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A Couple Entwined In Art

BY KELLY CROW

HISTORY BRIMS with artist couples: Surrealists Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning, modern masters Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe and abstract expressionists Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner. The latest twosome to join the international art circuit is Los Angeles painter Jonas Wood and his potter wife, Shio Kusaka. Together, they are helping to redefine creative collaboration.

Mr. Wood, 37, and Ms. Kusaka, 42, don't merely work alongside each other in a shared studio. They continually refer to each other's works in their own: Mr. Wood's still-life interiors often include rows of striped and speckled pots and planters that echo Ms. Kusaka's ceramics. Ms. Kusaka, in turn, often mimics images from his canvases—from his signature plants to basketballs—on her pots.

Now the couple's overlapping oeuvres are getting an in-depth look for the first time in a Gagolian Gallery show in Hong Kong, "Jonas Wood and Shio Kusaka: Blackwelder," up through Feb. 28. The show includes 10 paintings and 25 drawings by Mr. Wood and 53 pots by Ms. Kusaka, many of which haven't been seen before.

"They each have their own stories to tell, but we want to show how they cross-pollinate," said Nick Simunovic, a Gagolian dealer. "Where one meets Jonas, one meets Shio."

Of the two, Mr. Wood is better known, a Boston-born transplant to Los Angeles. He caused a stir in 2006 when he showed a series of David Hockney-like portraits of his grandfather—as well as of former Boston Celtic Robert Parish—in a former Kung-Fu studio in the city's Chinatown neighborhood. The earnestness of his sports-star portraits, some of which looked like oversize sports trading cards, endeared him to collectors like New York real-estate developer Aby Rosen and New York printers Michael and Susan Hort.

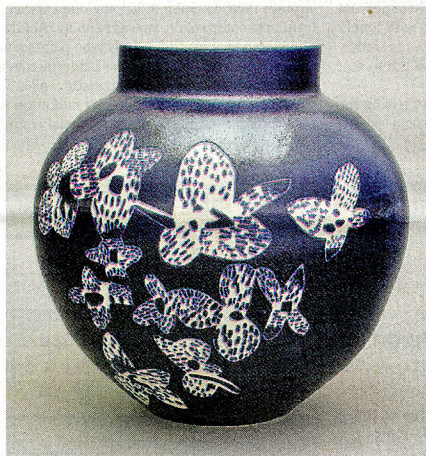
In 2012, Mr. Wood designed wallpaper featuring repeated painted images of basketballs. From a distance, the wallpaper looks abstract—like rows of orange polka-dots—but up close, the basketballs' differing details stand out. He has also scoured gardening books for images of plants, which he painted large on otherwise white canvases in a series called "Clippings" that showed at Mr. Rosen's Lever House in 2013.

Mr. Wood's pieces now belong to at least a half dozen museums, including the Hammer Museum, and have traded at auction for as much as \$56,250 apiece. At galleries they have sold for as much as \$140,000.

Los Angeles dealer David Kordansky, who also represents the artist, said that Mr. Wood gives his works a conceptual edge by using the Internet, books and pop culture to appropriate source images for his paintings before blending these images with family photos or objects in his studio—a combination that makes the final product appear realistic but slightly off. "It's a deception that still feels heartfelt," Mr. Kordansky said.

What matters, said the artist, is that the imagery in his paintings "feels meaningful to me—they need to come from an important place," he said. He played basketball and tennis in high school and listens to ESPN while he paints, which explains the portraits of sports stars. That's also why his wife's pottery pops up so often in his canvases. "I love her work, and I love her."

Mr. Wood met Ms. Kusaka in the art library of



JONAS WOOD'S 'Red Studio Pot,' above, pays homage to Henri Matisse; left, Shio Kusaka's stoneware ('flower 1').

Ms. Kusaka said that she studied ceramics in part because she had always loved watching her grandmother conduct tea ceremonies. These domestic rituals allowed for slight imperfections—in the bowls as well as the conversations—and Ms. Kusaka found that she, too, was drawn to her pots whenever they turned out slightly misshapen. "I like the tension that comes with failing," she said. She also admired the minimalist lines of painter Agnes Martin, and today she's best known for painting wobbly grids on her pots—as well as pots whose bellies or handles feature dinosaurs. ("Our daughter used to be obsessed with them," she added.)

Some of these so-called dinosaur pots were included in last year's Whitney Biennial, and her pots can sell for up to \$10,000 apiece.

The couple's artistic collaboration started

slowly. It was only after they married in 2002 and moved to Los Angeles that Ms. Kusaka noticed that images of her ceramics began appearing in her husband's paintings. She was more flattered than miffed. After a while, she started borrowing the striped lines and patterns that she saw in his paintings. Eventually, it became clear that they had become, in a way, each other's muse.

"It's fun to see what he does with my pots," she said. "Sometimes he takes a small one and paints it giant, and suddenly I want to make a giant version as well."

That was the idea behind the Hong Kong show—to explore how their own practices intertwine. Highlights include Mr. Wood's "Still Life With Two Owls," which shows a case of potted plants, some of which contain black-and-white grid designs like Ms. Kusaka's "(grid 36)." Mr. Wood also nods to Henri Matisse's studio by painting its contents, in "Red Studio," within the ginger-jar shape of a red pot.

Ms. Kusaka said that the only time she got flustered in the run-up to the show was when she set about to paint some orchids on a pot that she admired in Mr. Wood's painting "2 Tigers." Then she realized she was trying too hard to copy them exactly—a no-no, since she had hinged her own artistic code on finding beauty in flaws. In the end, she painted her own version of his orchids. She said, "He's comfortable with my imperfections."