

VISUAL ARTS & ARCHITECTURE

Southern classic remix

Couple's work echoes 'simpler truths' of an earlier era

By Debra Wolf
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Atlanta artist Red Weldon Sandlin grew up in Owensboro, Ky., a cozy town tucked along the Ohio River. Husband and collaborator Mark Sandlin was raised just 80 miles away, in Florence, Ala.

It was the 1960s, turbulent years in the South. Yet both speak fondly of their childhoods. And both remember being moved by reading "To Kill a Mockingbird," Harper Lee's story of children coming of age in Depression-era rural Alabama.



In "Cured Ham," Red Weldon Sandlin poses an endearing and gawky ceramic Scout in Halloween attire atop a whimsical painting of bird-headed figures.

"I Still Hear the Mockingbird: Red Weldon Sandlin & Mark Sandlin"
Through May 10. 11:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Wednesdays – Saturdays or by appointment. Prices: \$800-\$7,800.
Whitespace, 814 Edgewood Avenue, Atlanta; 404-688-1892,
www.whitespace814.com.

Bottom line: The result of several years of distilling memory, imagery and life lessons inspired by their own Southern roots and a classic American novel, "I Still Hear the Mockingbird" is a fluid, intimate body of work from two accomplished visual storytellers.

Neither has forgotten the tale of lawyer Atticus Finch, his children Jem and Scout, and wrongly accused sharecropper Tom Robinson. The novel's characters ultimately found their way into the couple's art — first in Red's about four years ago, and then in Mark's.

Gradually, a body of work began to form — paintings, drawings, assemblages combining sculptural elements and found objects. The result, their new collaboration at Whitespace gallery, "I Still Hear the Mockingbird," is a quiet, uplifting and intimate display.

Perhaps this is in part due to the couple's deep personal connection to the story. They speak of the characters as though they are family. "We grew up in the South," says Red. "We are these children, this sense of place."

Nationally recognized for her fanciful ceramics, Red bases much of her work on children's literature with adult interpretations. So Scout, the 6-year-old protagonist in Lee's masterpiece, is a natural point of departure for the artist.

Mark, on the other hand, comes at the work not only thematically, for the story's beauty, but as an artist who is passionate about nature; he has returned in recent years to flowers and birds, which he began painting as a child in Florence, at his grandmother's side.

Describing their collaborative process as interactive and rhythmic, husband and wife praise each other's contributions. Red points out a lovely passage of abstract, light-infused brushwork by Mark; he remarks on the wonderful innocence in his wife's whimsical compositions.

In fact, the pairing of their differing styles and mediums seems ideal; it is fluid, understated and ironic — much like the style and construction of the novel from which it takes its inspiration.

The focal image, "I Can Still Hear the Mockingbird," is Mark's elegantly rendered drawing on a background of pages from the book. It is the distillation of adult

perspective — the symbol of belief in good, despite everything — still intact. The mockingbird seems to stand guard over the smaller vignettes of assembled cigar boxes, portrait fragments on panel, ceramic works and mixed media paintings — each of which evokes a scene, sentiment or essential character from the story.

Although they worked together on many of the paintings, "Cured Ham" is all Red: a poignant and quirky construction that presents a ceramic Scout as a Halloween ham. She is gawky and endearing, posed atop a panel depicting two bird-headed figures. The matte surface of her clay body begs to be touched. Her costume is charmingly decorated with a delicate, pastoral scene resembling toile, a signature element in Red's renowned teapots.

By turn, the pieces "Tom Robinson" and "Miss Maudie" are pure Mark. They are an accomplished pair of portraits executed in graphite, colored pencil and pastel on a background of softly brushed acrylic.

"He's the soul of the mockingbird," says Mark about Tom Robinson. "They sing their hearts out to give beauty to the world."

The artists look around at the images of Jem, Scout, Tom and the other characters. "That was a time of beauty and courage," says Mark, wistfully. "A time of simpler truths."