



Artistic pairing

Husband and wife Jeff Gillette and Laurie Hassold have a similar passion but distinct paths.

By JIT FONG CHIN

SqueezeOC.com

Laurie Hassold used to paint with her own blood and cut up dead birds for her sculptures. Jeff Gillette sneaks Mickey Mouse into his paintings of slums and makes humorous cartoon colleges.

You might expect that in this married couple, Gillette is a light-hearted prankster, while Hassold is an intimidating introvert. Turns out Hassold's the chatty one, while Gillette speaks softly like Jeff Daniels on a downbeat day.

The artists, both 46, met at Cal State Fullerton as graduate art students. The full-time teachers live in Costa Mesa with two cats in a house filled with their art and Asian dark-wood furniture.



Jeff Gillette

Slumming it

Jeff Gillette grew up in Detroit admiring underground comics. When he got laid off from a General Motors assembly job during his college years, he used his money to backpack through Nepal and India, where he saw Calcutta's infamous slums.

Using photographs he took, Gillette started to make oil paintings of slums. He bathes them in gentle colors and light, as if they're Carmel seascapes instead of horrifying hovels. Gillette inserts signs of industrial capitalism – a McDonald's here, a Pepsi sign there – or places the slums in incongruous spots, like by the San Onofre reactors. In one painting called "Irvine," Gillette multiplies identical shanties as though they're part of a tidy tract.

"I find just the images of slums are kind of hard to deal with," Gillette said. Adding First World touches invites viewers into the paintings, and turns the work from social awareness to social commentary.

Gillette was in the Peace Corps from 1987-89, teaching English in Nepal. International travel continues to be a priority. Egypt, Kenya, Thailand and Costa Rica are among the countries he loves. Europe is not appealing. "It's too much like here," he said.

When not traveling with his wife, he stays in the cheapest dormitories, sometimes in rooms with dirt floors. He prefers not to eat out in Orange County. "My feeling is, when I was in the Peace Corps, I was getting by on a 20-cent meal. You have that twice a day, and you're done, less than a buck."

In recent years, Gillette has started painting freeways. They're torn, with their wire-and-concrete innards spilling out messily. Like the slums, they're a form of urban blight.

Disney, Jesus and cartoons

Gillette's lighter – somewhat adolescent side – can be seen from the small-scale collages and paintings that he makes by incongruously slapping together recognizable images. Olive Oyl jostles for space among the distorted women in Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)." Jesus extends his arms lovingly, while a bomb goes off behind him. Ronald McDonald gets ready for bed, and we don't mean sleep.

The collages are very funny, and when seen in hundreds, serve as a compendium of images that kids see when growing up. Gillette poses the question: Have you noticed what we've chosen to be our visual culture?

"As kids, they infiltrate our brains, whether we want it or not," Gillette said. "I like to pick on things that are most beloved, which are our cartoon characters and our religions."

"Banksy-ing Banksy"

Gillette likes camping alone in the desert in the summer. He likes the loneliness and doesn't mind the intense heat. Sometimes he makes human-sized cartoon figures, like SpongeBob SquarePants, and stealthily leaves them at night in the desert plain or by freeway exits. He returns a few days later to check on them. They're usually shot up by gun-wielding desert visitors. Gillette repairs the cartoon figures, and leaves them there, a bit of guerrilla art for more campers to discover.

In September, Banksy, an intensely hyped-about contemporary British guerrilla artist who hides his identity, had an exhibition of work in Los Angeles. Egged on by a collector, Gillette decided to pull an art stunt on the stunt artist. He hid a painting under his T-shirt – a remake of Edouard Manet's iconic "The Luncheon on the Grass" with the Taliban eating fast food – and pasted it on the wall by Banksy's work. Security guards took down Gillette's painting within an hour.

"There's a certain amount of hypocrisy there," Gillette said of Banksy, whom Gillette has never met. "He does it to everybody else, but you can't do it to him."



Laurie Hassold

Blood, Barbie and aliens

Laurie Hassold is not squeamish. She made such a reputation of using feathers in her work that her mom's friend sent her owl wings in the mail. As part of a performance in 2003, she painted a wall with blood freshly drawn from her arm.

Growing up in Orange County, Hassold watched her father, a doctor, assist on surgeries like hysterectomies. "I've been kind of de-sensitized that way to blood, though I'm not de-sensitized in terms of empathy. I could never be a doctor because I can't see someone suffer," Hassold said.

Compared to Gillette, Hassold has a stronger experimental streak in the way she approaches her work. She fiddles with objects without knowing where it might lead. Gillette paints quickly, finishing a slum painting in three to four days during the summer when he isn't teaching at Foothill High School. Hassold can take more than a year to finish a sculpture.

"I'm really into the process," Hassold said, who teaches at some local colleges. "I'm really into always becoming, but never being."

In her experimentation, Hassold finds herself returning to certain images: symmetry, blood, aliens, skeletons, sexual organs and insects. A recurring theme is the exposure of the insides of bodies, exploration of the apparent separation between mind and body.

Her new sculptures in the "Strange Attractor" are symmetrical, antler-like works that look like 3-D Rorschach blots. "Cyborchid" is filled with little objects like electrical components, shark's teeth, coyote paws, and dental instruments. Each sculpture has a different feel: "Tuber" feels more organic with an orange hue, like a Georgia O'Keefe desert painting, or a piece of coral taken from under the sea. "Lily" has what looks like a red sexual organ. "Zygomorph" is silver and steely.

"I want them to look like they made themselves," Hassold said. "The human race has become extinct. They've just captured up everything and they can put themselves together. They've got lures, they've got things to attract mates, they can kill. They're hybrids between plants and animals and leftover industrial products."

Barbie parts show up often. "To me, Barbie was like the first cyborg," Hassold said. "She is impossibly designed and totally anatomically incorrect, and sort of idealized and streamlined. She's got removable parts, too, and she has no genitalia. She's a really bizarre thing for little girls to play with, if you think about it. High heels, the feet are like this, her legs are in perpetual rigor mortis."

"Exorb, and ond day we didn't need to breathe"

What: Solo show of new sculptures in the "Strange Attractor" series by Laurie Hassold

Where: [Grand Central Art Center](#), Santa Ana

When: Nov. 4 to Dec. 17. Gallery closed Mondays.

Cost: Free

More info: lauriehassold.com, bgfa.us

"Darkness"

What: Group exhibition, including "Process Wall" and other works by Laurie Hassold.

Where: [J Flynn Gallery](#) (714-708-3504, [2950-A Randolph Ave.](#)Costa Mesa)

When: Continues through Dec. 2. Gallery open noon-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday and 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday.

Cost: Free

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