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Lafayette Artists on Life and Work

By Lou Fancher



The central image in the MacCannells' current installation. It is about 2.5 by 4.5 feet on transparency and lighted from behind. Photo provided by Juliet MacCannell

own eyes: they always look flat, vacant," Juliet said.

Fascinated by this inconsistency from an artist whose work she believes reveals the overlooked or under-realized, Juliet began to draw while Dean "brewed."

"I was interested in the metaphor and I knew Juliet's piece would have light coming from within. I wanted to do something with the light coming from without," Dean said, about the glitter-filled Picasso-esque renderings framing the light box. "That's the paradox about illumination: what's the source of thought? Do you get it from your teacher, or from your soul?"

Research and reflection are primary tools in their technique. Juliet brings a relentless focus on cultural phenomena and excavating the psychoanalytical aspect of an artist or art object. Dean is more anthropological, diving into the origins and cultural progression from a thought or idea to a physical representation.

"Our work has a political aspect and [Yañez] loves that, although he says, 'Oh, you're going to get me in trouble!'" Juliet laughed.

One year, an angry construction worker, disliking how the vitriolic power commercial developer Joe O'Donoghue had been depicted, came to the exhibition with a crowbar.

"He destroyed our piece and demanded Juliet give him our phone number," Dean recalled. "She gave him the phone number of the local police department instead."

This year's piece, especially the collage of images Juliet has created in a layered process involving sketching, painting in Photoshop, and the incorporation of fragments of Picasso's own artwork, is less directly confrontational.

Still, there are messages: pay attention to poverty and how it restricts and represents reality; ask yourself if an image can communicate without the alibi of words, ponder the tension between those who believe light emanates

For Juliet and Dean MacCannell, Lafayette writers and visual artists, preparing for the annual Day of the Dead exhibition at SOMArts Cultural Center in San Francisco meant gazing deeply into the eyes of Pablo Picasso.

The 2011 show's theme, "illuminations", offered an opportunity to explore light as a source of inspiration and to dedicate the work they produced to the great Cubist artist.

The MacCannells have participated in curator René Yañez's celebration of death and loss every year since 1998.

"It's always exciting because you never know what the theme will be until two months before. And you can't do the same thing each time: you have to bring something fresh," Juliet said.

Seated in their home, under towering book shelves and in view of an outdoor work bench scattered with glitter, wood scraps, sketches and glue guns, the two artists spoke about their current project and life as artists.

"We both had thoughts that we would be visual artists when we were younger. But as soon as we went to college, the demand for our essays was so intense!" Dean exclaimed.

Their good fortune as writers led them to become college educators and the first non-fiction writers invited to Headlands Center for the Arts, an incubator for artistic exploration located in the Marin Headlands.

"At first, we were getting the cold shoulder," Dean recalled. "The artists were thinking, 'What are these professors doing getting this big, valuable residency?' As soon as I told them I was writing because I had to, not because of some institution, they accepted us."

Acceptance led to collaboration, which is the starting point for the light box installation still under construction and the three-by five foot transparency stretched across the dining room table.

"It's very concept driven," Juliet explained.

The MacCannells had just returned from Europe and their usual routines were in a jumble when they saw the Picasso exhibition at the DeYoung Museum.

"I looked at Picasso and his failure to do a self-portrait that accurately reflected him. His eyes never resemble his

from within and those who seek answers through external means.

Dean insisted that their work and their 46-year marriage are not hard work.

"I never considered for an instant there was labor involved here at all," he admitted, looking across the room for affirmation.

Juliet remembered one, singular hardware store disagreement-over a dishwasher valve-that was so uncommon, their young niece worried it might signal a turn for the worse in their marriage.

"But everything we do is a collaboration: the work, the children," she concluded. "We talk a lot, which is apparently what many married people stop doing after a while. And we always figure out a strategic way with each other."

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