

# MHD

MAINE HOME + DESIGN

## 18 MAINE INTERIORS THAT INSPIRE US

JANUARY // FEBRUARY 2021

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**A COLORADO TRANSPLANT  
CREATES WHIMSICAL CERAMICS  
INSPIRED BY NATURE**

BY KATY KELLEHER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTINA WNEK



Ceramics artist Brooke Knippa lives on a tiny dirt road in Bowdoinham that my navigation app fails to recognize. Even in Maine, this is unusual, but fortunately the potter had prepared for this and emailed instructions ahead of time. “Our house is the white Cape with the vintage Airstream,” she wrote.

Once I found the road, I had no trouble finding the house, which overlooks fields that roll out toward the Kennebec River. It is surrounded by a garden, a work shed, and Knippa’s charming little aluminum-plated mobile gallery. (The 1978 Airstream, she notes on her website, is in near-original condition.) “I have a tendency to take over every space,” she admits. “Whenever I learn something new, I just want to spread out. I keep turning everything into my studio.” Her husband, she says, has observed her eyeing his work shed with unease. “He told me, ‘Don’t even think about it!’”

Knippa is just that kind of person—she’s a maker. Born in Colorado and raised in the restaurant industry, she came to Maine because her then-boyfriend got a job as a chef at Hugo’s in Portland before he went on to open Eventide. She was brought on as the front-of-house manager, which eventually led to her acquaintanceship with ceramicist Alison Evans, owner of Ae Ceramics and creator of the distinctive “Oyster Series” of bowls, dishes, and serving platters (a version of which is used at Eventide). Knippa had taken a few classes at Portland Pottery, and she was looking to learn more about the craft, so meeting Evans was a stroke of particularly good luck. “At Portland Pottery, they teach you how to make things, but they don’t teach you how to fire or make glazes,” she explains. “I started my business as a way to get out of the restaurant industry, but I realized quickly I wasn’t really ready.” She reached out to Evans and secured a job at Ae Ceramics. “I ended up working for Alison for four years, until I was ready to jump in, head first, to my own business.”

(Opening spread) In Brooke Knippa’s studio window hangs a wood-fired hanging planter made by potter Sarah Burns of New Hampshire-based Sweetfern Pottery. “It was a wedding gift,” she says. Her Flamingo Plant Pal sits among the succulents.

Knippa (opposite) and her husband bought this trailer in 2016 from their friend’s parents to live in for the summer. “We bought our house in 2017, and so no longer needed it as a place to live, but I loved it so much and I refused to sell it,” says Knippa. “I decided to buy my husband out (so he could buy a boat) and I turned it into my gallery.” The gallery is open by appointment only.







Now, Knippa runs AP Curiosities entirely out of her picturesque riverside home. At first, she drove south to Ae Ceramics to use their kilns, but now she has her own set up on the front porch. Her entire process of creating and selling art happens on this one-acre property, from conception to sale to packing and shipping. She reads like a bit of a workaholic, but a cheerful one. Her work seems to make her genuinely happy, and it makes others happy, too. For Knippa's wedding in 2018, she decided to make travel mugs for each of the 125 guests. "That's the kind of thing I'll do," she says, laughing at the memory. "I make things hard on myself." But, she is quick to add, the cups (adorned with a pattern of flying ducks accented with gold luster) proved worth the trouble once pictures of them in use began rolling in. Sometimes, a friend will text her to say she's using the cup right now and thinking of her, of the couple, of that day. "Especially right now," she says, "we all need that extra joy."

The pandemic, Knippa explains, has allowed her to focus a bit more on online sales and promoting her business on social media. "It's so interesting," she says of social media, "I have a love-hate relationship with it. It's a weird way of putting something into the world and seeing how people react to it. But it does drive my art, too." The quick response time enables Knippa to see what people like, what they are drawn to, what they want more of. As it turns out, people really love her animal cups, vases, and planters. "It started with an owl bud vase," she says. "People would send me stories about how it reminded them of the picture book they had as a kid or about an owl they heard in their yard. It meant something totally different to people around the world." She heard from people in Germany and Iran, each with their own stories. "That's the direction I'm headed in now," she says. "I'm focused on stories."

A collection of mugs, including the Barn Owl Family Photo Mug in cream with 22-karat gold luster and the Curious Fox Mug in mint (opposite). "I started making flamingos when we purchased the Airstream," Knippa explains. She sold this Flamingo Mug for charity, and the Moonlit Barn Owl Tumbler now lives in Finland (above).



Each piece Knippa sculpts and fires evokes a story, and that story changes depending on who is viewing it, who is ordering it. She does a limited amount of custom-made pieces but sells version of her classic animal cups. Inside her porch, there are shelves lined with mugs featuring little wolves, squirrels, frogs, chipmunks, flamingos, and other critters. “Back before I was running my own business, I had more time to experiment with other art forms, but now I’m getting excited about incorporating different things into my packaging,” she says. “One of my friends is a printmaker, and she taught me how to make these little linocuts.” This current round of ceramics will be going out into the world accompanied by a small card, stamped with the image of an owl—her mascot. “I’ve done so many owls,” she says when asked about the choice. “It’s become my signature. It started with this barred owl I used to see on my walks in Freeport. I would see it everywhere. I don’t know what to call it, but I do think some animals come in and out of your life.” To her, an owl signifies curiosity and subtlety. It’s an animal you might not see, something that lives in the background. She likes that.

“Mountain goats are one of my favorite animals to make,” Knippa says (top). “I remember seeing them perched on the side of the mountains while driving through the canyons in Colorado, in awe of how they could climb such steep terrain, and how they could balance on craggy cliffs yet look so comfortable and relaxed.” A Gold-Spotted Giraffe Bowl, with spots lined in 22-karat gold luster (bottom).

(Opposite) Tools of the trade: Small Hedgehog Dish, pliers, sponge, Barn Owl Ornament (glazed and fired), Barn Owl Ornament in progress (raw, unfired clay), Flamingo Plant Pal, clay shapers, pieces of nichrome wire (a high-fire wire) that will become owl legs, lump of stoneware clay and porcelain clay, ribbon tool, paint brushes, needle tool.







SUNDECK RESTAURANT  
Est. Park, Colorado



Although Knippa rarely keeps pieces of her own work, she does admit to playing favorites occasionally. Right now, she's holding on to a bud vase adorned with a little tree frog. "It's like the owl: it's an animal that's there but you don't always see it," Knippa says. "This summer, I saw so many of them." This particular sculpture was modeled after a frog she encountered while picking blackberries. She went to reach for a plump ripe one, and there it was,

just sitting on the berry. She snapped a picture, and later, when she sat down with her clay, she molded a delicate amphibian that would perch upon an equally diminutive vessel. It's always a gamble when things come out of the kiln ("Potters are masochistic," she jokes. "So much can go wrong!"), but when this frog emerged, she knew. "I haven't had enough time with it yet," she says. "I knew, and said, 'I'm going to keep you.'" **MH+D**

Throwing a mug on the wheel (opposite), wearing an old apron from the now-closed Sundeck Restaurant in Estes Park, Colorado. Knippa's grandfather founded the Sundeck, and before moving to Maine, Knippa worked alongside her parents serving diners.

(Clockwise, from top left) Mouse Bud Vase in a crystallized aqua glaze. Stoneware and porcelain earrings with 22-karat gold luster accents and waxed thread fringe. Starry Night Jewelry/Trinket Dish with Sleeping Fox under tiny porcelain lilies and gold accents. Barn Owl Spoons—made from stoneware, porcelain, and wire, with waxed thread to hang and display when not in use.