

A Conversation With ... Sue Robertson

By John McPhail, Feature Columnist

A puzzled look crosses local potter Sue Robertson's face as she traces the astonishing evolution of her craft from the first classes she took in the 1980s to her present status as a recognized artist whose work has been displayed across Canada and in the United States. What began as an interesting diversion or possible hobby has developed into both a passion and a profession. There is no easy explanation how it has all come about; there was neither a business plan nor a timeline that was rigorously followed. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Sue could not be happier with the outcome. As she speaks animatedly about her work, it is evident that she has developed confidence and looks forward to exploring new forms of expression. "You have to keep growing as an artist," she explains, "and continue to challenge yourself." Some of her most visually arresting works feature cat and fish motifs. Although Sue modestly downplays her success, it is evident that she has established her credentials well beyond Outlook and Saskatchewan. I can testify to her national recognition, having seen Sue Robertson pottery in shops from Salt Spring Island, BC, to the historic town of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. Her "Stoney Plain Birches" was chosen from over 1600 entries for inclusion in book entitled "500 Pitchers: Contemporary Expressions of a Classic Form."

Sue, her husband Ian and 17-day old Blair arrived in Outlook in 1983. Determined to raise their children in a rural area, the couple left Ottawa behind to become proprietors of a local motel. Sue recalls the transition to rural life in Saskatchewan being relatively easy, although she was not prepared for sociable people saying "drop by for coffee" and

actually meaning it. Their other children Dyan and Rian were born in Outlook. Curiosity drew her to classes offered by local potter Barb Hamlin. Sue was irretrievably captured. Over the years, she has learned and refined techniques and, like all good artists, developed an individual style. The line between amateur dabbler and dedicated professional was soon crossed, setting Sue on an artistic journey that has resulted in the establishment of her own studio and production work continuing over two decades.

In 1995 Sue earned a Diploma in Fine Arts, Ceramics, from SIAS. "The formal studies helped me to define style and use of color," Sue explains. She continued production work following her studies. In 2004-05, under CARFAC, a program established by Saskatchewan visual artists which pairs upcoming artists with a mentor, she studied with sculptor Les Potter. The experience resulted in Sue exploring the medium of sculpture, particularly the effect of light. More recently, a second mentor Lee Brady of Saskatoon has sparked her growing passion for

fused glass art. In her studio Sue enthusiastically explains some of her early triumphs and failures as she experimented with the new medium. Amid several tiny, exquisitely colorful pieces is a remarkable bowl with an unintentionally collapsed lip. She enthuses over the delicate bubbles that have appeared in some of the works. One of Sue's future plans includes a residency at the Banff School of Fine Arts. "It would be a wonderful opportunity," she explained. "I would have access to both artists and equipment, including a car kiln." Set on a track or on wheels, the "car" is the platform on which heavy and bulky ware is stacked for firing.

Saskatchewan Arts Board grants have enabled Sue to develop a body of work that has attracted the notice of the provincial artistic community. Both apprehensive and confident, Sue has submitted works for jurors to assess. "It is important to learn that someone other than me sees merit in my work," she explained. The appraisals have led to exhibitions, such as a major one "Interplay" which opened November 1, 2009, at the Saskatchewan Craft Council Gallery in Saskatoon. Producing an exhibition presented new challenges for Sue. The works must relate to each other and there must be an overall, discernable impression that makes sense to the viewer. "There has to be a clear intent," Sue stated. One art critic wrote: "This is a strong exhibition showing the works of a clay artist who has transcended technique. Susan Robertson has demonstrated that she is a mature maker who has come into her own."

Two works from the exhibition caught my attention and prompted questions. "Requiem for Rudy," a triangular piece which gracefully tapers to a curved tip, derives its name from the Robertson family dog. Evidently when Sue was moving the work Rudy bumped into her, almost causing the sculpture to slip from her hands and prompting her to think that if it broke she would be angry enough to annihilate the family pet, thus necessitating a requiem. As Sue matures as a sculptor in clay, she has discovered that it is a living medium, so much so that each piece has a "will of its own," as she puts it. "Listen," another work from the exhibition, is a good example. At one point during its formation—a square column with a brown base that evolves into a translucent ivory peak—Sue noticed that a section of the clay appeared to have lips. The epiphany of the moment convinced Sue of the importance of being "more in tune with the clay as I am working with it—to listen, as it were."

A recent holiday to Greece—"our first real holiday in twenty-seven years!"—included a visit by Ian and Sue to potters Katharina and Alex Bolesch. The Robertsons rented a house on the Island of Naxos where they spent two weeks hiking and visiting ancient ruins. During the 2006 Canadian Census, Sue and Ian worked in Nunavut. Ian's first interviewee was Joseph Suqslak, a well known Inuit carver. Sue visited him at his "studio", a small shack with a



Sue Robertson has recently started working with fused glass.

single light bulb and hoar-frost covered walls. The humbling experience has made Sue appreciate the relative luxury of her own studio and the easy access to supplies and markets.

Sue has received commissions from various groups to create unique art work. For example, she has done design work for an Alberta organization on birds of prey, and has painted antique cars on clay for another group. As Sue has discovered, there is a great deal more to being a successful potter than simply spending countless hours in the studio. In order to have her work seen and purchased by large numbers of people, she requires agents. In particular, she has engaged an agent in Ontario to have her works shown to retailers at trade fairs such as the Canadian Gift and Tableware Association show in Toronto which twice-yearly attracts 25,000 retail buyers. Sue also has an American agent. "I would love to be able to spend all of my time in my studio, but that is not possible. Marketing is part of the process," Sue laments.

Plans are underway for changes to her studio on McKenzie Street which will be expanded to include a hallway gallery. Called Robertson Gallery and Gift, the refurbished premises will sell works by other artists as well as offer "how to" classes at various times during the year—e.g. how to plant a planter, how to gift wrap presents, and how to knit. Sue's web address is <http://www.srobertsonpottery.com/>

Asked about the origin of her passion for creating art, Sue momentarily struggled for words to explain the complex process that leads to the end product. "For me," she summed up, "art is about expressing beauty, even if that beauty has an edge to it." She has developed a simple test to measure viewers' reactions to her work: "I like it when people look at my things and smile." Sue greatly admires the famous English sculptor Henry Moore who wrote about the rewards of being an artist: "The particular obsession changes, but the excitement, the thrill of your creation lasts." His words seem an apt description of Sue Robertson's successful approach to art.



"Listen"



"Erudite"



"Requiem for Rudy"