A Couple Entwined In Art

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HISTORY BRINGS with artist couples: Surrealists Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning, modern master Andy Warhol and Jane Holzer, and George O'Keeffe and abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner. The latest newcomers to join the international art circuit in Los Angeles are 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 in basketballs—on her pots. Now the couple's overlapping canons are getting an in-depth look for the first time in a Gagosian Gallery show in Hong Kong. "Jonas Wood and Shio Kusaka: Blackwells," up through Feb. 28. The show includes 10 paintings and 23 drawings by Mr. Wood and 33 pots by Ms. Kusaka, many of which hasn't been seen before.

"They each have their own stories to tell, but we want to show how they cross-pollinate," said Nick Siminovitch, a Gagosian 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 Hockey-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 verisimilitude of his sports-star portraits, some of which looked like oversized sports trading cards, endeared him to collectors like New York real-estate developer Ary Rosen and New York printers Michael and Susan Sert. In 2011, Mr. Wood designed wallpaper featuring repeated painted images of basketballs. From a distance, the wallpaper looks sheet-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 attracted auction for as much as $36,250 apiece. At galleries they have sold for as much as $46,000.

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

What matters, said the artist, is that the imagery in his paintings feels meaningful to him—they need to come from an important place," he said. He played basketball and tennis in high school and listened to ESPN while he paints, which explains the portrayal 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 said. When Ms. Kusaka is in the art library of Seattle's University of Washington in 2000, where they were both students, Ms. Kusaka, who had moved to Los Angeles from Japan in 1992, said that they clicked immediately. "We both loved being in the studio, and it's comforting to be with someone who gets my need to be there."

JONAS WOOD'S "Red Studio Pot," above, pays homage to Henri Matisse: left, Shio Kusaka's stoneware "Flower I." 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 mishapen, "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.

Mr. Wood also nods to Henri Matisse's studio by painting his contents, in "Red Studio," within the ginger-jar shape of a red pot. Ms. Kusaka said that the only time she got frustrated in the run-up to the show was when she saw her paintings could be too flat. "I tried to put some depth onto the paintings by doing this," she said. In the end, she painted her own version of her orchids, she said, "He's comfortable with my imperfections."