



**GIVE ME SHELTER**

PARTNERS, MAKERS  
AND KINDRED SPIRITS  
KEMI AND NIKO  
LET SALVAGED  
MATERIALS DICTATE  
WHAT THEY CREATE.

WORDS  
Philippa Prentice

PHOTOGRAPHY  
Adrienne Pitts





**BELOW** The couple try not to go into town too often, so they've started a big vegetable garden at Penpyddle, where they're also continuing Niko's grandparents' reforestation efforts and restoring the wetland.



to move onto my grandparents' property in Wharepapa South came up. **Kemi:** Initially, we didn't know how long we'd stay, but it's been almost three years now and although rural, multigenerational living has its challenges, it has given us the space and time to clarify what we want to focus our efforts on.

**That's primarily building your Mini Huts, guided by one of your studio's core values: 'All materials salvaged'...**

**Kemi:** We were both working at Fidel's Café on Cuba Street and started taking the empty tin cans home to see what we could make from them. Flattened, they look like corrugated iron, which led to the idea of mini tramping huts. **Niko:** We've basically come up with a way to process a material that pioneering hut builders would use. We love that our Mini Huts populate homes and the fact we're not generating new waste makes that possible. >

Under the moniker Kemi Niko, the studio they founded a decade ago, creative couple Kemi Whitwell (Ngāi Tahu) and Niko Leyden take on all kinds of projects, including turning waste wood and tin cans into nifty collectable Mini Huts that replicate iconic ones in Aotearoa's bush and national parks. From the moment their partnership began, it's been underpinned by a shared ethos that deeply affirms why they do what they do: for the joy and adventure of art.

**So what strengths do each of you bring to your work?** **Niko:** Kemi's a natural maker with an incredible range of skills and knowledge. He's always had an appreciation for the Aotearoa vernacular and a tireless drive to use that to create new perspectives.

**Kemi:** Niko's as much a part of the design process as I am — I'm just the making muscle. She keeps me and the business on track and has the communication skills I sometimes lack. Amazingly, she puts everything together while also wrangling much of the domestic stuff.

**Your 'travelling studio' is currently based on Niko's family property, Penpyddle, in the Waikato — how long have you and your daughters Rhea (6) and Jade (1) lived there for?** **Niko:** In 2019, after eight years' working from our home studio in Wellington, we decided to live and work nomadically for a time. We went between housesits and friends' huts on the West Coast and near family in Kāpiti for a year before the opportunity



**RIGHT** This Mini Hut is a replica of the West Coast's Poet Hut. **FAR RIGHT** While living in the house Niko's grandparents built in the '70s, the pair are building this tiny house. "With everything else on our plate, building SlowPoke is slow going, but we prefer it that way," says Kemi. "We're making every part from scratch, so the more time we have to ponder and experiment, the better. We salvaged and gathered most of the materials, including the timber and glass in the windows we built, so that all takes time." Although SlowPoke's interior is yet to be finished, the family has recently started using it as an office and play space. **OPPOSITE, BOTTOM** A hut from the new Bigatures range in the workshop.



**You're illustrators too — what work have you done lately?** *Niko:* We love graphic design and drawing, and have done some awesome work for companies and causes that align with our values. We got to do the latest Green Party merchandise, which was a dream job. How cool that our illustrations are on the world's first political underwear!

**You also work on lots of public art projects and exhibitions...** *Kemi:* We make art that enhances the experience of being outdoors. I often want to touch artworks, so we figured we should make art that's interactive. Our biggest project to date was for the 2020 Aotearoa New Zealand Festival of the Arts. We built five small huts from salvaged materials in parks along the Kāpiti Coast. Some are still there. *Niko:* That was another dream project. Bret McKenzie saw our potential and the Festival took a chance on us, to great success. They say never meet your idols, but Bret could never disappoint. We've

been inspired by what he and Taika Waititi and their Wellington peers did for the city and the world — it gave us the confidence to try ourselves.

**What other kinds of projects can people commission you to work on?** *Kemi:* We're working up to offering commissions of specific tramping huts that people treasure, in a larger scale than the Mini Huts. It's the range we're calling Bigatures that we've just started developing, and they're sturdy enough to potentially outlive their namesakes. For now, we're making the huts that inspire us the most. The first, Bealey Spur Hut [an homage to the hut in Arthur's Pass National Park], is going to be displayed in the Henry Trading window space in Lyttleton this summer. *Niko:* We love getting commissions from reserve groups and sanctuaries to create custom 'hutworks'. We did an awesome permanent installation for Ngā Manu Nature Reserve in Waikanae last summer, for which we created hut-based



**RIGHT** "We collect tin cans from a café in Te Awamutu and get 2x4 timber offcuts from building sites," says Niko of the origins of their salvaged Mini Hut materials. "We're always on the lookout for new sources of waste materials and have recently started contacting businesses about accessing their usable excess. The other day, we scored some old fishing nets from a company in Nelson that we'll turn into canopy nets for SlowPoke." Over the years, the couple has discovered many sources of useable 'junk', including tip shops. They also get offers from people in their community to go and pick things up. **TOP RIGHT** A consummate maker, Kemi also crafted this beautiful pounamu ring.



"Each Mini Hut is inspired by a real hut, so hiding its info in the chimney or tying it on with paper ribbon is important to telling that story." — NIKO



interpretations of native species and hid them throughout the bushwalk.

**You're both big on tramping — what do you love most about it?** *Kemi:* To us, staying in a tramping hut is almost medicine — it's our idea of church. To be able to go into the relative wilderness and sleep comfortably feels very special. *Niko:* It's hard to find the time to go tramping these days, but we're always on the lookout for local walks with huts close to a road end. Having your gear ready to go helps, because packing is definitely the worst part. It doesn't need to be flash either; most of our gear is from op shops or borrowed — work with what you have. Tramping really is the main thing that boosts our creativity. Every time we finally get out there, we get flooded with inspiration, and any problems we're struggling with are suddenly solved. *Kemi:* Gardening is the closest we get to that in everyday life. Everyone's happier with some dirt in their hands.

**We see you're making kimchi with some of the spoils — how's that coming along?** *Niko:* It's probably ready to be tasted — thanks for reminding me! ♡ [keminiko.com](http://keminiko.com)