

CERAMIC ARTS

Mudpuppy Studios settles in to Salt Spring practice

First open studio day set for Dec. 22

BY ELIZABETH NOLAN
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An experienced potter who is forging new roots on Salt Spring will open her home studio and gallery to the public on Friday, Dec. 22.

Mudpuppy Studios is the latest venture for Francine Hampson-Reid. Though fairly new to the island — she and her husband John Reid moved to the Channel Ridge neighbourhood from Calgary in August 2014 — she is deeply connected to the history of her craft on the West Coast. In a way, she's actually continuing a legacy, since her gas-fired kiln was partly built using bricks that came from the kiln of a renowned local potter who died in 2012.

"In January 2015 we spent the month hauling more than 1,000 bricks from Lari Robson's studio, back and forth, back and forth," Hampson-Reid recalled, describing it as a difficult but healing process for Robson's partner Diana Thompson.

The bricks are in good use in their new home, with the kiln anchoring the creative practice of someone who, like Robson, has spent decades specializing in salt-fired stoneware.

Hampson-Reid started learning ceramics at age 15 and then studied at the Sheridan School of Design in Mississauga and the Georgian College School of Design and Art in Barrie, Ont. While at the latter institution she learned under the influential English artist Robin Hopper. (He then moved to the West Coast where he set up the Metchosin International Summer School of the Arts and the region's famous studio scene.)

Hampson-Reid was at first drawn to traditional English pottery methods and learned the importance of mastering the technical aspects of things like throwing on the wheel, mixing her own glazes and achieving a successful firing. She opened studios early on in Springhill, Ont. and Hull, Que. Later she studied at the University of Calgary when the family moved to the city for Reid's work. They stayed there for 30 years.

The decisive turn to a specialty in salt firing came during a period when many artists were creating production molds of their designs and shining up the manufactured element with flamboyant hand-painting. Hampson-Reid's response was to produce a line of work that could not be mistaken for anything other than hand-made. (She believes it's up to the artist to educate people about the true costs of producing such work.) She mainly creates functional pieces produced on the wheel and then altered, although she also does some hand-built work.

Salt is added during the firing and vaporizes, creating a signature "orange peel" texture in the finish. The firing itself takes 24 hours and the kiln has to be watched throughout to make sure neither burner goes out. Reid has made the process more enjoyable by building a sauna nearby and a mirror system the couple can monitor through the glass door. They can jump out to relight the burners or adjust the damper as needed.

"The firing is a really fine dance of 'how much fuel' and 'how much air,' and because I've done this a long time I know what to do to get the results that I want," Hampson-Reid explained.

Mudpuppy Studios uses an electric kiln as well as the propane unit that incorporates bricks from Robson's oil-fuelled operation. The second is necessary for salt-firing because electric elements cannot withstand the havoc of vaporized mineral particulate during firing. Building it proved a challenge, though, both getting the provincial permit to run gas lines and then finding a pipe fitter



PHOTOS BY ELIZABETH NOLAN

Francine Hampson-Reid and John Reid stand next to their gas-fired kiln, constructed partly using bricks from the late Lari Robson's outfit. Above right: ceramic bowls made by Hampson-Reid and painted by her husband. Below: Reid's stamp trademarks. Hampson-Reid's salt-fired functional stoneware.



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who could connect them.

Other challenges in moving the studio from Calgary to Salt Spring involved getting used to the West Coast's humid atmosphere and water with a different pH level — factors that have huge impacts on how clay dries and fires. There was a year or so of heartbreaks before Hampson-Reid got it down, even with her deep knowledge and experience.

Since retiring, Reid has also been exploring the ceramic arts. He is interested in hand-built works using paper clay, in which wood fibres are mixed into the raw clay and then burned up during the firing, producing a light, textured material. Steel wire supports help define the form.

"I'm an emerging artist if you will. Even though I spent my life as a designer, I never really worked in clay too much, so now I'm kind of leveraging off what Francine knows and just doing my own thing," Reid said.

Some of his pieces combine curved ceramic platters with bases made of interesting wood, such as a section of burl maple. The couple has also collaborated on many projects that incorporate his designs and her clay work, such as a set of Salt Spring mugs with different island-themed stamps, and decorative bowls with hand painting.

Hampson-Reid's studio is at 148 Cormorant Cres.

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