

Bad Dog Arts:

barking up the right tree

When I set foot inside the inconspicuous Esplanade East warehouse from its alley entrance, two dogs race toward me. Rusty, the feisty cocker spaniel, barks his best warning. Sam, the big black lab, leaps up repeatedly, his paws tapping playfully against my chest. From the far end of the corridor-like studio space, Elizabeth and Shannon call out to their animals. Rusty dances around my feet. Sam rolls over, offering his belly for a rub. Welcome to Bad Dog Arts, an open-concept, multi-discipline working art studio, born of necessity and rebellion.

"We found there was a real dearth of affordable live/work spaces for artists on the North Shore," says wheel-turn ceramic artist Shannon Barker. "We were using studio space at the community centre," adds painter/ceramic artist Elizabeth Harris-Nichols, "but we always wanted to bring our dogs."

"It wasn't working out because our dogs like to wander," says Shannon. But it wasn't just their 'bad' dogs. The hours at the community centre didn't always jive with the times Shannon, Elizabeth and sculptor Robin Atchison wanted to work. (Robin has a border collie named Sequoia, also known as Boo). The trio decided to search for a work space of their own, a place where they could get their paws dirty. They formed a partnership, found a warehouse and set up shop with the intention of providing an inviting and challenging place for North Shore artists to share ideas, get professional training and work at any time of the day or night. "Robin, for example," says Shannon, motioning to his area, "often works at two or three a.m."

Bad Dog Arts has kilns, wheels, a printmaker and open working space. The absence of walls invites dialogue, interaction and mentoring. "Bad Dog is an environment where there are no rules and artists are encouraged to push the envelope and explore creativity in a safe, supportive place," Shannon says. Resident painter Shirley Walter joins the conversation, adding: "We couldn't do the degree of mentoring that we do without the open concept." Some days the fur flies. "We can be cranky," laughs Elizabeth. "And we don't hesitate to yell at each other. But more than anything, it's fun."

On Monday nights, Bad Dog offers life drawing classes and clay workshops; the studio skeleton hangs in view for anatomy hints. They hold studio sales, artist-controlled exhibitions and bring in guest artists for lectures and workshops. From January 28-30 renowned ceramic artist Les Manning will be teaching a

course about clay throwing techniques and ergonomics called "Throwing Pains." Weekly classes and special training sessions fill up quickly, yet Bad Dog has never advertised outside of the studio; it's all word of mouth. Shannon and Elizabeth express surprise at their success, but it's obvious that Bad Dog Arts fills a void. In fact, with a waiting list of artists hoping to get space, the partners are looking into expanding to encompass 4000 square feet of space.

On Fridays from four to seven p.m., Bad Dog hosts drop-in socials. Wine flows, artists mingle and crowds swell to as many as fifty people. "It's about awareness," says Elizabeth. "It matters to show work and build a community." And they do not see themselves disappearing. "The difference between Bad Dog and some of the studios we've seen come and go here," says Shannon, "is that we're well-run. We keep on top of the business side of things—because we have to."

Bad Dog is making a definite paw print on the future. The studio not only fulfills the owners' needs but evolves in response to the desires of new artists on the North Shore. As Shannon says, "Bad Dog Arts is a living, moving, breathing animal." As I prepare to leave, Robin arrives (minus Boo). His current work, probably the most experimental of the group, includes a mix of odd heads and dolls, pieced together with different media. He sheds his coat, ready to dig in.

Bow WOW.

LEFT TO RIGHT: ROBIN ATCHISON, SHANNON BARKER (WITH RUSTY), ELIZABETH HARRIS-NICHOLS.

