“Upon viewing the mosaic at a distance, it should be recognizable as the reflection of a tree. However, when walking by, or seeing the work up close, you will have a more intimate experience with the relief, textural surfaces and colors...they will change as you move. Glazes will reflect light much as water does, and will have a watery translucence to the colors.”
In May 2011, College of Arts & Letters alumna Anne Marie Karlsen traveled from her home in Los Angeles, California, to the Michigan State University campus. She had come to meet with the architectural team, the landscape architect, the construction company and the interior designer for the Case Hall building renovation project.

Karlsen, an art professor and accomplished art-in-public-spaces artist with nearly 30 major installations spread over several states and even two cruise ships, had been chosen by MSU’s Public Art On Campus Committee (PAOCC) to create a public art piece for the North Case Hall lobby. The assembled group presented Karlsen with the overall concept and theme of the Case Hall materials, colors, layout, feeling and function of the building spaces.

“Over the course of their presentation, I learned that Case Hall is often used for recruiting foreign students and athletes, as well as for orientation,” says Anne Marie. “It is often a student’s first impression of the MSU campus, and possibly the state of Michigan itself.

“In the PowerPoint presentation I viewed, and in the materials sample boards I was shown, the theme of Michigan’s natural wonders was readily showcased. The chosen elements, including wood, colors, photographs, light fixtures, and more, were all native to Michigan, and were meant to showcase the state and infuse Case Hall with a feeling described as a “lodge-like” experience; one that is connected to the outdoors.”

THE HEART OF CAMPUS

This connection with the outdoors jibed perfectly with many of Anne Marie’s memories of MSU, and she began thinking about how her art could complement and add to this experience. As an undergraduate student at Michigan State University in the early to mid ’70s, she had lived on campus for more than four years. And, as a student, her favorite memories came from the times she spent near the Red Cedar River.

“In my mind, the river served as the heart of campus. The changing seasonal colors of the trees, the light, and the flow of water, all provided an ever-changing and beautiful place to study, paint or just hang out with friends,” Anne Marie remembers.

Karlsen decided to explore the Red Cedar River as a focal point for her art. During her visit back to campus, she spent two days photographing the river under many different lighting conditions and compositions, taking several hundred photographs as she sought inspiration for the North Case Hall project.

“At first, I was interested in the mirroring of the trees in the flat surface of the river,” says Anne Marie. “One time, a group of ducks swam by making ripples all through the water. It created an amazing series of more abstracted patterns of the trees. This wonderful, unexpected surprise then became my artistic focus. I sought out areas of the river where there was more movement, and also tossed a lot of stones in the water to create and experiment with more circular rings.”

Karlsen returned to California having completed a considerable amount of investigation, research and photographic work.

PROPOSING THE ARTWORK

In August, Anne Marie returned to campus to meet with the PAOCC Committee, and proposed creating an undulating relief ceramic tile mosaic for the lobby of North Case Hall. The source image would be a photograph she had taken of trees reflected in the rippling water of the Red Cedar River. The size would be 8 feet wide by 12 feet tall, and the mosaic would be installed on the east wall of the main lobby, so as to be visible to both residents and those walking through the building.

Karlsen explained to the committee that she would be developing a uniquely formed tile for the project, in collaboration with the award-winning Mosaika Art & Design studio in Montreal, Canada, who would also be fabricating and installing the mosaic. Anne Marie showed the committee members a selection of the images she’d photographed, and then, one final image that had been manipulated digitally to alter colors and enhance certain features of the image. She went on to explain her interest in the mosaic image having a rippled, water-like texture: one that reflects light and color like the river does, and provides the impression of water, along with the reflection of trees and the sky.

“Another important aspect of the work, and central to my own working aesthetic, is that the artwork read in multiple ways to the viewer,” Anne
Marie told the committee. “Upon viewing the mosaic at a distance, it should be recognizable as the reflection of a tree. However, when walking by, or seeing the work up close, you will have a more intimate experience with the relief, textural surfaces and colors...they will change as you move. Glazes will reflect light much as water does, and will have a watery translucence to the colors.”

In closing her presentation, Karlsen explained that she would be traveling to Montreal to work in the Mosaika studio to continue to develop and refine the mosaic tiles, textures, colors and image resolution.

**MOSAIKA ART & DESIGN**

A design and manufacturing company with a fresh take on the ancient art of mosaic making, Mosaika Art & Design was founded in 1998, and is the product of the combined talents of its founders Kori Smyth (project director) and Saskia Siebrand (creative and technical director). In addition to administrative offices, the company’s Montreal headquarters consists of a tile-placement workshop, ceramic-glaze studio, and design space. As an added plus, Mosaika has its own crews of installers.

“My visits with Mosaika were some of the most enjoyable sessions I’ve had with a fabricator,” says Anne Marie. “During one visit, we actually worked with kitchen spatulas to get the right surface texture on some of the artwork’s larger ceramic tiles. It was a playful yet artistic and creative moment in the process—one that helped confirm for me that I’d chosen the right firm. Then, too, there was Mosaika’s ability to precisely match the colors in the photo of the tree’s reflection in the Red Cedar. It was spot on in every respect.”

Once the tiles and glass had been fabricated, Mosaika divided the 8 x 12 foot mosaic into multiple smaller sections, much like a giant jigsaw puzzle, for ease of transport, assembly and installation. A paper covering was affixed with soluble glue to the surface of each section to help protect it from scratches or errant mortar. Mosaika installers Emily Stoger and Mike Minnis drove the 626 miles from Montreal with the “Red Cedar Reflections” mosaic’s panels safely secured in the back of a van. They began installation in the lobby of North Case Hall on Monday, March 5, 2012, during spring break, and completed work a week later on March 12, as students returned to classes.

“To create and make art for MSU, where I was first encouraged to explore the myriad possibilities that a career in art presents, has been a joyful and humbling experience.”

In June, Anne Marie visited campus with her son, Tor, and saw her finished artwork in North Case Hall for the first time. She found the experience meaningful on both a professional and personal level.

“To create and make art for MSU, where I was first encouraged to explore the myriad possibilities that a career in art presents, has been a joyful and humbling experience,” says Anne Marie. “The mosaic’s title is ‘Red Cedar Reflections,’ and, on a personal note, that’s precisely what this project has been for me.”