

Double Trouble: An Interview with Shannon and William Cannings



William Cannings, "Split-in-the-Cloud," 2021, inflated steel, clear coat, 7 x 14 x 6 inches; Courtesy of the artist

While the title of *artist* alone comes with many hats, throw in *spouse*, *parent*, and *teacher*, among others, and the list of demands grows exponentially. Though some might find that all a little daunting, none of it has ever stopped Shannon and William Cannings.

Shannon and Will live in Lubbock, Texas, have been married for over 21 years, and have two children, Maddie and Bella. In addition to teaching at Texas Tech's School of Art, both artists

maintain rigorous individual studio practices, actively exhibiting throughout the state and beyond.

The two recently shared an insider's look at how they manage it all and, from their perspectives, the advantages of being married to another artist.

Caleb Bell (CB): How do you juggle your jobs, studio practice, household duties, and parental responsibilities?

Shannon Cannings (SC): *You can have it all, just not all at the same time.* – Betty Friedan. There is no secret formula for balancing everything. Some days are more successful and some days we screw it all up. Some days the kids are proud of their crazy parents; their friends visit the studio and borrow paint or comment on what I am doing. Sometimes, they wish we were more organized and remembered to make dinner on time.

It was harder when they were little. Our parents live in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Cheshire, England, so we never had grandparents to help with the kids. We just tried not to schedule things at the same time. It was a challenge, and we didn't always handle it well, but we were able to schedule sleepovers with friends and rushed trips to galleries out of town.

William Cannings (WC): I have no idea! One step at a time. Don't forget to breathe. I thrive on intensity. I was a racing cyclist in England before immigrating to study at Virginia Commonwealth and Syracuse Universities. Controlling the intensity with discipline, desire, and goals is my stimulus. Having good friends, family, and an understanding partner are essential to this balancing act.

CB: What do you think is the biggest advantage of having another artist as a partner?

SC: Oh, man. I cannot imagine trying to live this chaos with another person. It is really helpful to have a partner knowledgeable of my visual language and process, who can respond to what I am doing, question my choices, and encourage me when I am tentative or self-conscious. From a practical standpoint, he makes my beautiful painting stretchers and helps me move and transport art. I edit all of his writing and Photoshop his images and proposals.

WC: The easy answer is understanding and support for making art, teaching, and mentoring. That doesn't mean it is easy.



Shannon Cannings, "Cover Me," 2021, oil on panel, 24 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist

CB: Do you share a studio space? If not, do you conduct critiques with one another?

WC: Nope! We use space differently. We do critique each other, both hard and soft. Knowing when to use which sort is essential. Shannon and the girls are great sounding boards. They are honest and forward.

CB: Can you briefly describe your process? How does it differ from your partner's?

SC: The things we have in common are color and attention to finish. Everything else is different. My work starts with my uncomfortable relationship to our American obsession with [gun culture](#). Because I have a love affair with color and material, I use those to ask the viewer to question their thoughts about it. I plan my compositions, scale, and material from the onset. I set up the subject and lights, take photos, crop, grid, and roughly edit them in Photoshop. I spend much more time editing them on the real painting, but sometimes blocking in big changes helps me see them. I grid up outlines on the canvas with watercolor pencils, because they are not mineral spirit soluble and don't move or dirty up the oil paint. I usually end up with 2-3 layers, fat over lean, using thinner in the first layer and media in the subsequent layers.

Will is so good at making gorgeous surfaces, seamless joints, and hidden connectors. He makes elegant solutions. He is such a physical person that he has to do something to understand it. I have to draw a scale diagram.

Our kids are just like us. When they were about 2 and 4, Maddie sat before a big bucket of crayons. She took forever sifting through them, gingerly picking out colors. She lined up about 20 crayons in a perfect spectrum and tapped the ends to line them up with the edge of the table. Bella watched patiently. When Maddie was satisfied with her completed row, Bella dumped the rest of the crayons on the floor, laid down in the pile and made a crayon snow angel, windmilling her arms and legs. I have always thought this was the perfect metaphor for our differences.

Will motivates me to jump into things, and I motivate him to stop and think before he hurts himself.

WC: Though my process for inflating metal is something I have developed since moving to Texas in 2000, it can't be divorced from my 30+ years of material knowledge gained since first starting art school at Northwich College of Art and Design in 1986. After welding sheet metal forms together, I use heat and compressed air to change the metal from stiff squared shapes to softly rounded and puckered forms. The fine welds sometimes make me feel more like a tailor than a sculptor. I enjoy this exact making. My work is practice based, so the more I create, the more I learn and develop.

Shannon is a fantastic oil painter, and her process is both similar and different. She chases ideas and values, whereas I "shoot in the dark." I am a leaper, not a looker. I will gladly leap into or over something to gain forward momentum. Shannon looks, thinks, and reflects before moving. The combination of these methods is the strength of our unit/team/marriage.



Photo of Shannon and William Cannings

CB: Do you ever have shared inspiration?

SC: Yes! When the kids were little, their toys were bright and colorful. I know their beach balls and pool floats have influenced both of us.

—Caleb Bell