

# Groutline

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## Yulia Hanansen: Juggling Art, Business and Family

Detail of Yulia Hanansen's 8 x 15 ft. stained glass tile mosaic mural, *Chippewa Creek*. Medina District Public Library, Medina, OH.

by Lynne Chinn

Photos by Yulia Hanansen

*Our friendship began on opening night of the SAMA exhibition in Chicago, 2006. She was looking at my artwork "Far Red," and I was drooling over her "Crater Lakes: Melting Snow." Neither of us could leave the show without the other's piece, and so an equal trade was forged without discussion of tesserae used, size discrepancies or time spent on the work. During my recent visit to Yulia's delightful, historically designated home (painted a vibrant kiwi green), with its eco-friendly garden of vegetables and flowers and her incredible three-level mosaic studio in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I was struck by the balancing act within her life: Yulia, as wife to her lovely husband Web, and mother to their tiny, precocious, 3-year-old daughter Minea, in contrast with the professional instructor,*

*businesswoman and fine artist equally at home in her light-filled studio. Yulia uses primarily stained glass to create her vibrant and highly detailed textural wonders. Her subject matter is varied but includes scenes from the cosmos, as well as more earthly images of plants, landscapes and flowers.*

**LC: Yulia, how long have you been a mosaic artist, and how many years have you owned and operated your business, MosaicSphere Studio?**

YH: I made my first mosaic back when I was a kid. Both of my parents are mosaic artists, and when we lived in the former USSR, they made large-scale mural installations. My brother and I used to climb the scaffolding together with them and “help out.” Professionally, I have been involved in mosaic making since 2001, when I opened my studio. [www.mosaicsphere.com](http://www.mosaicsphere.com)

**LC: Your father Yakov and mother Angele Hanansen are mosaicists who began their mosaic careers in the former USSR and eventually immigrated to the United States with you and your brother. They now work in their own studio in New York City (Unicorn Art Studio, Inc.). I’m aware that from them you learned academic drawing, how to make mosaics, create large-scale works, and weave tapestries. How has their style of mosaic art informed your work?**

YH: Working with and learning from my parents made me realize mosaics are a form of fine art. If you have a deep understanding of the principles and techniques of mosaic making, you can push that media beyond the “classical” style. I learned that mosaic can be the primary expression of an idea; that is, a mosaic doesn’t have to be merely a translation of a finished painting or design; it doesn’t have to be a copy of something already created. My parents almost always make sketches and designs for their future mosaics with the idea that the sketch is just a sketch; it’s the mosaic that will be the terminal expression of their idea.

**LC: You have a very exciting and extensive educational background in art and design. You received a BFA in graphics/painting/photography from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, an MA in graphics from the University of Michigan, and an MFA from Columbia University in printmaking/digital media. Does your background help you to create mosaics and to run your business?**

YH: Absolutely! Fine art education certainly makes the difference when I have to make design, color, and material decisions for my pieces. This knowledge is also very helpful when trying to convince a client of a certain image or composition!

Because working with glass reminds me so much of working with paint, I say that I paint with glass. Having extensive training and experience in printmaking has resulted in a layered mosaic technique I have been developing since 2005. When making prints (I teach printmaking at the University of Michigan), I almost always use several plates, which I have to layer one on top of another. This technique produces an effect of depth in the final image.

No matter how much you learn at art school, nobody is going to teach you the details of how to run a

successful art business. In the beginning, it almost drove me insane! Not only did I have to pay rent and taxes and keep up business records, but I also had to come up with the profit-making business model. As business grew, I had to fine-tune it to fit my goals and needs. In running an art business, it is crucial to be adaptable to changes, to make sure there is time dedicated to your personal work; and it is equally important to listen and cater to the needs of your clients, whether your students or someone commissioning an artwork. That is why my workweek is usually split between teaching mosaics, managing the studio/business, and – the most rewarding part – making my own work.

**LC: Where is your studio, and how is your work space set up?**

YH: I rent a three-floor studio space on a fairly busy street in downtown Ann Arbor. Ground level houses a classroom, an art gallery and a small mosaic supply shop. Downstairs has a woodworking/framing area, grouting and concrete casting workshop. The mezzanine is my personal art studio space where I can spread out and create. At the studio, I have the best lighting a mosaic artist could wish for!

**LC: You “wear a lot of hats” in the business you have created. For instance, I could see you offer and have created numerous public art mosaics; are involved in community-based mosaic projects; make residential mosaic that is ready for installation; take commissions – both fine art and architectural – and offer installation, too; you display and sell work from your “gallery” walls; you conduct retail sales of tesserae and tools; you provide many types of classroom instruction; and you produce fine art mosaic for exhibition, for yourself, and as gifts for friends and family. How important are these different aspects to you and to the health and the growth of your business? Also, how do you juggle them all so gracefully?**

YH: Teaching several classes each week helps bring continuous income to the studio. Not only do mosaic classes produce necessary income, they also help to grow the mosaic community and educate people about techniques. By now I have trained hundreds of mosaic artists. Commissions, especially large ones, are very important, as I get to do something different each time. So far I have been very lucky with my clients – they have all been well-wishing, reasonable people who admire the work I have done for them. Gallery space provides a display of my mosaics – it’s a “reality show.” My main source of getting the word out is my website, which I maintain and update frequently. It is not easy to juggle everything, and sometimes it seems I’ll lose my mind, but partitioning my time into task slots and being realistic about goals and possibilities helps a lot. I also have an extraordinary husband, who provides me with moral support. Now, that is the biggest help of all!

**LC: Since you have a degree from Michigan, and you seem to have a deep connection to the campus, do you have any interaction with the School of Art and Design? If so, is it important to you to stay current in this discipline?**

YH: Yes! I am an instructor of an advanced printmaking course at Michigan. Not only does it help me keep up with the quality of my work, it also helps bring back an “academia” style of teaching at the studio.

**LC: You try to employ eco-friendly techniques in all facets of your business and life. For instance, you drive a small, low-mileage car, you grow some of your own produce, you recycle and compost, you use reusable cotton rags instead of water and paper towels, etc. Why is this important to you, and what else can mosaicists do in their work to help the environment?**

YH: For me personally, it is common sense to use only as much as is needed. I can't stand when things that can be reused or recycled are being thrown away after a single use. It makes me think about the rest of the world, where there are fewer goods and they are more precious. Living in Ann Arbor – one of the most eco-friendly towns in the U.S. – made me realize things can change. From day one, I ruled out the use of paper towels in my studio (except in the bathroom). We cut up used T-shirts into rags. We also reuse containers and recycle as much as we can. I try to employ only non-toxic adhesives in mosaic-making. As for my garden – it is a great reward that I go to at the end of the day and on weekends, a gift from planet Earth.

**LC: Talk about the technique you have invented and use for your fine art mosaics.**

YH: I am using a layered glass mosaic technique, whereby tiles are first glued next to each other, and grouted, and then one or more layers are adhered on top of that layer. The tesserae are cut in the shape of a long boat; I call them “brush-stroke” cuts. They are quite dynamic and versatile in depicting many objects, especially topographic and cosmic views.

**LC: From snooping around the bookshelves in your home and at your studio, I noticed you have a lot of books that might interest someone who is into sci-fi and outer space (like me!). Also, your website says you “have a fascination with the cosmos and the connection of human beings to it.” How did this interest begin, and how would you like it to develop in terms of your artwork?**

YH: I don't go to bed without reading a sci-fi book or some type of astronomy-related material. My interest in astronomy started with the study of physics in middle school. Plus, I grew up in the '70s and '80s in the former USSR, where any spaceship launches or cosmic discoveries were very well-covered by the media. I really wanted to become an astronomer. I was fortunate to meet a guy (now my dear husband) who was equally crazy about astronomy and a sci-fi lover who was willing to look at the stars with me. Because I have a hard time pinning down my cultural belonging, I call myself a citizen of the planet Earth. I often say I live on Earth, but that my mind wanders beyond it. I think about the far future, space travel and alternative universes. If humans were ever to leave our planet, what shape and form would

they be in, in order to do that?

**LC: What are you working on right now?**

YH: As always, I have several projects going on. My current mosaic mural project, “Great Lakes Ecosystem,” is for the University of Michigan Matthaei Botanical Gardens. It has eight panels that are 42” x 42” each, made from stained glass, vitreous glass, smalti and found objects. It features eight ecological systems that form the Great Lakes ecosystem, and each panel depicts at least one plant that is common to a specific ecosystem. The construction of this project was made possible by a generous contribution of time and skills from my incredible volunteers. Some of them have been my students for many years, and some are complete novices. Recently, the mosaic panels were loaded on top of a car and taken to the site to be grouted and installed. The official opening of the mosaic project is scheduled for September.

I am working on a series of mosaics called “Starscapes.” This series will depict portraits of stars and their relationship to their environment. Stars are like people – some burn bright and fast, some burn dim and long, some are life-giving, some are explosive and intense, and all of them are inspiring and have a place in the universe. I hope to exhibit this series at my studio first, and then have this show travel to New York City. I also have several small commissions to work on while taking a break from my large-scale projects. And, as always, several sessions of mosaic classes are running every week.

**LC: What project or commission are you going to work on next? Or, if there is nothing specific right now, what would you like to do next?**

YH: I would absolutely love to work on another public mosaic project. My volunteers enjoyed working on the Botanical Gardens mosaics so much, now many of them are looking for new spaces for us to mosaic. As an artist, it is important for me to develop my personal work. This type of work comes from the depths of my head and my heart. It is not defined or limited by any size, color or media. After “Starscapes” is done, I would like to do another series dealing with the theory of evolution.

Somehow Yulia Hanansen manages to keep a good balance between the love of her art form, the serious business of educating good mosaicists, and the day-to-day grind of running a business. Needless to say, I am very fortunate to have been invited to visit this busy home and business! But then again, Yulia has worked as hard to keep our friendship alive as I have, and that is also about the balance in our lives.

***Lynne Chinn**, former graphic designer, art director, and oil painter turned mosaicist, lives with her husband Louis in Plano, Texas, where she owns and operates a very different kind of mosaic studio from her home. [www.lcmosaic.com](http://www.lcmosaic.com)*





