

Married makers follow different muses



SCOTT STODDARD/Daily Courier

Susan Paul-Williams and Michael Williams relax at their home in northeast Grants Pass. Between Susan's pottery work and Michael's photography, there's plenty of creative energy flowing through the house. Both are showing their work at Gallery One this month.

By Kathleen Alaks of the Daily Courier

Michael Williams and Susan Paul-Williams do not call themselves artists. The word "artist," they say, is too broad, too grand, too inflated for their particular skill sets. He is a photographer. She is a potter. Period. Yet, while they may not be "artists," this husband-and-wife duo is undeniably artistic. Their work is featured this month at Gallery One in downtown Grants Pass.

Michael, the photographer, records images of people and places around the globe, capturing both their beauty and their intensity. Susan, the potter, creates functional pieces, everyday bowls and platters, teacups and vases meant to be used and valued. Taken together, their work feels connected to the earth. His photographs are alive with rock and water, sun and shadow, figures and faces; her stoneware is solid and subdued, carrying the colors of copper and cobalt and iron.

"We believe in the spiritual nature and the magic that happens in the process of creating," Susan writes in an artist statement. "It is a state of grace to communicate with pure emotion through our work."

Married in 1985 — "we're coming on our 37th anniversary" — Michael and Susan met in the San Francisco Bay area, where he had been born and she had lived since about age 7. They had a "meet cute" at an ice skating rink, where Michael was backward skating to show off and she was impressed enough to notice. "I saw her skate by with her hair flying behind her and I knew she was the one," Michael says.

In 1990, the couple bought the pottery studio where Susan had been renting space, and converted it into the Albany Arts Gallery, adding a cibachrome darkroom.

They both began giving classes and exhibited the work of other artisans while running the gallery full-time and raising their son. "We started moving the renters out, turning it more into a gallery," Susan says. "We kept moving the walls back... making it into a bigger space, to accommodate more art." Michael filled his part of the gallery with photographs. As a boy, he learned about mountaineering and developed an eye for the

natural beauty of the California landscape. He was 12 when his mother gave him his first Pentax camera. "My first photo was of a 747 [airplane] landing at the San Francisco airport," he says. "And then I fell off a rock and broke the lens."

From that humble start, Michael went on to travel photography and photojournalism. His travels took him around the world: Finland, Denmark, the Arctic Circle, Nepal five times. On one trip to Germany he was arrested after getting on the wrong train and finding himself in East Berlin.

Michael has a series of books of his work: "A Photographer's Journal: Language of the Heart and Eye." One volume is filled with images from the Himalaya, another of the Sierra Nevada, one of Yosemite, one of the American West. One volume holds images of police officers and fire fighters taken while he was working as a cab driver on the streets of San Francisco, images he sold to news outlets.

Susan filled her part of the gallery with pottery. It was something she had been drawn to since childhood, finding the process of forming shapes from lumps of clay akin to magic. "I saw a potter when I was 10 or 12 and I knew I wanted to do that," she says. Her mother encouraged her to take her first pottery class. From there, she apprenticed with a potter in northern California and then with George Tudzarov in Ann Arbor, Michigan, before getting her studio space in Albany.

She likes to keep her pieces simple and functional, with earth-tone glazes. She especially likes to work with high-fire porcelain and stoneware. "I love having my hands in the clay," she says. "It makes me feel connected to the earth and the cycles of life."

The couple moved to Grants Pass in 2011.