

Pair of 'change agent' local artists partner for Mars Hill exhibit

By Johnny Casey || Asheville Citizen Times

MARSHALL - Mars Hill University's Weizenblatt Gallery will feature the work of two local icons beginning later this month.

Ceramics artist Josh Copus and photographer Rob Amberg's exhibition, "Place: Reflections by Copus and Amberg" The show will take place September 21-October 14, with an opening reception on the 28th from 6-8 p.m.

Amberg, who served as a visiting artist and instructor at Duke University and as a research associate at UNC Chapel Hill, will feature work from all three of his Madison County books, "Sodom Laurel Album," "The New Road: I-26, and the Footprints of Progress in Appalachia," and "Little Worlds."



Amberg was born in Washington, D.C., and graduated from the University of Dayton in 1969. He moved to Madison County in 1973 and began what has become his lifetime project – writing and photographing about the evolving culture and environment of his adopted county.

Common ties

The decision to partner for the exhibitions was a no-brainer, as the artists have always shared a strong bond.

"Since I first set up my pottery in Madison County, Rob has been a part of my life as a friend, mentor, and a role model for how to make a life here in Madison County," Copus said. "Through his unique perspective as a person who showed up here as an outsider but has put in nearly 50 years here, Rob has helped me to better understand this place and how best to navigate living here.



"As our friendship has grown and my role in the county has expanded, I have continued to lean on Rob for counsel and guidance in how best to integrate and elevate in the place that I now call home."

Amberg interviewed a number of Madison County figures, including Jerry Plemmons, for his work on UNC-Chapel Hill's Southern Oral History Program. Amberg and Copus' mutual reverence for the land and its inhabitants affords a deeper connection between the two artists, according to Amberg.

"Madison County has been going through a period of change for the last few decades," Amberg said. "This began in earnest in the mid-1970s when many people, like myself, arrived as back-to-the-landers and made our homes here. Josh is representative of the latest wave of change agents. I think our partnership in this exhibit and other projects is an effort for inclusion."





Amberg said he hoped the exhibit will help to continue to encourage a spirit of tolerance and acceptance of all community members.

"One of the things that concerns me about our county is the division between the born-in-county locals and the newcomers," Amberg said. "There is no question that people have differences of opinion, and belief, and culture. Yet, I do believe all of us share a love of place, an understanding that our mountains are sacred and need to be honored and respected."

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Amberg said the exhibit serves as an expression of his belief in the community's resilience, as well as the enthusiastic spirit of residents looking ahead to the county's future.

"This exhibit is about my love of place and the diverse people who have chosen to live here and love it as I do," he said. "I think it is this mutual love of place that provides us with common ground to get beyond our differences and move forward to our shared future."

To Copus, the exhibit represents a connection between two artists from different places conveying their shared love for their adopted homes, as well as the connection between the artists.

"The best exchanges go both ways and while this exhibition is largely about the work we've made independent of each other, it's also about a shared experience - two people working with the same material, the same place, even if we each did it in a different way," Copus said.

Weizenblatt Gallery is on the main floor of Mars Hill University's Moore Fine Arts Building, located at 79 Cascade St. The gallery is open Monday through Friday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. It is closed on weekends and holidays. Admission is free.

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