THE PAINTER & THE POTTER

Artist duo Nick Cantrell and Maya Blume-Cantrell have been creating alongside each other from college to life on the art show road to home studios. Now, their new gallery and frame shop is full service and full cirlce.

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There's an image that comes to mind of a certain type of artist whose talent manifests in funky ways.

His studio is in his basement. His office, his van. He paints outside, only when it's not raining.

His long hair isn't on end like a mad scientist, but rather that sight is saved for his paintbrushes, which are twisted and cut and smashed like a little boy's sister's Barbie's bristle. Many are stored upright in a holder next to his worktable. Others lay cemented this way and that in a bowl of wax as sponges sit on shelves and by the brushes and in a drawer and on another shelf, like trinkets collected from the sea. Some were.

The madness behind the method is what makes Nick Cantrell and his work stand out at fine art shows up and across the East and Gulf coasts, what always has people asking just how he makes his stuff because, they say, they can see it's different than just painting. Art is like play for Cantrell – at least that's what it seems like to someone who doesn't live inside his head – in the best way. The result, 12 years of being able to make art fulltime for a living and only showing his work at shows and festivals, is what you get when you combine methodical practice, years of learning the business of showing and selling with a childlike whimsy for color and experimentation to channel a flow state of creation.





Plus, not all that "madness" is even true anymore.

Not since he and his wife, Maya Blume-Cantrell, opened Studio Cantrell. Now, for the first time, he has a gallery to showcase his work.

"He had been very successful with the fine art shows, but it was a lot of travel time. It was very physical. Also, when he was here, there is no place when if somebody just pops in town and is like, 'Hey, can I come see your work?' That would involve pulling everything out of the van and setting it up in a workplace [at the house]," Maya said.

That'd all take two hours, Nick said, to get to the one piece they may be interested in possibly purchasing.

The duo studied art in college, reconnecting at Auburn University after having known each other since Nick moved to Orange Beach in eighth grade. Maya is the resident artist at the Coastal Arts Center of Orange Beach's Clay Shop, where her pottery and ceramics are on display for sale. She also shows her work as Maya Earth Ceramics. Nick first went a more corporate route, working as a realtor until the 2008 financial crisis dissolved that path. When Hurricane Katrina hit, his "little Boy Scout self" went to help extended family with damage removal. By the time Gustav hit, he was a paid FEMA contractor.

Nick was working on a damage assessment in Upstate New York in 2011 when he found a magazine with the work of Kathie George. Though he initially went to school for building science before a medical setback redirected him, he had always been a gifted drawer. You'd never guess, with his watercolor Batik paintings he layers with wax to preserve designs and shapes, his vibrant renderings of turtles and jellyfish and coastal scenes, that he grew up struggling with color.

"Color and I ... fought and did not get along. I can do a whole paper on self-limiting beliefs, but one that I had was that it's not finished until there's color, or I can't make a living selling artwork that is just black and white, or graphite, or line drawings," he said. "And I tried everything under the sun. I was in love with colored pencils for the longest time. I did acrylics. I've done murals. I loved oils, but an oil studio when you're young and moving around and you got kids, if you're not in there every day and keeping things moving, they stop."

Enter his discovery of Kathie George.



He started experimenting. Rice paper. Watercolor. Wax. He may have been inspired by George's work, but his own spin on the artistry is what resonates closer to home.



"It's not Italy. It's not there. It's everything that you'd walk around and you'd see," Maya said.

"My life's full of broken pylons, brown pelicans ... I cling to the coast [for art shows] because of my subject matter," Nick said. "I'm going to paint beachy stuff. This is literally like that's what comes out of me. Like, let's take a boat ride and go see what we can see."

Nick's process eliminates his work surface as he continues, like a sculptor but by adding material rather than removing. Layer of light color, add some more. Layer of wax. Layer of color. Wax. Color. Wax. Color. The hot wax freezes the color in time and space, a physical barrier that prevents that bit from being affected by the next infusion of bleeding color.

Like a kid learning about cause and effect in an ever-expanding world, Nick's tests different sponges, different iterations of patternmaking and line-drawing and dabbing and cause and effect in an ever-expanding piece of artistry.



Amanda Pappas, Studio Cantrell, Frame Shop Manager & Design Consultant

When Nick Cantrell met Amanda 15 years ago at the former PostNet in Fairhope, she was one of two people he trusted stretching and printing his work. Amanda can help accent or preserve pretty much anything you bring in to Studio Cantrell. She's done everything from all types of art pieces to flags, historical documents and even Grandma's doilies. The shop has a wall of custom frames to pick from, whether your piece needs something simply functional or substantially fun.

> *"We're only here because of what other people have helped us with... sharing their knowledge and sharing their experience.*

The Cantrells have lived parallel to the space where the studio is now in for years. Sometimes more adjacent or slightly overlapping. It seems like a right-time, right-moment type of thing that came to be. Just the right amount of color and wax in just the right texture and layers.

Lee and Nancy Wright had an art gallery, the Prosperous Pelican, there for over 20 years. Start with the paper. Nick said after Lee passed away around 12 years ago, right around when he was starting to accumulate a home studio, Nancy offered her late husband's upstairs office space to Nick. He stayed home, added to the house. A decade passed. Wax lines to preserve the path.

He knew the couple who bought the building, two Fairhopers who saw his Orange Beach tag on his booth at a show in Key West. The Pelican had fallen into disrepair and was a project for the estate to sort through a building full of other people's art, sans records. Color, washing together. The Cantrells and some of Maya's colleagues from the art center helped, and Tony and Tamara Scott put the capital into remodeling the place into the Pink Pelican. New wax layer. The first artist they contracted to represent? Nick Cantrell. Splash of color.

When they decided to relocate, they approached him about taking it over.

As Nick says, you grow to fit your container.

He had already long brought his whole assembly line in-house, learned about making frames, when to pair a piece with a simple, standard frame – for art shows, the piece should be the focus – or when to make the frame part of the art itself – when it's being personalized for someone's home – from Rick Tino, who used to have the only frame shop on the island, Tino's Fine Art & Frames.

Now, not only does the old Pink Pelican afford him space to show his work to the public outside of a show, not only does it give him a studio and enough space to house an upgraded printer and a wood cutter and frame assembly station, a place to cut glass without relying on the weather because it's no longer outside in the yard, but Studio Cantrell is also a full, public-facing frame shop, managed by Amanda Pappas, and art gallery. Maya, who has "kept her hands dirty" since finding her medium in college, from being shown at the Kress Gallery in Asheville, North Carolina, to her initial Orange Beach Festival of Arts to the last 12 years of being at the arts center, now juggles clay and emails to run the business side of the shop.

Around a dozen artists, not including Nick and Maya, have their work on display for sale.

"Now I have a proper frame shop with proper equipment, and I needed all of this in a way," he said, "but being able to be open to the public is really amazing. Representing other artists, sharing the spotlight with up-and-comers and helping to be a resource and helping enable these people to get to where I am.

"I feel there's stewardship that comes with having a talent. First off, if you have a gift, you should use it for the greater good, something bigger than yourself. And then if I'm able to support having a shop like this, then I want to be able to offer those services. We're only here because of what other people have helped us with, you know, sharing their knowledge and sharing their experience."

The image that comes to mind of a certain type of artist whose talent manifests in funky ways has changed over the years. You'll never know until you add the layer, but this could be the most vibrant one yet.