

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Married to Art and to Each Other

A Show Focuses on Artists Who Share Lives and, Often, Creative Spirits

Can the two artists in a couple be identified based on the artwork they create? That is the question behind "Couples," the exhibition currently at the Islip Art Museum. More than just an art show, it is a parlor game.

On display are the works of six couples in which both people are artists; most have been married for years, some for decades. In the accompanying catalog, each pair of artists is asked to describe their working methods and how their relationship affects their art. It makes for compelling reading.

The question in the exhibition catalog that relates to problem-solving offers the most revealing answers. A majority of the artists said that while each was not directly influenced by his or her partner's work, each drew on the other's vision and thinking. Perhaps that is the secret of a healthy relationship.

That doesn't necessarily mean that the couples see eye to eye on everything. In fact, in interviews with the couples, the interpretation of each artist's work sometimes varied significantly between partners. It seems that couples everywhere can always find something to fight about.

Works by the partners hang in proximity, inviting comparison.

Because the common theme that unites the works in this exhibition is the marital status of the artists, and not any kind of aesthetic criteria, it stands to reason that the show would lack visual cohesiveness. This is indeed the case, a problem that is compounded by an abundance of mediocre work.

But here and there individual pieces rise above the rest, like James Burgess's colorful painting of intertwined organic shapes and forms, "Multiverse" (2006), which fills a wall. The work resonates with a sense of nature's vulnerability, hinting at possible outcomes from preservation to disaster.

Karen Shaw, the curator, has hung the work of each partner in proximity to the other, inviting a direct comparison. Near Mr. Burgess's painting are some abstract drawings by Paula Elliott, his wife, in which we see a related palette of earthy colors and love of abstract forms. It is not hard to imagine these two working side by side in the studio.

Similarities also abound in the works by Leslie Wayne and Don Porcaro. Both are interested in ideas of visual sensation, though except for a generous use of color, they generally rely on different means to achieve it. Whereas Ms. Wayne creates abstract, almost sculptural paintings by bunching strips of dried oil paint at the tip of a jagged wooden base, as if to simulate a burning flame, Mr. Porcaro makes sculptures from discarded industrial materials, which he then paints. Both artists put traditional mediums in play, resulting in intensely hands-on, original art. It is powerful stuff.

Other couples share a more immediate and obvious aesthetic sensibility. An affinity for Minimalism unites the work of Jeanette Cole and William Childress, who have been partners for 26 years. Echoes of his Minimalist wire sculptures can be found in her abstract, largely monochromatic paintings.

The works of Miriam Bloom and Ron Morosan have a natural sort of whimsy, joyfulness and love of color. She makes bulbous, abstract sculptures, often using painted clay, while he paints colorful gouaches blending doodling with appropriated imagery. They share not only their lives but the same creative spirit.

Conversely, though Todd Johnson and Sally Brogden both work with ceramics, their works have little in common. While Ms. Brogden is interested in the sensuality of abstract forms, Mr. Johnson is far more conceptual, his work ref-

erencing that of other artists. His sculpture "Saucers With Four Face Cups (For J. J.)" (2007) is an obvious homage to Jasper Johns.

In the catalog interviews, some couples say their works have nothing in common, while others, like Virginia Maksymowicz and Blaise Tobia, see all kinds of similarities. You wouldn't know it to look at their work on display here; while she makes figurative conceptual sculpture, he takes snapshots of quirky-looking street scenes worldwide.

Burning with an awkward, artless energy, Mr. Tobia's photographs are worth lingering over, for somehow he manages to capture moments of poignancy, humor and pathos in the everyday. One series of pictures documents oddball signs and billboards, while another shows struggling urban gardens; together they reveal a combination of flawed beauty and social and cultural insight.

"Couples," Islip Art Museum, 50 Irish Lane, East Islip, through June 1. Information: (631) 224-5402 or www.islipartmuseum.org.



RELATED
Right, Leslie Wayne's "Hefty Hunk of Burnin' Funk" and below, "Nomad 20," by her husband, Don Porcaro.