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## INTO THE WOODS

A NATURE LOVER TO HER CORE, ARTIST LEANNE CULY GETS RIGHT TO THE HEART OF WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW.





**OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT** Workdays usually start with feeding the chooks and doing a bit of gardening, before getting into the studio and not stopping until five. **OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT** When asked how she creates her interesting glazes, Leanne says, “I’m on a learning curve with glazes. At this stage, most of mine are happy accidents or collabs with other artists, so I’m keeping my forms as unadorned as I can until I learn more. I actually love the simplicity of the clay being upfront and undressed — I like the terracotta showing itself.”



Leanne Culy reckons she popped out of the womb interpreting the world in a creative way. Art was her favourite subject at school, kickstarting a career that traversed graphic design, interior design, styling for still shoots and TV, then making low-impact commercials while raising two daughters on an organic farm in the Wairarapa with her photographer/cinematographer husband Brian. Painting followed, then a move into designing her own fabrics and furniture, which resulted in opening a store in Ahuriri/Napier called Homebase Collections. In 2019, she became a full-time artist, and since taking up ceramic modelling in 2020 and doing a stint at Coromandel pottery Driving Creek last year, she’s been exploring a new medium, clay.

**Leanne, what’s wonderful about art being so central to your life?** Being creative doesn’t just mean you paint pretty pictures — it also gives you the ability to problem-solve and makes you resilient, and I’m grateful for that. There’s never a dull moment when you’re an artist. A rudimentary task can be turned into a creative one, making life constantly interesting.

**Many art lovers will know you for your painted oars — how did they come to be your signature piece for 20 years?** I was living in Kerikeri in the Bay of Islands at the time and that beautiful part of the country inspired me to tell cultural and environmental stories. I began to combine poetry and painting on pieces of wood, then when I ran out of wood I happened to have a wooden oar that turned out to be the perfect symbol to paint on, so I never looked back.

**You also create watercolour paintings and have talked about the out-of-control element of working with this medium as an “unknown participant” — what do you love about it?**

The oars were a product of problem-solving. They’re tight and disciplined, so they needed to follow a pattern or they went to pieces. I always had an instinctive sentiment I wanted to convey, so they had to tell a story and relied on symbolism and painting in a pictorial way. Now I’m contrasting that with water and colour, which I don’t want to control at all. I wanted to stop drawing what I saw and paint what I felt, so that’s what I’m trying to do.

**And what motivated you to delve into clay?** I’d had a few encounters with clay over the years, but never took it seriously. Then I did a two-day hand-building class with Kay Ogilvie in the Coromandel, and something clicked. Since that class, I haven’t stopped making — I’m obsessed. The tree and wood-grain designs I developed took me right into my comfort zone and let me express my deep interest in nature — now they’re a signature form.

**Your birth mother and uncle Peter Oxborough were both potters — do you feel a deeper connection to this work because of that link?** I do feel more connected knowing this. I never met my birth mother, so when I’m in the studio working with clay, I sometimes feel as if I’m having a conversation with her.

**Your art is heavily informed by your love of nature — when did that start for you?** When you’re adopted, there are always the big questions of “Who am I?” and which parts of you are from nature or nurture. The natural world is something that’s always interested me and both my adopted and genetic family were lovers of nature, so I think maybe I have double the passion for it.

**How is your environmentalism embodied in your work?** I’ve had environmental concerns >

“WE HAVE THE MOST AMAZING BIRDLIFE HERE ON NAPIER HILL, SO I MAKE SURE I JUST SIT AND LISTEN EVERY DAY. THAT MAKES ME HAPPY.”





**ABOVE** Leanne thinks of herself as a ceramic artist as opposed to a studio potter, but still wants to make objects that are useful, like these lamps. "I love the concept of illuminating the forest from a hollowed-out log — it might even enlighten us to the need to care for trees," she says. "In a nutshell, these lamps are about that. The hollow shape is a repeated sculptural form I'm using a lot to project and hold light." **LEFT** The hues she chooses for her watercolour works depend on what she's focusing on, but influenced by the bush she saw at Driving Creek, she's made a recent shift from bright florals towards greens and browns. "I'm deep in the forest with my colours," she says.



for a long time, but I don't consciously set out to make each piece embody them — I just start making what I love and my instincts set me on a path. I do wear my heart on my sleeve when it comes to the correlation between my art and my environmentalism, though. It's instinctive to me, it's in me, it's everything to me, so it's always present in my work.

**What do you hope your pieces make people think?** I guess I can't make people think, but I can say something on behalf of nature. I hope people feel something, and see the connection and need to observe and care for the environment. I had a more descriptive message on my oars, about how we impact nature. With my ceramic work, it's more about mimicking or resembling it to bring awareness to it. For example, my ceramic log work is a tribute to trees and also a nod to their destruction.

**Have this year's stark examples of the effect climate change is having influenced your work**

**in any way?** These issues have always been with me, but the disasters have amplified my concerns. We're seeing the effects of what we do speeding toward us like a train we can't stop and it deeply affects the way I work. I feel like there's a sense of urgency to change and a lot of lost opportunity. Given both [the issue and art] are about problem-solving and respect, I believe artists should take charge of the climate crisis. My latest show at Spa\_ce gallery in Napier [in August/September] was created for the time of doom and gloom we're in. I created work that was fun, full of hope and bordering on alternative, because I felt like that's what was needed.

**What's one thing you think we should all be doing right now?** Taking any opportunity we can to prioritise the health of the planet. I say this with a lot of caution as it's all well and good for me to say. Not everyone has the luxury of making this a priority, but if you can, go hard! ♣  
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