



"Queenie and Trigger," 7 feet (2.1 meters) in height, ceramic, steel and paint.

Collaboration and Creative Play

by Karen Terpstra and Nils Lou

Last year, we were together in Terpstra's Onalaska, Wisconsin, studio working on large jars and platters. These were to be fired in the wood kiln Terpstra had designed and built for the ceramics program she heads at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse.

Shortly after Lou finished some large platters and began drawing with a nail through slip, Terpstra asked if she could try, and added one of her signature horse drawings to his figure. The result

was a unique interaction. The combined drawing fit the platter perfectly with a composition neither of us anticipated—we had to do it again! Several pots later, all with drawings of human figures and horses, we sat down, looked at the collective work and simultaneously released pent-up breaths. We realized the work excited us tremendously. The potential of a collaboration exploring a world of combined aesthetics was a revelation.



"Tequila Tumbler #1," 3 inches (8 centimeters) in height, incised porcelain, salt fired.

The Collaboration

The beauty of our collaboration is that individual creativity, inspiration, the playful muse, culminate in a unity of unexpected expression. We connect with each other, not knowing precisely where the other is going, yet we anticipate, sense, lead and follow intuitively. Though rare, we may agree on a form in advance, but most often not. There is no agreed structure or plan other than the fact that Lou draws women and Terpstra draws horses. Usually, Lou begins the drawing with the female figure and Terpstra adds the horse form, completing the composition by developing and combining the drawings. Both may add finishing touches.

A mysterious kind of information flows back and forth on paper, canvas and clay quicker than spoken words. The process is difficult to describe or to explain exactly. The evolving work could not have come from one of us alone. We have similar styles, but because of our contrasting idiosyncrasies, there is an underlying, natural pull between our aesthetic energies, capable of producing surprising compositions.



"Platter #3," 19 inches (48 centimeters) in diameter, incised stoneware, wood fired.

The work comes not from compromise on either part, nor from a halfway point. It comes from an inexplicable third place that isn't necessarily what either of us would do individually. What evolves usually surprises. There is a totally new style of figure/horse pressurizing the space.

As collaborating artists, we play against the limitations of the medium and the limits of our individual sensibilities. Each brings to the work a different point of view, but in the merging, the image takes on unexpected life. We can annoy each other and we can inspire each other, but neither wishes to disappoint. In fact, we try to test limits and risk failure, trusting the other will salvage the work. While taking that risk, there is the expectation that either may express a critical judgment, knowing it will be respected objectively. No pouting from cracked egos has yet emerged, nor is it likely, as we realize the absolute need to balance egos, even to the point of letting them disappear altogether!

By merging one aesthetic with another, there is potential for going beyond the sum of the parts. The variables that exist in a team relationship play important roles in the collaborative exercise.

An essential aspect of any collaboration is play. The act of playing demands some collaboration. To enter into the play state, with either an imaginary partner or a real one, establishes an improvisational mode. Egos are either matched or ignored when the play state is maintained. In creative collaboration, there seems to arise an entity that observes, playing the improvisational role of creator either simultaneously or reciprocally, with the result seemingly created by this third party.

Playing is not without risk. As an essential part of collaboration, play demands a mutual understanding of the other's aesthetic grasp of boundaries and limits. There must be an acceptance of mistakes. More than that, mistakes need to be desired as opportunities.

It's much easier to learn from another's critical review than from one's own subjective analysis. We are too close to our own work. When seeing what the other brings to the collaborative piece, there is some distancing that takes place. When working alone, we are often caught in our own inertia. When working together, we release each other's energy. Information flows and multiplies. Perhaps this works because we live 1500 miles apart and we have the necessary solitary time in our own studios.

Working with a wide range of media enriches the collaboration considerably. For us, it began with drawings on clay and moved easily to charcoal on paper. Combinations and permutations are endless, as we have since explored steel, wood and canvas. From teabowls to paintings, from drawings to sculptures, no material is excepted as we explore any medium that might excite our collaborative imagination. It is another way we have learned to see.



"Vase," 11 inches (28 centimeters) in height, incised stoneware, salt fired, by Karen Terpstra, Onalaska, Wisconsin, and Nils Lou, Willamina, Oregon.