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En plein air



Nature is the muse for the art of Julie Wiegand

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Inspiration is everything for artists, and that's especially true for Julie Wiegand, who expresses herself through her paintings of the Missouri countryside. For her it only takes a step outside the door of her unique home to find her muse and the subjects for countless oil paintings featuring the natural world.

Twenty years ago, Julie and her husband, Tommy Griesedieck, were living in a St. Louis suburb. "I am not a city girl," she relates. "I was ready to get out of the city and so was Tommy."

Friends told them about the abandoned Lyon School near Berger, and the couple immediately saw the potential in its thick limestone walls. Their multiyear efforts at turning the school into a home became a labor of love despite the challenges that are part of any restoration project.



Today the school built in 1868 forms the core of Julie's Lyon School Studio and Gallery. A recent addition to the school offers more living space, as well as room for the frequent patrons who visit the gallery in the country to listen to music, walk the mowed prairie paths and see Julie's latest efforts.

Here she is surrounded by nature. The property includes 14 acres of native prairie — which Tommy, a member of the St. Louis brewing family and a landscape artist, created out of a hayfield. His stone walls and walkways form the backdrop for native wildflowers along with colorful annuals such as irises, daisies and zinnias while tying the old work into the new additions to the school.

"We took it down to four walls of stone that needed complete restoration," Julie says. "The family that owned it used it for storage. It had been that way for 50 years."

One of the several contractors and craftspeople who worked on the restoration was Howard Schutt, who attended school here. "That was special using Howard to rebuild the place," Julie says. "We wanted to keep it close to the original."

One special touch was taking the original bell tower roof and turning it into a garden shed, which also incorporates the decorative cast-iron shell of the school's coal stove. The effect of the restoration is as natural as the ancient cedar tree that stands guard over the school.

Her studio's remote location proved to be a blessing for Julie when the pandemic hit in 2020. "I was grateful," she says of the home, which is served by Three Rivers Electric Cooperative. "I could walk out my door and go, 'Oh my God, I am so blessed to be here.' Because I could continue my work. I do feel an intense connection to nature and that is what's gotten me through the difficulties."

Whether it's painting from her front porch on rainy days or in the Missouri River bottoms near Augusta, Julie is never so happy as when she is working outdoors. She's a regular at "plein air" festivals around the state, taking part in the one at Augusta for 18 years.



Opposite page: Artist Julie Wiegand puts the finishing touches on a painting of pale lavender iris outside her studio. **Above:** Julie expresses the joy of the moment as sunlight breaks through on a cloudy day. **Below:** Julie and husband, Tommy, saw the potential in the abandoned Lyon School and lovingly restored it to its former glory. A landscape artist, Tommy designed the gardens and stone work that embrace the home. His business — Griesedieck Brothers Landscaping and Construction — designs and installs stone landscapes in Franklin and St. Louis counties and beyond.





Most of Julie's work focuses on nature, including landscapes as well as the flora and fauna she encounters. Examples of her paintings include, from top, "Feather and Lace," "Golden Girls" and "The Drink." Besides paintings large and small, she also creates murals for homes and businesses.

Plein air is a style of painting that originated in France. The idea is that the artist becomes immersed in the landscapes they are painting, using the changes in light and weather in their work. That style accurately describes Julie's art, which is done in impressionist style with the artist often using a single brush.

One of her works is a dramatic sunset painted at the Klondike Park boat ramp near Augusta. A mix of orange and pink, with darker tones of magenta at the edges, it depicts the last vestiges of daylight with just a hint of blue sky lingering.

"Most of my paintings I am trying to capture a mood or a moment," Julie says. "My goal is to memorize that moment before it changes. Sunrises change faster. Sunsets are great because they linger. You hold that moment. You try to record it with your vision and experience."

Another of Julie's paintings, titled "Shadows On the Hayranks," shows the windrows in a hayfield just as the sun breaks through gaps in the clouds. Only by being there with wet paint could the artist have recorded the way the light falls on the field. Sometimes she works from sketches or photographs as well.

Several of the paintings on display at the gallery are of cows in a field, another of Julie's favorite subjects. Her take on this commonplace scene has the feel of a daily gathering of old friends, gossiping over tea rather than chewing their cud. They each have a unique personality.

"One thing that happens when I am painting cows," Julie says, "they will come up because they are curious. I get a 20-minute window, maybe half an hour. And then they move on."

The youngest of a family of artists, Julie honed her skills while attending St. Joseph Academy in St. Louis, a college prep school that offered a lot of art education. But her desire to create art began much earlier. "It was always there," Julie admits.

Her first art show was in 1985 at the studio of her brother, Don, an accomplished sculptor based in Chesterfield where the family was raised. "I did sell some work and it felt tremendous," Julie says.

Initially her bread-and-butter was painting murals on private homes, businesses and even traffic boxes in St. Louis. This work included 60-foot murals for aviation company McDonnell-Douglas (now Boeing).

"For years I did floral patterns on walls," Julie says. "I was known for that. Instead of people doing wallpaper, I would start with a pattern on a room and just paint flowers. That was really how I earned a living for about 10 years. My paintings were a minor part of that."

Julie still welcomes mural commissions, but most of her talents today go into her oil paintings. Her work ranges in price from \$250 for small paintings to \$7,500 for an impressive take on wildflowers called "Bee Balm Bliss."

Rebuilding the old school and moving to the country seems like destiny to Julie. "We are giving it our love and affection," she says. "I don't need to run around and travel. I've got it all right here. It's a sweet spot."

You can learn more about Julie and her work by calling 573-834-5064 or visiting www.juliewiegand.com. To reach Tommy and his Griesedieck Brothers Landscaping and Construction call 314-805-1300.