



MICHAEL S. WIRTZ
Artistic team
Marcia Kocot and Thomas Hatton in their home studio. Over one decade, the pair painted portraits of each other, including two oils on linen (right) in 1982.



Where the dialogue in marriage achieves artistic communion

By Eils Lotozo
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

When Thomas Hatton and Marcia Kocot first met as art students at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1964, it was not love at first sight.

In fact, their first encounter, at a party, turned into an argument when Kocot discovered that Hatton had taken her cigarettes. Recalled Kocot, 56: "He said he'd buy me another pack, and I said that's not good enough."

But within weeks, the two were critiquing each other's work. Three years later, they were married.

In 1973, the two undertook a more unusual kind of merger, combining their artistic careers to become a collaborative team.

In 1973, they combined their art careers. The process intrigues them.

After showing under various names, they officially became Kocot and Hatton. "We wanted to learn and grow together as artists," said Hatton, 54.

Almost 30 years later, they are still at it.

Conceptual artists with a surrealist side, Kocot and Hatton, who have a retrospective of their work up at Old City's Larry Becker Gallery through May 19, have ranged across mediums over the years. They've exhibited paintings in steel

"cages" and done prints using plastic-bubble-wrap. For last year's Delaware Art Museum Biennial, they had volunteers sit in a darkened room in front of an infrared video camera and ponder the exhibition.

Long-term projects, with an al-

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For about 30 years, entwining marriage and art careers

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most meditative or ritualistic aspect, are also a Kocot and Hatton hallmark. For a decade, beginning in 1973, they painted portraits of one another once a week. Fascinated by the state between waking and sleeping, they once kept a lithographic plate next to their bed, drawing on it before they arose in the morning. A current project involves each artist's taking a turn at the camera shutter to produce double-exposure, black-and-white photographs of art-world friends and acquaintances.

"Far more than the final art product, the process is what interests Kocot and Hatton. 'We get these really strange ideas,' said Hatton, a native of Kingston, Pa., 'and we're curious as to how far things can be taken.'"

"What's interesting about Kocot and Hatton is that their creativity exists as a dialogue between two people," said Andrea Cooper, curator of exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art, who called their work "ethereal and poetic."

"The couple live in the Graduate Hospital neighborhood in a partially renovated rowhouse that clearly reveals their priorities. The living room is crammed with art books, and their art-making has spilled from upper-floor studios into the dining

room, where prints on long sheets of paper hang drying on wooden racks.

They've even turned welcoming a guest into one of their ongoing artistic projects. Seated at the kitchen table over coffee, the serious couple, both dressed entirely in black, took turns tearing strips from a piece of paper and then passed it to a visitor for a turn. "It's like breaking bread," explained Hatton, who said the ritual was inspired by a pet raven they once owned that would make precise tears in any sheet of paper it was handed. (What did they do with pieces? Made a drawing of them and sent it to the visitor.)

When the two started out as artists, Philadelphia had just a few galleries that showed contemporary art; female artists were still struggling for recognition; and the idea that a work of art could be made by two artists, instead of a solitary genius, was a suspect concept. Kocot, who grew up in western Massachusetts, recalled submitting a piece to a group show at the academy under both their names. When the show went up, her name had been mysteriously erased from the identifying label and omitted from the catalogue.

"When Tom saw it, he got really mad and said he would physically remove the piece," she said. (It stayed up, her name added.)

While the couple have shown consistently over the years, they've had to hold on to their day jobs. She works at the Marketplace Design Center, and he now runs the records department at the Center City title company where he's worked for more than 20 years.

Both say collaborative art-making has found greater respect. Among a number of more famous collaborative teams to emerge in the past two decades are Russian emigre artists Kocot and Melamid (who have created paintings based on polls and are promoting the artwork of elephants), the British duo Gilbert and George (who affect identical dress and are known for monumental nude portraits of themselves), and Christo and his wife, Jeanne-Claude, who have wrapped bridges and buildings with fabric.

Kocot and Hatton have even taught a course on collaboration at the University of the Arts.

How does a couple combine the intimacy of married life with the intensity of artistic collaboration? The

soft-spoken pair, who exhibit a zealous carelessness not to interrupt each other in conversation, insisted that after 34 years, they are still learning.

"We're always trying to find a way to work together better," said Kocot. "The ego factor is always there, and we fight over what we think the work should be doing or where it should go."

But the joys of collaborating are worth the struggles, she said. "It gets you thinking in a direction you might not."

"We like very much being together," said Hatton. "We share similar opinions, and we like to do the same things."

Hatton recalled the reaction of some friends when the couple spent a car trip to New York shooting photographs from the moving vehicle's window. "They said, 'Don't you ever stop working?' We don't."

Not even on vacation. A few summers ago, during a getaway at Kocot's brother's cottage in the Berkshires, they spent their time throwing stones in the lake and taking roll after roll of photographs.

Mused Hatton: "Those images are symbolic of our collaboration: Two circles in the water intersecting."

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A retrospective of Kocot and Hatton is on view at an Old City gallery.