

Cover Story

Two minds in one glance

John Hall collaborated with Alexandra Haeseker on a series of paintings on exhibition at the Kelowna Art Gallery. It's unusual for artists to collaborate on paintings but John Hall and Alexandra Haeseker found that it worked for them. Some of their collaborations as showing at the Kelowna Art Gallery into the new year. Photos Gordon Bazzana

"I say, let's get this right, right off the top. I did all the good parts," says John Hall with a wink and a chuckle as we stand looking at the exhibit *Pendulum/ Pendula*, currently showing at the Kelowna Art Gallery.

A series of 12 collaborative paintings have been created by Hall and artist Alexandra (Sandy) Haeseker, which form the core of the works on display. But what makes the exhibition even more interesting is that in addition to these works, there are individual pieces by each artist as well.

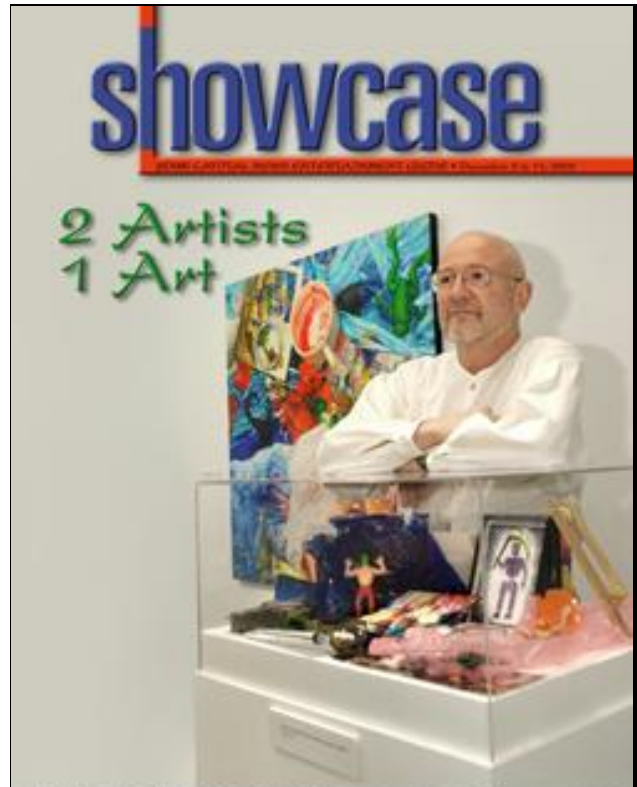
Haeseker, who is currently working on an installation for the Calgary Airport was unable to be here for the opening days of the exhibition, but contrary to how the interview with Hall started out, he quickly changed his tune and began singing her praises.

Using vibrantly coloured acrylics, the two artists worked together to create a sort of study on Mexican commercialism. Hall describes it as being, "in a sense, celebrations of how a couple of prairie kids responded to the excesses of Mexican popular culture."

And while the show is receiving high critical acclaim, more importantly to the average gallery gawker, you don't have to be a fine arts major to appreciate its beauty. Indeed, one look at the brightly coloured canvases and my immediate reaction was: Wow!

"We've known each other almost forever, since the 1960s, that's when we first met," says Hall, who was working at the Alberta College of Art's gallery when Haeseker was attending as a student. "And since then, we've been running parallel."

Both artists were admirers of each other's work, but it wasn't until Haeseker made a trip to Mexico that things began to click. Hall recalls, "On one occasion, Sandy and her husband were down visiting my wife and I...I was working on this one painting and I had one part that was particularly problematic. I said to Sandy, why don't you help me out and paint it.



"The offer was sincere, but so was her decline, however, the seed of possibility was sown at that moment."

"Back in Canada a little while later, we decided to take a look at the idea of collaboration. It's rather unusual in visual art and, while not unheard of, was uncommon. Even more uncommon was to find successful collaborations," says Hall.

"We stretched up two canvases. She started one in her studio and I started one in mine. We didn't know what the other was doing. After a period of time, we switched," the well-articulated Hall says with a Cheshire cat-like smile.

Haeseker had been painting a series of dogs at the time, so the canvas Hall received had a large dog's head filling the bottom centre of the piece. "So I responded by putting in a very dramatic sky, a sunset," he says, then points across the room to one of his solo paintings with a similar sky, "because that's what I was working on at the time."

After the first two were complete, Hall says, "at that point, we looked at it and said, yes, there is a possibility here. The paintings are viable. They do work. Let's take it to another level."

The second level required formalizing the process a little bit. Hall remembers,

"We decided to hold four sessions together: one in her studio and one in mine, a third session where we'd bring objects together and a fourth session for location for the photographs. Back in Canada, we would put all this photographic material together into what we considered interesting, coherent images."

Together, they took turns posing for photographs including masks and veils, then came up with their favourite Mexican pop-culture icons. Then, they took all the visuals and cut and pasted them into collages which, in turn, were then painted onto canvas.

Included in the exhibit at the Kelowna gallery are several display cases containing these Mexican novelty items along with some interesting photographs of their work in progress.

All of the collaborative paintings were created between 1992 and 1998 while both artists had winter retreats in Mexico. The exhibit has already toured Mexico and this is its Canadian premiere.

Hall, who calls Kelowna home now, has also worked at OUC teaching in the fine arts department and while he says there are no immediate plans to do more collaborative works with Haeseker, he does say, "I think if we were to do them again, it would be a return to the less formal form of the first two.

"Who knows, one day there might just be a knock on her door and a painting sitting there."

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