



Susan Spencer, *The Builder's Box*, 16" x 10".

SUSAN SPENCER

AND

MICHAEL WILSON:

FIVE LEVELS

By Michael Potts

Their work is humorous, complex, intriguing: not-quite-familiar objects (handles, gears, faces, text in different alphabets) presented with symmetry and rhythm in the best traditions of painting, yet thick, dimensional, sculptural, often literally outside the box. Susan Spencer and Michael Wilson, assemblage artists of national note, live in a house they designed and built themselves on a ridge-top above Anderson Valley.

"I always did art," says Susan. "My family didn't understand, but knew what sparked me. I worked mostly in watercolor, but soon established that I'd never be as good as the good guys. . . Watercolor didn't come alive for me until I saw Michael's work, and began doing assemblage. . ."

Michael: "My dad was a famous animator, John David Wilson, and I grew up in the 1970s in a bohemian enclave in Pasadena surrounded by about 400 artists. After a few art classes at City College, I was a ranger in Big Sur, then moved up to caretake a ranch on Low Gap. I met Susan at the 2001 Wild Iris Festival in Boonville."

Susan picks up the narrative, "I studied for a medical career, but got married and moved to Anderson Valley. My husband died young, and in due course, I was at Wild

Iris looking for good music."

"We've been together ever since," Michael summarizes.

"During those first years, we ran The Beat Gallery in Ukiah," recalls Susan.

Michael continues, "In a working class town that doesn't endorse art that much, we sold a lot . . . and we met so many artists! That gave us a valuable perspective on placing our own work. When we started building, we closed the gallery."

Their upstairs studios face across a stairway, and reveal contrasting styles. Susan explains, "We both collect all manner of objects with interesting forms and textures – from friends, antique stores, eBay. We each have our interests: Michael buys mechanical parts and makes castings of existing art works; I get biblical images on paper

because they evoke an era I like."

Michael explains, "We spend thousands of dollars on parts, and I do a lot of deconstructing. I start with the substrate – the frame and backing. I get an idea, then start selecting discarded objects and moving them around in the frame, seeking the happy 'mistake': that's the adventure of assemblage, a sort of poetic development of found and discarded objects into a cohesive whole. We're both



Left: Susan Spencer; Michael Wilson photo. Right: Michael Wilson; Michael Potts photo.



Left: Susan Spencer, *Tempus Fugit*, 14" x 12". Middle: Susan Spencer, *Blue Moon*, 30" x 20". Right: Michael Wilson, *Piano 2*, 24" x 20".

interested in ‘distressing’ our works so they have the authority of age.”

Susan adds, “We’re both heavy on technique, and resist the ‘baby dolls in a box’ watering down that has plagued assemblage recently. I’m interested in assembling pieces using deconstructed antiques, following what I have come to understand as ‘the rules of art.’ When I look at some of my earlier pieces, they look flat. A solid piece needs to have electricity, and when it’s there, viewer’s responses can be very strong.

“For me, one of the ‘rules’ is that my works need to have five layers to generate that electricity. A piece has to start from good bones and then layer up.”

Michael adds, “Sometimes I find a new part, and it belongs and transforms the work, so I have to rethink things. Sometimes I know what a piece needs, but I don’t have it. That drives me crazy!”

Susan continues, “Sometimes, you think you’re done, and awhile later you have a better idea. I hung a sweet piece in a gallery, but knew it was somehow out of proportion. After two years, it hadn’t sold. When I finally saw what needed to change, I retrieved the piece and added a new layer – the fifth! – and it went back to the gallery recharged . . . and sold the next day!”

Michael: “In early 2016 we participated in a show at the Grace Hudson Museum, In the Construction Zone, with a number of other local assemblage artists, and the response was gratifying.”

Susan: “For that show, we all had to talk about our work. Listening to the other artists, I heard how different

our methods are. Our colleague Spencer Brewer assembles a piece using artifacts from the same era. We avoid plastic, and strive to make our pieces look old, but aren’t above casting an art piece and using it more than once, or fashioning a connecting piece with baked Fimo.”

About selling art, Michael says, “We’re lucky: we have time to go out after the business, and hang our work in wineries, restaurants, galleries.”

Susan adds, “Owning the gallery, we learned by turning

away a lot of good art that just wouldn’t sell in Ukiah, that you have to step away from your work, be sure of your own value, and not be hurt by rejection.”

Susan Spencer and Michael Wilson are teaching “Dust Bin Alchemy (Assemblage)” at the Mendocino Art Center, October 21–22, 2017.

Visit Susan and Michael’s blog at assemblageartists.wordpress.com.



Michael Wilson, *Indian Trader*, 19" x 22".