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GOING MY WAY?

Patrick Marston and Michael Brunt find direction in painting, songs and community projects

BY BETTY BAILEY

PHOTOGRAPHY • SAM DIEPHUIS

Patrick Marston and Michael Brunt walk the halls of The Teen Project, a Sun Valley home for young women recovering from drug addiction and abuse. As they inspect their work, they are greeted with warm smiles and affectionate hugs from workers and residents. The Venice couple has spent three months at the center, transforming the once-dreary white walls into a serene cubist landscape, with deep green hedges and a protective tree. "I used the colors of ground and sky to increasingly open up the field," says Marston, "and there's a bridge to symbolize their journey to recovery."

"These women are great," adds Brunt. "We lived in the middle of a life lesson here."

Marston is the visual artist whose designs grace the halls. He works in various mediums to create murals, planted art and fine art. Brunt, a musician, takes charge of the business end of Marston and Brunt Art Gallery, but there is some crossover between the two jobs. "Michael is very much my muse," says Marston. "He brings a certain quality to my art. He's the one person I have surrendered my ego to. I trust that he will tell me the truth about my designs or the colors I choose. He's really developed a really great eye over time. He doesn't



do the design, but I depend on him for the final piece we show to clients or for proposals.”

They adopted the business name *Marston and Brunt* this year; a fitting title for the power-couple that blends their lives and living together. They met 18 years ago on an Internet dating site. Ten months later, they moved in together. Eight years later, they were married. “We met and it was over,” says Brunt. “We fell in love immediately.”

“It was a wonderful surprise finding each other,” adds Marston. “The vernacular was similar; and we became friends fast.”

They are the kind of guys who skateboard to meetings. They are friendly and warm; when they want to make a point, they give you a gentle touch on the arm, or hold your hand and look you in the eye. In each other, they seem to have found the perfect match: an artist’s sensibilities and a strong work ethic.

In their early days together, Marston worked as an event coordinator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, while Brunt worked in the sales department at MTV. Their evenings were devoted to their art. “Three nights a week, we would spend three or four hours in the studio. We’ve been in the trenches with each other,” says Brunt. “We have cut up; we have mailed out; we have licked envelopes.”

“It was like having a day job *and* a night job,” Marston explains. “You’ve got to do *everything* when you’re starting a business and creating a life that you want. Nobody’s going to do it for you.”

Even the weekends revolved around work. That’s when Marston

would hold his art shows and Brunt would play his music. “For ten years we did this. Folks would come over to our studio and they would hang with us, but we were focused.”

Even with so much devotion to their work, they knew from the beginning that they had to put their relationship first. “We believe in healing each other,” says Brunt. “He must treat *me* well; and I must treat *him* well. Our greatest goal in our relationship is: how good can I treat you?”

“Especially when you’re such a tight unit like we are, you have to believe that you’re on the same team,” adds Marston. “If we don’t act like we’re on the same team, it’s not going to work. We’re very conscious of that.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” says Brunt. “The reason we’re good is that we skinned our knees, we made bad decisions, we partied at times and all that — and we’re just lucky to be here.”

“We respect each other’s pasts,” says Marston. “There are a lot of similarities in them that lead us to speak the same language.”

A big break came when the owner of a gallery on Abbot Kinney saw Marston's work and offered him space in her gallery. "There was a beautiful, huge window that she always had one of my paintings in," he says. "Intelligentsia coffee was just starting up. It was the hottest new spot so there would be lines right at that window. It was a way to get my name and my reputation out there."

Their strict studio schedule was interrupted by a challenge that would take them outdoors. A client asked them to create a vertical garden, an outdoor work of art, for her home on the Venice canals. The biggest hurdle was making it sustainable with very little water. "Drought tolerant does not have to be unattractive," says Brunt.

The result was an installation that was not only appealing to the eye, it would serve as a billboard for their work. "The Venice canals are a really good showcase for garden design, because people are walking on it all the time," says Marston.



The project started them down the garden path, so to speak. Using drip irrigation systems and preserved material, their low-maintenance, vertical gardens were soon in demand. "We didn't know we'd become good at vertical garden walls and known for gardens that are drought tolerant," says Brunt. "You don't have to do anything. The gardens manage themselves."

Brunt decided to leave his job and join forces with Marston, launching their new business: Planted Art. Working together, Brunt immersed himself in the world of art, while Marston honed his negotiating skills. "Michael is strong when it comes to having a voice and he has fostered that in me," says Marston. "Where it was a weakness, now it's becoming an ever-increasing strength. But I have to admit I do depend on him to step in during a difficult situation or conversation. He's a bit of my protector in that way."

"God help us, we love Venice...It's inception was creative so it's drawn people over the years who are creative. Here, everyone's kind of found their own way."

More large-scale work came in, with commissions for murals that now decorate private homes, public spaces and businesses, including two walls at Google's Venice Beach office.

"What I love about what we're doing right now is that, being a creative person, I'm always hungry for the next creative project," says Marston, who says he enjoys switching gears between the art forms. "It has been nice and it has served us, in that it keeps it fresh. It keeps my design muscle really strong."

They are enjoying the variety of the current wave of business, but both say they are happiest while working in their studio — and that's where they plan to concentrate their efforts in the future. "Our intention is to focus more and more on the fine art," says Marston. "Because it's really a beautiful life when we're in the studio and in our garden."

Their garden has been a neighborhood sanctuary for nearly two decades. In the early days, Brunt says, "Parents would come in and have a glass of wine with us while their kids played on the swings — so we really got to know our neighbors."

Today, most of those kids have headed off to college and jobs. Yet the disco ball from their wedding still hangs in their yard, along with a tree swing made from an old bed. "We had a quiet period for a year or two because the children were gone," says Brunt. "Buildings were torn down and rebuilt. Finally that stopped. Families moved in; and now our walking street is vital again with families."

"God help us, we love Venice," says Marston. "Its inception was creative, so it's drawn people over the years who are creative: writers, dancers, even the hippy culture, which was very politically creative. Here, everyone's kind of found their own way. I've always felt very supported in Venice."

The support runs both ways. Both Marston and Brunt take active roles in the Venice community. In 2017, Marston painted the rainbow-colored lifeguard tower at the end of Brooks Avenue. The L.A. County Board of Supervisors later voted to preserve the installation indefinitely.

"Being on the board of Venice Pride," says Marston, "we've learned that being involved in our community really creates connection."

We know our neighbors; we know leaders of Venice — and we love them all. They're doing some great things."

"We can breathe here, and our art is respected; but there's a turn now," Brunt says, nodding to the elephant sitting in many Venetian rooms these days: life here is expensive. Neighborhoods are changing, properties are at a premium and locals are being priced out. "We've definitely gentrified," he says. "We're seeing the change, and we had to make a decision: who are we in that?"

The verdict was to salute the changing environment and dig their roots even deeper. "He's not cutting his right ear off for sadness and I'm not sad with my art," says Brunt. "If you've got \$5-million homes, that means all those blank walls. Now, the artists have to show up!"

"I believe in Venice," says Marston. "Venice has always been changing; it's just happening again. If you want to live life, you have to adapt."

"In Venice, the change is 25%," Brunt says. "There is still 75% that's the same. When these [new] people walk up the street and feel important, you get an old salty Venice person who'll remind you that you're not in charge."

Marston credits the activists of Venice for helping keep the local focus on art and helping to preserve the town's bohemian vibe. "The Venice Art Crawl is an example," he says. "They are amazing people who are shining light on beginning artists in Venice. They are a vital part of the change in Venice right now."

As the pair strives to make their own work more economically viable, they are offering support to new artists who look to them for advice. "We stop and we immediately talk to them," says Brunt. "We say, 'Great, so you're an artist. Do you know that you're in the business of art? You've got to start a business.' There's no success without being in the business of it."

Their business model is based on the principle of completing a series of work and moving on. Naturally, they have several new projects in the works. Brunt is working on a non-fiction book titled "Your Joy is Required"; and he plans to release a new CD, *California Day*, this month.

Marston is spending time in the studio, working on a new series of paintings and setting up shows. "I would love to be the artist that has a huge studio somewhere where I can have five projects going at the same time, and loud music playing, and have one person who's focused on art reproduction while I'm focused on the next series," he says. "That would be a dream. That is our goal."

The couple is also working on a series of T-shirts that feature the work of visual artists, and they say talks are underway with the City of Los Angeles for some possible larger works in city parks. "We want to make our Eiffel Tower," says Brunt. "We want to figure out what that is."

Marston (l.), Brunt (r.) and Tonka at the Teen Center

