of four commemorative porcelain trees created for the site. "Not only do the tree pieces memorialize what has passed, they also embody a measure of hope," says Nickel.

By Lori Penner

Grace Nickel never planned to become a ceramic artist.

In fact, when she entered art school, she had never touched clay before.

But, with a little encouragement from two of her professors, the Winnipeg artist soon began what she calls a life-long love affair with clay.

"Its amorphous quality and its malleability, allowing it to be formed into pretty much anything the mind can conceive is what has enduring appeal for me," she says.

Nickel is the feature artist for the opening season of Gallery in the Park this May and June. Having grown up in the Altona and Plum Coulee areas, she says she is thoroughly impressed with the gallery and is excited to be reconnecting with her roots.

Looking back, she says her father was her greatest artistic mentor.

"He was talented not only in music, but also in drawing. His sketchbooks, filled with drawings of cowboys and famous country singers fascinated me then, and have remained a lasting inspiration. It is through my parents' encouragement that I pursued art-making. My mother is also very creative and a skilled craftsperson, particularly in sewing and needlework. While my father instilled an attitude of inquiry, she taught me about reaching for excellence."

It is this curiosity and hunger for excellence which garnered success in the Mino Competition in Japan, and earned her the Golden Ceramics Award in Taiwan and the Fletcher Challenge Award in New Zealand. Nickel has also been an Artist In Residence in Australia, Canada, China and Taiwan.

In 2007 she traveled to China as one of 10 Canadian ceramic artists invited to create work for the permanent collection of the new Canadian Ceramics Museum, one of a series of international ceramic museums being built in Fuping in Shaanxi Province.

Her work appears in numerous public and private collections including the National Museum of History in Taiwan, the Taipei County Yingge Ceramics Museum, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the Claridge Collection in Montreal and the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

Nickel currently teaches ceramics at the University of Manitoba and was recently awarded a public commission for the Beechwood National Memorial Centre in Ottawa, a new building located in the Beechwood Cemetery which was designated Canada's national cemetery.

She is creating an installation of four

commemorative porcelain trees for the site. The tallest is a seven-foot tall forked tree.

Entitled "Devastatus Rememorari," the work is a departure from Nickel's internationally respected architectural ceramic forms. One review called it "a tribute to the awesome, random forces of nature and our human attempts to understand and control the resulting chaos."

"Not only do the tree pieces memorialize what has passed, they also embody a measure of hope. I am reclaiming fragments of trees that have been destroyed, and rebuilding them in a new medium that is both durable and fragile. I am applying clay text to my porcelain trees and this represents a type of growth, a new bark for the trees that is made up of words. In this way I am setting up a dialogue between nature and culture — the two strands, either in competition or in cooperation, make up the human experience," Nickel says.

### Altona enjoys premiere

Devastatus Rememorari will be installed in Ottawa this summer, but first, Altona will get two months to enjoy it

Over the next six months, Nickel will also be making work for a November exhibition in Perth, Australia.

"I plan to travel there in July to continue work on some collaborative pieces I started in Winnipeg last summer with my friend and colleague Sandra Black from Western Australia. I'm also designing a series of smaller porcelain works for the exhibition."

While the larger pieces are the most challenging and gratifying, Nickel says ceramic work, itself, is filled with endless challenges. "There are so many stages from start to finish where things can go wrong."

"I usually begin with drawings, and then rigorously test clays and glazes for a while before I begin on the large works. All my recent work is made of porcelain which is highly demanding. Problems such as severe shrinking, cracking, warping, and slumping are common with porcelain, so sound construction and firing techniques are paramount."

Nickel makes her own porcelain, and for the large works, adds paper pulp to create a more cooperative clay body for construction.

"My pieces are not only large, but also highly detailed, so I can easily spend two to three months on a single piece. Part of the appeal of working in clay is that you can never gain complete control, and catastrophe can strike at any stage."

"When it all comes together, it seems like a miracle," she added. ■

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