



A COUPLE OF ARTISTS CONVERSE

Mike: An interesting part of being married to another artist is witnessing her process of creation, so different in its deliberation and structure from my own. I remember the first time I saw her book of color swatches, a book where she had meticulously recorded the tones achieved by each of the many watercolors she uses in her illustrations. These were graded through a series of dilutions with each wash recorded in a distinct swatch, about three eighths of an inch square. It was like opening a box of jewels. Finding the line in her drawings is an equally elaborate process of finding the precise path that will bring a character to life. Through a series of transparencies and overlays these bears, children, other critters and their settings build to definition for days before ink ever touches paper. Then colors combinations are tested and refined, then washed in layers to final brilliance and balance. I think it's this precision of execution that has made her books so popular in Japan where tradition has prized the finding of maximum expression in accurate line work and thoughtful, subtle color. Her patience and care have inspired me to a heightened awareness of those qualities into my own work.

Clay: What a lovely surprise. When I suggested we have a dialog instead of writing separate artists statements, I had no idea what Mike would say. Living with another artist is like that. A daily, even hourly, surprise. Like the time Mike said, "I think I might be fun to make the sculpture in your book." In my new middle grade novel, *Wild Things*, one of the main characters, a metal sculptor, is loosely modeled on Mike. This character makes a sculpture for his niece. After I wrote this, Mike actually made the sculpture, called *Wild Thing*, of the girl running with her cat. It's beautiful and it's in the show. Often, too, after Mike makes a piece, he says, "You name it; you're the English major." Art married life at our house.

Mike: Like many I've sometimes had the thought that I'd like to write a book. But now that I've had the experience of supporting someone through the long process of draft and numerous

revisions, the rise and fall of hope through submission and rejections, ultimate acceptance and then more revisions, final proofs and final final final proofs, I'll stick to sculpture. If I spend more than a month on a sculpture I've written *War and Peace*. I'd never have the patience for publishing. I have, however, had the pleasure of inspiring a major character in Clay's novel to be out in spring. And I think I can claim some credit for helping her through the tough spots to make the book a reality. I believe in the cycle of art inspiring art, and art motivating the more general energy of creative expression in all who interact with it, wherever their talents may call them. Our marriage is the intimate stage where I daily see that play out.

Clay: I remember a similar time for Mike, after we first got married and he was trying to get back on the creative rails after being derailed for a long while. Pragmatically, he was committed to making a living by his art, which is tough. Creatively, he was trying to make steel move. Steel's heavy and that's hard. I look back now and see how far he's come in a very short time making, as he says, "art that moves," moves in all its meanings, and it's amazing what his output has been in our short time together, not to mention the high quality of that output. I like to think our marriage, our fostering partnership, helped him to do that.

Mike: Making art requires focus, and strong self-motivated discipline. Inspiration is fun when the lightning bolts strike, but the work gets done by consistently showing up the other ninety percent of the time when inspiration seems to be far away. The most important way I think Clay and I support each other is by reinforcing that daily commitment to work. When one of us is in avoidance mode (more often me), the example of the other getting to work tends to motivate the lazy one to get back at it. Of course if we both wind up in play mode, we're pretty good at that too.

Clay: Oh, I can avoid with the best! But it's true you can't goof off as easily when your partner is hard at work on a two-hundred-page book or a two-ton piece of art. You get inspired to work yourself. Often, too, we bounce ideas off of each other. We ask, what do you think of this? That? We don't usually advise each other specifically on where a work should go. It's more like riffing. Associating. Which can loosen me up when I'm stuck or bring me back to what's important if I'm spinning my wheels or I've gone too far off course.

Mike: But the fact of the matter is that art tends to evolve along a meandering course, and the way forward can often seem nebulous. Painting can be a good way to step back from the sculpture and reset the creative machinery. Creative blocks come and go, but they can appear daunting to the one experiencing it. When it's me, Clay's calm reminder that I've been here before, and it will pass is enough to get me moving. Cleaning the studio is often a good place to start. Inevitably I'll turn up some piece of metal I'd forgotten about, or some relation of parts will start an idea. Before the studio ever gets organized I'll be messing it up again. Several pieces in this show are the result of that very process. Smaller pieces are often the result of picking through the accumulated scrap left from making larger works. Certain pieces of metal I grow very fond of because of their texture, color, or simply the story created by the art they contributed to. For instance, two hefty, weathered I-beams went into the making of "Glimpses of the Promised Land," a large commission I did for the City of Raleigh. I've saved every scrap generated from the making of that sculpture and they've gone into the making of many sculptures, from sizeable pieces to more modestly scaled works like "Reaching." When I find a place for one or two of those orange-flecked scraps it reminds of the pleasure of making that big three-legged whirly gig.

Clay: All the cats in the show are for the new book. The cat pictured was a cat from my real life, my feral friend Mr. C'mere, wild thing and my boon companion for ten short years. I've tried to put some of his great spirit in the book, along with a few things I've absorbed as the wife of a talented metal sculptor, and other echoes and resonances from my life. The alphabet I did as therapy while waiting for my editor to return from maternity leave and then waiting for her third edit of the book and after that, the copy editor's edit. That last was destructively over-correct, not in the spirit of the book. As I restored my manuscript, it was good having another artist around to help me ignore the red ink, hear the beating heart of the story, keep the faith.