

The World's Largest Collection of the World's Largest Things

of the World's Smallest Versions

Traveling Roadside Attraction and Musuem

Yeah, it's a mouthful. But for museum organizer Erika Nelson, well, she hopes to make it ...

PART OF AMERICA'S FABRIC

The world's largest ball of rubberbands. The world's largest electric shovel. The world's largest talking cow. Tourist traps? Not for Erika Nelson.

For her, they're part of the fabric that defines American culture.

"These things aren't just here to grab your attention for a few minutes and make you spend money," she said. "They have a purpose, or they at least did at one point."

"There's a reason somebody went out and built that big chicken, that big talking cow, that big shovel. Not everything is just a gimmick."

As a multimedia artist, Nelson has founded what is known as the World's Largest Collection of the World's Smallest Versions of the World's Largest Things Traveling Roadside Attraction and Museum and has based it out of the home of the Garden of Eden in Lucas. While the name is a mouthful, the concept relatively is simple.

Developed in 2001, the collection of the museum is made up of miniature versions of the world's largest items.

"When I travel to see these things, I take a few high-resolution photos of them, and then use them to create a small physical sculpture when I get back," Nelson said.

With having visited nearly 500 different sites in the country, the collection is relatively large.

"Most of these sites are in rural areas, and I want to tell the stories of these rural towns," she said. "These things are icons in a small sense, and they're a neat part of American culture. If you don't tell their stories, then when they're gone, they're gone."

One such example would be the Big Well in Greensburg.

"With (the Big Well), it's so well known and such a big old icon that it's a rallying point," she said. "I feel a connection to these things that most people wouldn't recognize right off the bat. It's what I call roadside vernacular architecture. Most of the people who make these things have little or no formal artistic training on their part, but what they create becomes iconic in some artistic form or another."

The museum is the result of Nelson's interest in art and pop culture's influence on it.

"It really started evolving through grad school, and it's kind of the result of off-beat explorations," she said. "But realistically, I've always been this way."

"The last 15 years or so have been when I've decided I can make my own career path."

Nelson earned her degree in commercial art from Central Missouri State and then obtained her advanced degree in fine arts through the University of Kansas, where she taught while finishing her degree. It was during this phase she learned about the museum at the Garden of Eden and its importance in pop culture art.

"Anybody who is educated in the arts of pop culture knows the importance of the Garden of Eden," Nelson said. "It's internationally known and probably the best place for an artist like myself to live and work."

True to her words, Nelson lives practically next door to the museum at the Garden of Eden. While she was born in Texas and raised in the Ozarks in Missouri, she feels more at home in Lucas.

"At one point, I was living in a bus traveling the country, and I drove through Lucas to see the Garden of Eden and the museum," she said. "I made my decision to move here, and a month later, I bought the house next door to the museum over the phone while I was in Arizona."

Since then, she has helped revive the museum at the Garden of Eden and wants to use it in conjunction with her traveling road museum.

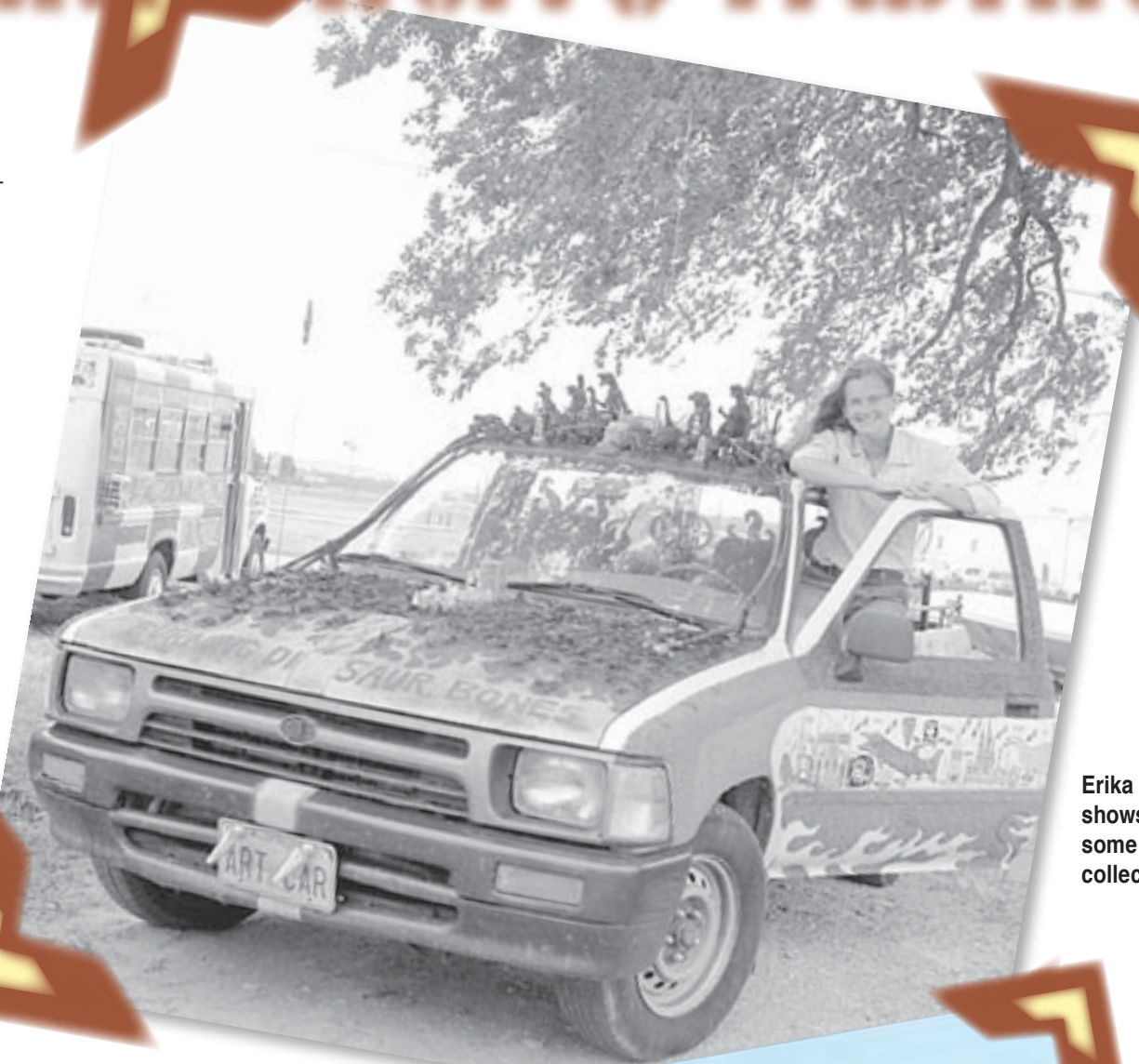
"We're in an expansion phase now, since we've moved the museum into nonprofit status. The old museum has been retired, and a new one is being made," she said. "We're going to start working on telling the stories of these rural towns, and in the long term, I'd like to see the museum continue beyond my tenure of involvement. It really is a neat part of American culture."

In the meantime, Nelson will continue taking her traveling museum on the road and hopes the arts commission listing will help her find more stories to tell.

"I'm now to the roster, and not really sure what it means for me yet, but the KAC will fund 40 percent of the artist fees if a community applies for my work through them," she said.

While a person can see the smaller versions of the very things that happen to be the biggest in the world, she says people still should go see the originals.

"I'm encouraging people to stop and ask questions and see what those odd things are in the back alleys," she said.



Erika Nelson shows off some of her collections.



Nelson holds a miniature version of her famous traveling bus.



STORY BY BRANDON WOLF
(WITH COURTESY PHOTOS)