

# All in the Family: Featuring Kelly and Kyle Phelps



This exhibition showcases the work of families of artists—couples, parents and children, and siblings. **All in the Family** explores how shared environments might shape the creative process. What similarities may exist generationally, as visible through works of art? Whether or not artists are creating collaboratively, it is interesting to consider how they may affect one another's working processes or sources for ideas.

The centerpiece of **All in the Family** is a concentration of collaborative sculptural work borrowed from emerging artists **Kelly and Kyle Phelps**. The Phelps are African-American twin brothers who create mixed media work that addresses the complex role of the middle class in contemporary society. Drawing on their own blue collar upbringing in a Midwestern factory town, they explore the "plight" of the anonymous laborer through gritty, visceral reliefs and small-scale sculpture. Often incorporating objects found on factory floors, the artists build scenes collaboratively. Their backgrounds in ceramics and sculpture offer a strong framework for constructing narratives that combine socio-political topics regarding race and class with personal memory and experience.

The children of working class parents, the Phelps grew up with routines that were dictated by factory jobs—they have definitive memories of their father putting on his work boots for his day at an auto assembly plant and removing them when he came home at night. Their desire to highlight the hard-working and often marginalized comes from seeing firsthand what happens when jobs are lost, and people begin to harden and feel disenchanting. Their mixed media sculptures are more like tributes—gritty and harsh to reflect the conditions that some people endure to make a living. As Kelly suggests, "Our art now is reflective of our experience in that factory town...They [the factories] were these mega-structures, and when you see the space where it doesn't exist anymore, it's like a scab or wound, or a memory of what once was there."

University professors now, the brothers briefly worked factory jobs themselves right after graduating college. Building, making, and working with their hands was encouraged in the family as their father was also a handyman and "tinkerer" while their mother made dolls and ran an upholstery business. Both married, the Phelps live near one another and have described themselves as "one person in two different bodies." They define their personal and working relationship as "very close." Since their early years when they were making toys from scrap wood, they have been collaborating on creative projects. Works by the twins are signed "K. E. P.," for both Kelly Eugene and Kyle Edward.

The Phelps' working method includes researching closed factories (sketching, photographing, and interviewing), gathering left-behind materials, and sculpting figures out of clay—which they sometimes cast in resin—that they then paint. The found factory materials could be used to form a framework for their figures or as a primary motif—gears, tools, steel, and even shoes concretize the life of the worker. The actual creation of their wall reliefs involves a harmonious back-and-forth, with tasks being shared or rotated. This fluid approach to authoring their work challenges notions about how creativity is shared and managed.

**Racine Art Museum**  
441 Main Street  
Downtown Racine  
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ramart.org

(above left)  
**Kelly and Kyle Phelps**  
*Miner (detail)*, 2015  
Ceramic and mixed media  
24 x 8 x 8 inches  
Courtesy of the Artists  
Photography: Courtesy of the Artists

(right)  
**Kelly and Kyle Phelps**  
*Boots of the Proletariat Flint*, 2000  
Ceramic and mixed media  
50 x 32 x 6 inches  
Courtesy of the Artists  
Photography: Courtesy of the Artists





Is it their particular symbiosis that allows for such an exchange? Or is it their willingness to seemingly remove individual ego from their acts that allows for their artistic discourse?

Further exploring a dialogue regarding creativity and familial relationships, the Phelps' sculptures are compared with artworks from RAM's holdings. Perhaps surprisingly, the collection includes a large number of pieces by people who are connected through intimate circumstances such as marriage, romantic partnerships, or bloodline. Various methods are represented, encompassing artists who work both together and separately.

Art history—as well as literature, cinema, and other creative fields—is filled with examples of couples who made their work independently or collaboratively, sometimes both. Two of the most famous art examples from modern times include **Alfred Stieglitz** and **Georgia O'Keefe**, who tended to work in different media, and **Christo** and **Jean-Claude**, who collaborated on numerous environmental art projects.

Rather than outline definitive ideas about creativity, this exhibition offers an opportunity to raise questions and to consider human behavior. Some thoughts that might come to mind include (examples below are all featured in RAM's collection):

- Is creativity genetic? RAM has examples by a father and daughter—**Peter Voulkos** who favored ceramics and **Pier Voulkos** who mainly worked with polymer; and three generations of wood turners—**Ed** (grandfather), **Philip** (father), and **Matt Moulthrop** (son).

- Are children raised in creative households more or less likely to be interested in making when they are older?

- With collaborative work, how is a piece planned, designed, and executed? Is it a step-by-step process or more organic? **Bonnie Bischoff** and **J.M. Syron** each have specialties and skills, and suggest that the creation of their furniture with polymer veneer is a constant dialogue. **Elaine** and **Tom Coleman** collaborate on delicately carved porcelain vessels where Tom crafts the shape, then Elaine carves and incises the surface. Tom also creates work on his own made of clay, which has a very different aesthetic. **Tom Rauschke** creates carved and turned wood forms that are given added dimension with **Kaaren Wiken's** embroideries. Each of them also creates sculpture on their own—Tom uses wood while Kaaren uses metal.

- If work is not collaborative, but both members of a couple are creating artwork, are there similarities in their individual pieces anyway? If so, is this something that an artist may feel more or less inclined to highlight or exaggerate?

- Do artists sharing the same environment investigate the same topics—consciously or subconsciously? If they use different media, do the works still have things in common? Compare the floral still-lives of **Beth van Hoesen** and **Mark Adams**, the paintings of **Ruth Grotenrath** and **Schomer Lichtner**, and the wall relief and sculpture of **Richard Mafong** and **Jon Eric Riis**.

- For this conversation, creativity is connected to the visual arts. But it doesn't have to be. Abstract thinking and creative problem solving are components of complex math and physics—are the 43 similar patterns in those arenas as well?

- How is authorship defined for things (artworks, consumer products, etc.) that have multiple people contributing?



(above left)  
**Tom Rauschke and Kaaren Wiken**  
*Forest Goblet*, 1998  
 Ash and dyed cotton embroidery floss  
 11 x 9 1/2 inches diameter  
 Racine Art Museum, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. R.E. Mansfield  
 Photography: Courtesy of the Artists

(above right)  
**Roberta Williamson**  
**David Williamson**  
*Neckpiece*, 2001  
 Sterling silver and found printed paper  
 16 x 1 3/8 x 7/16 inches  
 Racine Art Museum, Gift of Trish Rodimer  
 Photography: Jon Bolton