

## Artist Lesley Nolan molds stories with a sense of humor

**Amanda Sieradzki**  
Council on Culture & Arts

Ceramicist Lesley Nolan's "Branching Out" centers on a ponderous, androgynous figure with mahogany eyes lilted heavenwards. Two branches diverge from the top of its head and its torso is rooted in a square-shouldered stump. Adorned with glimmering fungi and an air of woodland mystery, the piece is a testament to Nolan's ability to tell stories in clay.

"I've always loved to be outside and with the pandemic I spent a lot of time hiking through the greenway," says Nolan. "I got interested in the forms of a lot of the fallen stumps and logs. There's this dying and decaying log and yet there's the life of the fungi, vines, and the seeds of something else that is growing up through it. I loved that whole circle of life kind of thought process."

Nolan's most recent clay works are on display alongside artist Barbara Balzer in their "Figures in Form" exhibition at LeMoyne Arts. While many of her works are a celebration of the human form as it is transformed by the natural world, Nolan did not start out in clay as her primary medium.

As a student in school, she was immersed in theater as her main artistic outlet. Nolan never took art classes, and instead was drawn to characters as they appeared on the stage. Nolan's grandmother was an oil painter, and her mother was a craftswoman. Coming from a long line of "army brats," Nolan says the true talent of the women in her family was curating their surroundings.

### From quilting to kilns

"These women were always creative in trying to create a home wherever they happened to land," says Nolan. "I think that creativity was instilled into me as a young child. It would be sewing or painting or little crafts here and there trying to make your home feel like home."

Nolan picked up quilting after the birth of her first son. Over time, she got more interested in using fabrics and appliques to make a variety of works. Then, in 1991, Nolan took a class in fusing glass which launched her into her next 25 years of creating colorful figures and forms. Nolan admits that she bought a kiln for her studio well before she took a class in how to use it. For her, it was love at first kiln.

"Yes, that's a good way to put it," laughs Nolan. "I like big ovens."

Moving to Tallahassee, where glass was readily available for purchase, she started her Facebook page, "Stories in Glass" and found ways to sell her works in outdoor shows around the state. She is inspired by glass artists like Duncan McClellan, who she met for the first time at a show in Dunedin. She and her husband built a studio in her backyard. When she's at a loss for what to make next, she follows McClellan's advice to clean and clear her space, giving her room to think.

She had first turned to fused glass when making tables out of muscadine vines. Nolan would try to give glass leaves a more natural shape, rather than being solely flat. While she enjoyed how process-oriented glass is as

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# Conversations IN CLAY



"I got interested in the forms of a lot of the fallen stumps and logs," said Lesley Nolan, who's "Branching Out" is part of LeMoyne Arts exhibit. LESLEY NOLAN

"Clay is immediate," Lesley Nolan said. LESLEY NOLAN

### If you go

**What:** Figures in Form: Barbara Balzer & Lesley Nolan

**When:** 11 a.m.-6 p.m., Tuesday-Saturday through Oct. 9

**Where:** LeMoyne Arts, 125 N. Gadsden St.

**Cost:** Free admission

**Contact:** For more information, visit [lemoyne.org](http://lemoyne.org) /. For more from Lesley Nolan, visit [leslynolan.com](http://leslynolan.com).



**"Life is a Shipwreck," by Lesley Nolan, part of the LeMoyné Arts exhibit.**

LESLIE NOLAN

## Nolan

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a medium, she soon began to feel limited by its rigidity. In 2014, Nolan made the switch to clay given its more intuitive feel and process.

### 'Clay is immediate'

Nolan is kept on her toes with clay given the amount of engineering and problem solving she must engage in to make the architecture of her pieces work. Even if something doesn't turn out as planned, she has no qualms squashing the clay back into a ball and starting over again. That's what she finds most rewarding about the medium.

"Clay is immediate," says Nolan. "You just start working with it and anything can happen, any moment can change what you're doing. I can be working on a face and suddenly decide that I want her to wink or have a sly smile. They're created spontaneously."

While some works happen in the moment, Nolan will sketch out other pieces for months and sometimes a year before she feels she can mold it in clay.

That was the case for one of the main pieces in the show, "Who are all these People in my head?" Much like a Rus-

sian nesting doll, a woman's face sits balanced on the lid of a jar, the top of her own head ajar with miniature figures climbing and pointing outwards.

Nolan likes to keep a sense of humor in her work, delivering clay figures that represent the human condition with whimsy, a wink and a smile.

Nolan finds inspiration everywhere—from books, online articles, delving into her subconscious or ruminating on a conversation with friends. "Life is a Shipwreck" is an embodiment of her point of view as an artist and brings to life author Voltaire's written sentiment.

### Humor is a bridge

"Life is a shipwreck, but that doesn't mean you can't sing in the lifeboat," quotes Nolan. "I feel like I've had a lot of major tragedies in my life, and even in my darkest hours I find that humor will often bridge you through some of those moments."

Nolan says she shares Balzer's same droll, wry humor in the way she approaches "Figures in Form," which is on display through Oct. 9. Many pieces deal in big themes like life and death, but mostly Nolan hopes people who see the works will walk away feeling connected with the stories and ideas.

"For me, art is my conversation with the world," says Nolan. "Creativity



**"Who are all these People in my head?" LESLEY NOLAN**

comes from creativity, so the more that you create things, the more that you see things. It's like a wheel that just keeps going. It's an infinite movement."

*Amanda Sieradzki is the feature*

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