

As the wheel turns: David and Matt Repsher

Hollis Walker | Posted: Friday, November 1, 2013 5:00 am

It's common to hear of a child who follows in his father's footsteps, and sometimes a young person consciously or unconsciously tries to fulfill a parent's unrealized dream. Matt and David Repsher's story offers an unusual variation on those narratives, one in which a son's passion for work that his father once loved has rekindled that passion in his father. Matt Repsher became a potter in large part because his father, David, had worked in clay. Until recently, the elder Repsher made ceramics only very occasionally. Last summer, Matt traveled back home to central Pennsylvania and, with his father, fired up the long-cold kiln at their Lucas Hill Pottery, and the two went to work. Santa Fe Clay exhibits the results of the men's four-week "residency" in *Repsher & Repsher*, opening Friday, Nov. 1.

David was an architecture major at Penn State when, in his last semester, he took a clay class and fell in love with the material. "That term I spent every waking hour in the pottery. I almost didn't graduate because of it," he said. He did graduate and was soon invited back as a graduate fellow, earning a master of fine arts in ceramics in 1971. During his years at Penn State, he met and studied with many of the heavyweight ceramists of the era, including Rudy Autio, David Shaner, Peter Voulkos, and Robert C. Turner. He went on to develop a career as a designer and builder of homes and very rarely visited the wheel. Pots he had made but never sold took up permanent residence with his wife and growing family in their rural home near State College, Pennsylvania.

Those pots were far from a passive presence. Matt grew up surrounded by them, taking in his father's occasional stories about them, about clay and its chemistry. In high school, the younger Repsher took a clay class but planned to major in forestry management in college; growing up in the woods of central Pennsylvania had affected him deeply. "I wouldn't say there was an aha moment," he said, but even before he registered for his first semester, he decided to major in art, with an emphasis in ceramics. He discovered that his father's pots had taught him quite a bit about clay. "I had a reference point, a language of form, that started with him — it gave me a really good foundation. I had a huge advantage — and a garage full of stuff to play with."

Like his father, Matt attended Penn State, where his work leaned toward the sculptural and away from the functional, as was typical of students coming out of academic ceramics programs at the time. During college, he and a friend rebuilt his father's pottery on the family property, constructing a wood-fired, Japanese anagama-styled kiln with a smaller back chamber for salt firing, which is a technique that has historically been popular among the German settlers of the region.

Matt graduated in 1999. A fellowship at Indiana University took him away from home and the

pottery. At Indiana, he earned a master of fine arts in ceramics. In 2004 he migrated to Santa Fe, where he met Avra Leodas, owner of Santa Fe Clay, and went to work for four years as her studio manager in charge of the ceramics school. He has shown his work at the Santa Fe Clay gallery since then, attracting the attention of *Ceramics Monthly*, which recently published a cover story about him. That article and his father's cancer diagnosis earlier this year inspired him to propose a joint show, he said. "I realized I did not want to let the opportunity go by to do stuff with him." So last summer, Matt went home to Pennsylvania for a month, threw pots, and fired in the salt kiln with his father. In recent years the younger Repsher's work has "kind of come full circle," he said. "I left grad school doing sculpture and have moved back to making vessels — I've been working from the bottle forms that I remember from my dad's works at home." The time with his father was rich, he said.

David agreed, though he wasn't aware that his cancer was part of his son's impetus for the project. His prognosis is good, he said, "and I wasn't thinking about my cancer, or I was trying not to. ... The last two firings were spectacular, as far as I'm concerned. I hope we get to do this again next summer. It really got my juices flowing. I did a whole other load of pots after he left; I've never done that in my life."

The father's influence on his son — and vice versa — is evident mostly in the form and palette of their works. Both are working in vessel forms: bottles, jars, and crocks — functional shapes reminiscent of historical pottery from Pennsylvania. Each relies primarily on clay and slip colors that evoke the natural world: reds, browns, creams, and blues.

David uses clays and slips he has dug himself, sometimes with his son. "The clay I use came from a strip mine in Clearfield County that we discovered while motorcycling in the strippings. It's a light yellow-grey-colored clay, and there's a lot of junk in it, so it gets good spots" when fired. He favors two slips — a dark brown and a black — that he discovered when excavating house foundations — and a cobalt blue. The surfaces of his works are illustrative, typically including simplified tree forms, which he said are based on those he uses in architectural rendering, and rectangular and square repeating shapes that represent the landscape.

Matt tends to use a red clay and has two somewhat distinct styles. In one, he draws elaborate repeating patterns of arches, circles, and other graphic forms, and then cuts out the clay, evoking ancient architecture of the Middle East. He paints in earthen-colored slips over the designs. His other style features fewer and more delicate areas of cutouts and larger geometric forms, as if he has blown up the archways and portals of the other style so that only their basic shapes are expressed. These pieces have a modernist feel and sometimes have lighter or more vibrant colors. The surfaces of both styles feature a regular sgraffito, sometimes crosshatching, that adds a textural element. He scrapes away some of the color to reveal the clay underneath.

The two Repshers, both masters of understatement, admire each other's work. "I think he makes

really nice pots,” the younger Repsher said. The father demurred. “Matt is way better at it than I am.” The elder Repsher has recently been teaching his young granddaughter about clay. “I make tile blanks for her, and she draws on them and decorates them, and she’s pretty good at it.” The legacy continues. ◀

details

▼ *Repsher & Repsher*

▼ Opening reception 5 p.m. Friday, Nov. 1, artists talk 5:30 p.m.; through Dec. 14

▼ Santa Fe Clay, 545 Camino de la Familia, 505-984-1122