



Art Process: Will Ryan Forms Artist Duets to Create Unique Art in Partnership

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by Pat Rogers

When musician and visual artist Will Ryan hears the word “duet,” it is the musical form that comes to mind. After all, singers and instrumentalists both engage in duets—the practice of two musicians playing separate and unique parts that are composed to combine into a single piece of music. When Ryan started considering ways to collaborate with artists by way of expressing thanks after recovering from a life-saving surgery and cancer, the music-making form of duets made sense to apply to visual art as well.

The results of these poetic partnerships resulted in around 30 new art works, presented in the exhibition “East End Duets” at White Room Gallery in Bridgehampton. Artists participating in the process-driven project include renown and emerging artists. Many are based on the East End of Long Island or in New York City as Ryan has ties to both creative communities.

“East End Duets” is an expression of gratitude for Will Ryan, he said in an interview at his Amagansett studio. He’s grateful for being alive, grateful to the medical professionals who saw him through cancer and his recovery, and grateful for the support of his family and friends. He’s also grateful for fellow artists who pitched in to help following his bone marrow transplant in February 2015 and his eventual return to his Amagansett home. Making art in an equal and collaborative way to create something new seemed the perfect way to express his thanks and also make his way back to his own art making and music practices.

The exhibition is also a fundraiser for the adult bone marrow transplant program at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City that was responsible for saving Ryan’s life. Donations can be made online by clicking [here](#) for details.



“Vale Dance” by Will Ryan and Athos Zacharias. Oil on canvas and vale, 40 x 46 inches.

Taking the process of duets literally, Ryan selected around 30 artists who he felt there was sympatico and interesting art could be created by combining their respective artist visions. Then things get really interesting. Each contributing artist selected an artwork as starting point. Ryan considered the work as a blank canvas of sorts and started to work. The art in process was returned

to the originating artist. Sometimes additional changes were made and returned to Ryan. Sometimes Ryan made further changes and sometimes not. In all cases, both artists decided in concert when the artwork was completed.

The result is art that is completely distinct yet is identifiable to both contributing artists.



“Silver Lining” by Will Ryan and Sally Breen. Oil on board, silver leaf, gold leaf, 40 x 30 inches.



Artwork by Gabriele Raacke and Will Ryan. Acrylic on glass plate.

One through line in the process was making sure the original artwork offered retained identifiable in some way, explained Ryan. In some cases, this mean checking in with artist when radical transformation was being considered.

“I wanted to keep the integrity of the art and without compromising the integrity of each artist,” said Ryan.

For instance, a mixed media work by Perry Burns contained images that included recovery efforts from war, protests and published photographs covering conflicts and peace rallies set around the world from some time ago. Ryan’s vision for the artwork was leading toward reducing the image to its intended essence of cultural understanding by stripping away the photography, he said so he spoke to Perry Burns and described his vision. Burns agreed and Ryan changed the composition to incorporating his signature art making processes of leafing (gold, silver and copper) and abstract pigment to create pools of motion-infused fields of color. Burns embraced the changes by Ryan and *Arabesque* was created.



“Arabesque” by Perry Burns and Will Ryan. Oil and leaf on canvas.

In the collaboration with Paton Miller, Burns offered a painted canvas as starting point for Miller.

When the piece came back, Ryan worked on it and passed it back to Miller. Between the two, the art work underwent a radical transformation from its start to end point to create the dramatic work *Into the Mystic* that bears the artist visions of both men.



“Into the Mystic” by Will Ryan and Paton Miller. Oil on canvas, copper leaf, 72 x 48 inches.

Artists in “duet” with Will Ryan include Paton Miller, Janet Jennings, Dan Welden, Richmond Burton, John Messinger, Pipi Deer, Jeff Muhs, Perry Burns, Athos Zacharias, Daphne Stern, Darlene Charneco, Gabriele Raacke, Charles Waller, Abby Abrams, Steve Joster, Mark Wilson, Sally Breen, David Geiser, Scott Bluedorn and others.

In addition, Ryan worked in conjunction with nine artist members of The White Room Gallery to create a single artwork made up individual panels by each artist that were conjoined by a calligraphy character made by Ryan.



“Seatbelt Fastened, We’re Gonna Paint the Town Green” by Will Ryan and Charles Waller. Mixed media, 24 x 24 inches.



“Buddhessa of Giving” by Will Ryan and Abby Abrams. Mixed media, hanging piece, wire, gourd, pigment, 18 x 14 inches.

The idea of collaborating with 30 distinct artists and art work styles to create a single exhibition of a serious body of work seems like a recipe for stress instead of peace. The nearly year-long process went smooth and proved to be cathartic.

“Everyone was really great about it,” said Ryan. “I’m not sure if it was because what I went through but I don’t think so. It really was about making art. You never knew what was going to happen and what you were going to get and that’s part of the joy.”



“That Low and Rumbling Absolute” by Will Ryan and John Messinger. Photography, 58 x 48 inches.

Through the project, Ryan worked on a variety of mediums including paintings, sculpture, photography, assemblage and mixed media works. In his own art making practice, Ryan has gone through changes in his work. He first found success as a commercial photographer working in New York City making book covers and photographing models, celebrities and creatives. All the while, he was an improvisational jazz musician who made music with King Chubby as a multi instrumentalist. Often times, his music was made on flutes of his own making.

His initial visual art was centered on assemblage. Wanting to deepen his creative journey to explore beauty, he was drawn to play with materials that included pigment and then encaustic that required Ryan to surrender to serendipity.

“I wanted to see what I could pull out of myself,” said Ryan, “and the material that led me there was encaustic. You have to surrender to the material. Encaustic has a mind of its own.”

Playing around with the wax-based material led him to counter the fluidity to adding contrast with leafing (gold, silver or copper) that added surfaces that glistened in a different way than the encaustic. It also infused the art with the subtle element of possessing something precious through the infusion of gold.



“Night Dancers” by Will Ryan. Dye and leaf on board, 40 x 40 inches.

Working on “Duets” brought another kind of serendipity with the exchanges with artists who are also friends. It also brought Ryan joy and a way to physically channel the gratitude he feels on being alive, on surviving and in the artist community that wandered into his studio to help without asking for anything in return.

When looking at the art created for the process, Ryan feels joy and a hope that viewers will tap into the good will and community spirit that infuses the work in the series. Art work sales and donations will also help share the love that resulted in his ability to survive and continue making art.

While the visual art “Duets” have come to its conclusion, Ryan continues a music making collaboration that began as part of “Duets” but will unfold over the near year, he said. A concert of his new musical “duets” (so to speak) is expected next year. So far, around 11 tracks have been completed for the Lazy Point Collective.



“Dancin’ It Up” by Will Ryan and Pipi Deer. 8 x 10 Polaroid, 22 x 18 inches.



“Ready for My Next Tattoo” by Will Ryan and Andrea McCafferty. Mixed media, 15 x 12 inches.

BASIC FACTS: “East End Duets” features around 30 art works made by Will Ryan in partnership with a second artist. The exhibition is presented September 22 to October 10, 2016 at [The White Room Gallery](#), 2415 Main Street, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. A portion of artwork sale proceeds will be donated to Memorial Sloan Kettering in support of adult bone marrow transplants. To make a direct donation, click [here](#). To see the art created as part of Will Ryan’s “Duets” project, click [here](#).

To see more of Will Ryan’s art, visit www.willryanstudio.com.

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