

Intimate Collaborations Art expressing a shared life

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Undone, Tom and Lisa Dowling

To tour “Reconcilable Differences,” the collaborative works of Tom and Lisa Dowling, is to enter the private world of creative life partners. Their cooperative works display a beauty and virtuosity that come from an intellectual/artistic compatibility amounting to a meeting of hearts and souls. Lisa says, “I say ‘soul mates’ all the time and believe in it.”

Tom is a painting/drawing/art history professor and voracious reader. He takes a word-oriented approach to art, creating paintings, collages, assemblages and installations. “As a thinking person, I am interested in the conceptual,” he says. “As an artist, I live to make objects.”

Lisa is a published poet, composition professor and avid reader. She also works with objects, incorporating her poetry into textiles, functional housewares and into Tom's works. She often composes poems about the creative process. In “Tanka Series,” she writes, “He shaped art from air...”

The Dowlings live with their daughter, Clare, and dog, Zack, in a craftsman-like house that is as much their personal assemblage as it is their home. Tom has applied object-making skills to re-shaping the house, including building a studio for himself and a writing study for Lisa. Their home is filled with books, rugs, artwork and cool ocean breezes. It is enhanced by gardens that Lisa planted, by a fountain she built and by a Frank Lloyd Wright Hollyhock House sculpture. “The sculpture is lovely and representative of our love for culture and design,” she says.

Within the walls of this personal, inviting space, Tom and Lisa have collaborated on many artworks. Their pieces are assemblages and each includes a poem by Lisa. The Dowlings refer to the works as collaborations, and specifically as altarpieces, books, triptychs, diptychs and installations.

“Undone” a triptych, combines a pink, sequined dress that Tom purchased 30 years ago with a poem and painting of an easel. Lisa wore the dress, then Tom created the artwork. The poem reads: “It is given that the brush / will lift away from your desire: / the pigment chooses its own hue as you / paint, assigns value, considers shade / and tint; the light divides and falls / away like a lover slipping / languorously out of her sequined dress.”

“Undone” brings the viewer into a deeply intimate world, one filled with soft hues and sensuality. The artwork takes you to that secret space that exists between two lovers, where words, forms, shapes, gentle colors and lights merge and flow in harmony.

An altarpiece, “Japanese Maple,” combines rough-hewn wood shaped like a book with antique hinges and a drawn hand with a real Japanese maple leaf. The poem reads, “in the descent / there are only / two thoughts: / rest / and / rain. / love to lie, / arch-backed in / the ecstasy of fall / spine curved / with want / and release.”

Lisa explains, “I wrote that poem when we met in Italy 10 years ago. Tom collected that maple leaf years before from a tree in Warrick, England. The altarpiece required a small, quiet poem, something meditative. Only after I struck the poem into the wood did Tom start digging through his collections and recover the leaf. It came together effortlessly. Much like we did.”

Other pieces combine hand-thrown vessels, silk scarves and wooden beams sheathed in velvet, all with Lisa's poetry. Metaphorically, their artworks are collages of objects and of lines, words, thoughts and emotions. The pieces are physical manifestations of the deeper workings of their minds, hearts and souls.

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Liz Goldner