

Vercruyse stands among a display of pods on her Washington County farm.



A wood-burning kiln in Big Table Studios' pottery workshop.



## Liz Vercruyse . Pods (large and small), Bottles and a Refrigerator

**D**RIVING THROUGH THE HILLS of rural Washington County, it's easy to spot Liz Vercruyse's place—her mailbox has a terra cotta carapace covered with spikes. It calls to mind her O! Project, My Spiky O! (2007), currently at Harvey Oaks Plaza, and spikes have been a leitmotif of Vercruyse's work for the past decade. Her pointy pieces have been variously described as energetic, aggressive, protective, primordial, off-putting, and invitingly tactile. While her work may be hard to pigeon-hole, it's sure to elicit a response.

A walk in the country is rewarded with bristles and burs stuck to your clothing. Some of us regard them as annoyances, others take a botanic interest, and still others admire their form. Vercruyse is in the latter category. On these 200 acres of her late grandfather's farm, there are plenty of seed pods to admire. She and partner John Martelle converted the farm's machine shed into a pottery workshop, Big Table Studios, in 2005. Its open space is now filled with long wooden worktables, pottery wheels and kilns, buckets of supplies, and shelves of work, drying and finished. Just outside the studio, the couple built a 250-cubic-foot anagama-style wood-burning kiln. Its chamber is big enough for Vercruyse's tallest pieces, "pods" measuring 54 inches high.

"I love to read the ash patterns on these simple, unglazed forms," she says, running a hand over the dry, gritty surface of one of the large pods. She points out a cloud of sparkly gray ash on the reddish stoneware, the flow lines made by the fire's breath, liquescent ash pooling where it began to melt. Starting

with 240 pounds of wet clay, these giants are built in sections over a week to 10 days. In addition to a daunting physical challenge ("The material can be tricky"), each also requires an emotional commitment that is tested should the pod break during firing.

Porcelain "three-legged bottles," lined up on a shelf, are much smaller—about 10 inches tall. Vercruyse enjoys their malleability, both in her hands and during the firing. The kiln's heat (2300°) seems to animate them; they emerge with their delicate necks turned this way and that, their toes en pointe. It is this serendipity that leads Vercruyse to describe the studio as having a "climate of surprise." From first idea to the sales table, there are a myriad of unexpected ways a piece can change. In addition to individual pieces of sculpture, Vercruyse creates assemblages of ceramic pieces and found objects, both mobiles and stables. "The outbuildings are full of old equipment and parts," says Vercruyse. Disconnected from their original function, these pieces are appreciated aesthetically; in combination,

metal and clay elements take on a new life.

Vercruyse's work has been recognized with awards and commissions over the years, most recently a 2010 Individual Artist Fellowship from Nebraska Arts Council. Currently she is one of five artists selected for Omaha Public Power District's green-themed Refrigerator Art Project. As a fun way to promote OPPD's refrigerator recycling program, each artist was given an outdated refrigerator to use as a "canvas." Refrigerarium is Vercruyse's interpretation of a terrarium. For the latest siting (and sighting), go to [www.oppd.com/AimGreen/22\\_006092](http://www.oppd.com/AimGreen/22_006092). [HerLiving](#)

*Liz Vercruyse's website is [www.lizvercruyse.com](http://www.lizvercruyse.com). Big Table Studios is open to the public Mother's Day weekend and during the annual fall Omaha North Hills Pottery Tour, and by appointment. Classes are also offered. See [www.bigtablestudios.com](http://www.bigtablestudios.com). Omaha North Hills Pottery Tour 2011 is scheduled for October 1st and 2nd. Learn more at [www.omahanorthhillspotterytour.com](http://www.omahanorthhillspotterytour.com).*