

PEBBLE POWER

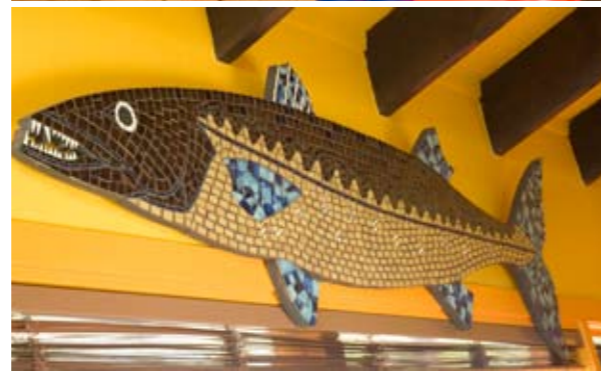
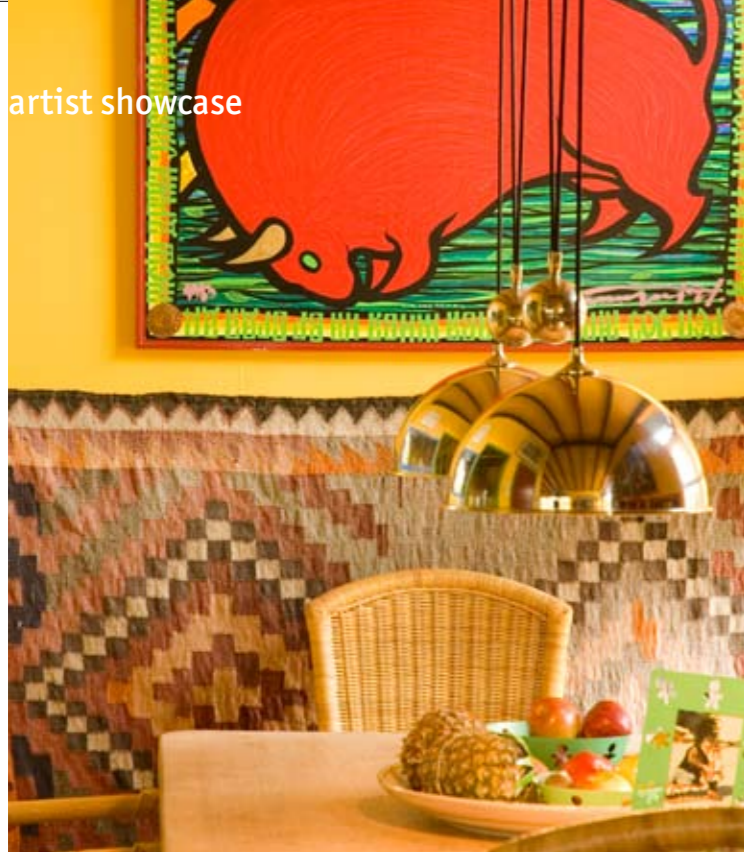
John Botica has a passion for the texture and patterns of pebble mosaics

STORY: Alice Leonard • PHOTOGRAPHS: Karen Abplanalp



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The laborious process of inserting pebbles into a sandy base. *Koru Land*, in the foreground, was commissioned by the Manukau City Council for a new arts centre in Mangere; the compass piece behind it is destined for a holiday home in Samoa. Detail from a work called *Morning Star*. The toucan at the centre of *Toucan Whirl* was inspired by a frieze at a pre-Columbian site in Peru. A work featuring a cabbage tree.

FACING PAGE: John Botica and Kuzco, a cairn terrier named after the ancient Incan capital; John is fascinated by the indigenous cultures of the Americas.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: John was born and raised in Belgrade and many of the pieces in his art collection – such as this image of a bull – are by artists from the former Yugoslavia. The teddy bear lamps were bought in Germany. The barracuda is an example of John’s tile mosaic work. John with one of the moulds he uses to create pebble mosaics.

Spend a moment or two examining the smooth swirls and undulating lines of pebble mosaics and they draw you in. Soon you find yourself poring over individual pebbles and exclaiming over their beauty.

Aucklander John Botica caught the pebble mosaic bug three years ago when his uncle gave him a book on this ancient art. John was already an accomplished mosaicist, using bright ceramic tiles, and he was instantly intrigued by the textures and patterns that could be created using only natural pebbles. Since then, he says, pebble mosaics have become “the greatest passion of my life”.

“I still enjoy the tile mosaics but they don’t give me a thrill,” explains John. “The pebble mosaics actually give me goosebumps when I look at them! The sense of movement you can achieve in them is just incredible – it’s like a wave of texture.”

Although the colour variation is subtle, it’s still there. There are moss greens and duck-egg blues, pale creams and earthy tans, and blacks that constitute a whole spectrum in themselves, once you’re up close.

The work is divided into manageable segments that will fit on to the work table in John’s garden studio (though manageable is a relative term: each creation will weigh around 50kg to 60kg when complete). A frame is built for each segment and a layer of sand poured into the frame. Pebbles – carefully selected for their colour, size and shape – are placed resting on their narrow edges, supported by the sand.

Once a segment is complete – and that can take up to a week for a square metre, especially with the small pebbles that John favours – the top surface is covered with grout, to anchor everything in place. It’s like making an upside-down cake, if you’ll pardon the lightweight analogy. The finishing touch – the cake batter, if you will – is 75mm of concrete. Once the concrete is cured, the segment is inverted and cleaned up, ready to be put in place.

John was born and raised in the former Yugoslavia but had many family connections to New Zealand and completed his last two years of high school in Auckland. As a young man he was one of the top 300 tennis players in the world. >



artist showcase



Kuzco beside *Koru Land*, a commissioned work inspired by the petals of a Polynesian flower and waves.

He went on to become a professional tennis coach in the United States and Germany (his wife Karin is German).

“After we moved to New Zealand [a decade ago], I was very worried about whether I’d made the right decision for my family. Everything here was so different and tennis wasn’t a big enough sport for me to continue my career as I had previously.”

Since developing his passion for pebble mosaics, however, John is confident that emigrating was the right choice.

“We’re very happy that we can give our daughter Jodie [now fifteen] a New Zealand life. People are so friendly and open here and there are so many opportunities. In Germany, I never would have got commissions as a self-taught pebble mosaicist. But here, people see you can do something and they give you a chance.”

The pebble mosaics are perfect for public art and John has already completed seven projects for councils in the Auckland region. “They don’t take up any space because they’re set in the ground, but they provide a focal point in a large space. They’re very safe because the stones have smooth edges and don’t get slippery when wet. They’re beautiful and virtually indestructible. You can walk over them; you can even drive over them.”

As with his success in the tennis world, John doesn’t do things half-heartedly. When he first fell in love with the bright colours of tiled mosaics, he turned his house and garden into a vibrant mosaic wonderland. He now has his sights firmly set on being one of the world’s best pebble mosaic artists – and he’s already had enquiries that may lead to international commissions. His mosaic work *Tree of Life* was selected for a special edition of *Mosaic Yearbook* magazine – *Mosaic Art Now 2008* – as one of the globe’s 100 best mosaic pieces.

“I’m very grateful to New Zealand for the opportunities I’ve already had and I want to promote this beautiful country by working internationally, using symbols like the koru and our beautiful native plants.” ■

For more information on John Botica’s pebble mosaic work, see www.powerofpebbles.com.