



Stacey Hildreth looks at coral in her exhibition 'In Hot Water'. Photo / Paul Brooks

Opening this Friday at the Community Arts Centre is an exhibition by Stacey Hildreth titled *In Hot Water*, mixed media work that explores the beauty and fragility of coral.

After three years spent teaching art at an international school in Phuket, Thailand, Stacey and her husband Jimmy are home, and she feels it's time to put herself and her work "out there". Her exhibition is part of La Fiesta.

Stacey is a firm believer in the therapeutic and uplifting element of art and says teaching it to children gives them another tool to help with the many things life can throw at you.

"After Covid, I think we all need something that makes us feel good."

Stacey went through design school at what was then Wellington Polytech and graduated in 1997. She worked in the design industry for some years before travelling around the world, cooking to pay her way. Her skills as a chef put her through design school.

Back in New Zealand, she went to Teachers' College at Victoria University and got her first teaching position at Whanganui High School.

On their return from Thailand, Stacey had this crazy idea that, instead of returning to full-time teaching, she would open her own studio.

They constructed in their spacious backyard a purpose-built, light-filled studio, with a garage being converted soon into a larger teaching space for holiday programmes, doubling as an extra exhibition space. And all her gear, including her press, is on the premises.

"Here the kids can do sculpture, printmaking ... I can use different types of media and I can do adult workshops as well."

Her own work uses mixed media.

"I always start with print: printmaking is my passion and it's where my starting point usually is. From there, I have been exploring encaustic [wax painting] ... and I have mixed that into my work.

"I usually draw back into my work by hand, just with pencil."

She was experimenting with using wax to make collagraph plates and print them, then making the collagraphs themselves into art.

"The whole exhibition is on coral and the fragility of coral.

"[In Thailand] we did a lot of snorkelling and free diving and I was captivated by the coral." She says pieces of coral were always being washed up on the shore, like pumice is on our shores. "I thought, why is this happening, and why is it white?"

Stacey read up on coral and how it can easily be affected by a polluted environment and human contact.

"I learned that there are charities around the world that grow coral and replant it.

"I'm not trying to be an eco-warrior or anything, I'm just fascinated by its beauty and all its different textures." A friend in Thailand photographs underwater, and Stacey has used some of her photos as a basis for her work.

There are also sculptures in the show.

"These are 3D versions of my encaustic work," says Stacey. "They are [made from] tissue paper that I have paper-machéd. I then cut circles out, punch holes in them, then they are waxed and painted."

She has exhibited previously at Space Studio and Gallery, the Sargeant Gallery, and Open Studios. She will participate in Open Studios again this year. Stacey uses the name Make a Mark for her studio and work — [makeamark.co.nz](http://makeamark.co.nz).

"It's about a starting point, and I think some people are afraid to put pen or pencil to paper. Sometimes it's about making one mark: it's a starting point for something. You build on that one mark to make more marks that make a picture."

*In Hot Water* is on at the Community Arts Centre until March 2.