

# Local artist earns slot in top arts festival

By Thaddeus Mast

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Artists use many mediums to express themselves, from oil on canvas to woven tapestries, but one Laramie artist is using a more humble material — concrete.

René Williams works with interior decorating and real estate but lets her artistic side really shine after she steps into her studio, complete with a kiln and a big garage door.

“First, when I was remodeling our house, I used stained concrete floors, concrete countertops, but I always thought of it as an architectural thing,” she said. “But when I was in art school, I started incorporating it in all my work.”

Shelves of her signature work — various styles of concrete houses — sit around her studio, with more wet concrete setting into molds in the middle of the room.

“I was going to make large outdoor sculptures, but I wanted to test my concrete recipes, so I thought, ‘I’ll just make a lot of one shape and write down the recipes,’” she said. “I made a house out of paper to make a mold, and I made my first house.”

This year, Williams was invited to the Cherry Creek Arts Festival in Denver on the Fourth of July. While more than 1,000 artists apply, only 150 are accepted.

“Cherry Creek is one of the top fine art festivals in the country,” she said. “I’m the only person from Wyoming. There are people from Colorado and California and New York, and there’s only one Wyoming person on the list.”

Williams’ concrete houses separate her from many of the other artists at the festival.

“Concrete is a unique material,” she said. “A lot of traditional artists do painting or drawing or, when they do sculptures, it’s with metal or ceramics. Concrete is one of those things I’ve been in love with since I was a kid. But I really fell in love with it when we moved to France for a while, and that’s when I



René Williams

René Williams smiles June 23 while at work in her studio.

started to see concrete in architecture and see it all blend together.”

While concrete houses will be the main focus of the Cherry Creek festival, local collaborations with University of Wyoming faculty are taking her away from concrete and into the past.

“We started collaborating late spring and early summer of 2015 on the Science Loves Art project,” said Cynthia Weinig, professor of botany. “We received a small award from the (Biodiversity Institute), whose aim is to couple science and art projects and the expression of science through art and making science more accessible to laypeople.”

Williams, Weinig and three other UW faculty members are currently working to create fossils in glass.

“I was happily surprised by how accessible art was,” Weinig said. “It was really interesting to examine plant life from an artistic perspective. Coupling science specifically with an artist provides these opportunities to reveal beauty in the natural world we don’t typically see.”

The glass pieces, integrating million-year-old fossils and modern living plants, will be on display in various shows throughout the summer. However, Williams said the program could surpass the glass.

“My goal is to have more access to kids, and with Science Loves Art collaboration, we’re making science art kits for kids across Wyoming,” she said. “We ordered all these crayons, and we have fossils, and we made these kits we’re preparing and sending them to schools across Wyoming.”