

# Arts

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Kevin and Jennifer McCoy have won worldwide attention for installations such as "Scary Things" and "Special Things," which she describes as "a little bit disarming and a little bit goofy."

BY CARLOS PUMA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

# Artists Who Dissect 'Starsky & Hutch'

*Couple Pieces Together Metaphors for Disjointed Times*

One in an occasional series

By BLAKE GOPNIK  
Washington Post Staff Writer

**K**evin and Jennifer McCoy have been together since 1990. They've been making art in tandem for almost as long — ambitious electronic work that draws equally on pop culture and film theory and that combines custom computer programming and crude modelmaking.

They appeal to all kinds of tastes: For about five years now, their art has been bought and shown at major venues around the world, from the august Museum of Modern Art in New York to dedicated new-media galleries in Germany.

It has won them a Rave Award from the technophisters at Wired magazine, but also sober articles in Artforum and Art in America. There's simply nothing else quite like the work they do, and that must help account for their success.

But it's hard to resist a niggling feeling that their coupledom could also play a role. They're one of several husband-and-wife teams who've made a splash in recent years, and you wonder if a cuteness factor might not be at work in their careers.

So, visiting the McCoy's studio — an old cold-storage room perched behind their rehabbed Brooklyn row house — it's a relief to discover that they're not a wedding-cake couple. That their two minds don't think as one. That they don't finish each other's sentences. That, for all the affection and mutual respect on view, they're about as likely to correct or probe each other's words as nod in agreement.

"You'd be screwed if conceptual art hadn't happened," says Jennifer, pointing out her partner's lack of traditional artistic skills. To which Kevin responds: "Am I not screwed? Have I dodged that bullet yet? I don't know."

Kevin, who is 39, is in torn jeans, a plain black T-shirt and scuffed black running shoes. He has long, unruly locks and a mustache that crawls, sluglike, down the sides of his chin. He could pass for a stoner selling used guitars.

His wife, 38, is notably more tidy. She sits near him wearing fresh khakis, a flowery green vest over a clean white shirt (untucked, because she's pregnant with their second child) and sparkly little flats. Her straight hair is cut at girlish shoulder length.

The contrast seems to feed into their art.

Last month they opened their first Los Angeles show, at a gallery called Fringe Exhibitions. It featured two new, contrasting installations, "Special Things" and "Scary Things."

For the "Special" part, 16 quirky little dioramas, barely the size of cigar boxes, hang from the ceiling of a cheerily lit room. They're attached to 16 tiny security cameras that transmit live video of the models to a nearby screen. Each model consists of a little patch of plastic scenery with letters perched in its foreground, like a 3-D version of a page from a toddler's reader. "Animals," say the letters in front of a pasture with a pair of sheep; "feel," reads a diorama of a child petting a lamb.

Before ending up on-screen, the cameras' images of single words and scenes are run through a homemade

computer program that assembles them into a constantly changing series of sentences: For "Animals can smell flowers" the computer cuts from a shot of those sheep to "can" (c-a-n, in front of a little girl about to climb a fence) to "smell" (the word appears in front of a scene of bees sniffing pollen) to "flowers" (the word, propped in front of tiny plastic blooms) before moving on to its next sequence of words. The phrases that come out talk about what counts as "special" to a kid — maybe about the "Jennifer" side of life.

In the "Scary Things" installation, which works on pretty much the same principles as "Special Things" — though it's shown in a basement room with spooky lighting — the sentences go in a darker, "Kevin" direction: "Dogs are fighting children," "You hear dirty animals crying."

The show is typical McCoy. It's built around the cultural theories they were both schooled in in France — structuralism and its descendant, deconstruction — which emphasize the constructedness of all experience. The theories insist, that is, that culture, including silly children's books, conditions everything we think we know about our world, such as what counts as "special" and "scary," and maybe also how girls and boys will "naturally" think. (The installations, say the McCoy's, were partly inspired by watching Ginger, their 2-year-old daughter.)

But instead of mouthing off about such things, the McCoy's art tries to flesh them out and test them: If our mental and cultural world is supposed to be constructed, then they'll craft building blocks of sense and a machine that lets us watch them being put together into an edifice of meaning.

The result is hardly slick. Their art can look as though it were built in a hobbyist's garage, and that may work as a metaphor for how the world, as we experience it, is a similarly cobbled-together, intractable mess — and for how analysis doesn't get that far in cleaning it up. "I think that's part of the way the work engages with people — because it's a little bit disarming and a little bit goofy," says Jennifer.

"Any of these modes of description are constantly getting outstripped by the basic facts of reality," says

Kevin. "There's so much structuralist work we love, and so much post-structuralist work we love — and those traditions drive us insane at the same time."

Classic structuralist theory suggested that all our notions of the world are built around simple oppositions — raw/cooked, good/bad, special/scary, boy/girl. The McCoy's art seems to descend from such ideas, even if it's only to show that things are less clear-cut than any binaries.

Not that you'd know it from studying the couple's almost perfectly opposed biographies.

Kevin grew up in Seattle, in the early days of the scene that came to be known as grunge. His teen years combined programming Amiga computers with playing experimental and punk music.

For a while, however, he left that artsy mix behind for a BA in philosophy, with a preference for the thorny, high-flown, continental kind.

Jennifer, on the other hand, grew up in sedate Dallas. As a high-achieving teen, she was on the "Whiz Quiz" on PBS, answering questions about abstract expressionism, she said, while her high school's "wicked guy-geeks" handled the sciences.



COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

"Horror Chase" re-creates a scene from the film "Evil Dead II," with the footage edited to create a pursuit that never ends.



COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

**"Special Things," partly inspired by the McCoys' 2-year-old daughter, features live video of 16 little dioramas.**

At Cornell, she started out in interior design, then switched to theater arts and film studies, where a teacher turned her on to radically experimental filmmakers such as Stan Brackage. At the same time her studies turned her into a "hard-core" fan of narrative directors such as Ingmar Bergman and the auteurs of France.

That's where the couple's histories collide. They started dating in Paris, where they had both gone to brush up on the latest French theories on film and popular culture. They also gorged on international contemporary art. "A lot of the experimental works we saw, it was clear we could do that, too," remembers Kevin.

It turns out they were right, even if others only came to recognize it fairly recently.



Ever since moving to New York in 1996 — after earning master's degrees from the cutting-edge program in electronic arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic in Upstate New York — the McCoys have been doing fine as academics. Jennifer's a full professor of fine art at Brooklyn College; Kevin's on his way to tenure at NYU. But their careers as *artists* took off in 2001, when they exhibited a piece called "Every Shot, Every Episode."

Describe the project and it sounds like a dry exercise in academic deconstruction: The pair took a huge pile of footage from a single television show, then pulled it apart into its components. Almost a season's worth of close-ups got burned onto one CD, while the establishing shots, zooms and pans were gathered onto others. Still other CDs collected all the shots of city streets, for instance, and other kinds of settings or props or characters. The artwork includes a little player and a screen mounted in a briefcase, "Man From U.N.C.L.E."-style, and you're invited to pop in any of the discs and watch as the disjointed imagery unfolds.

The genius and fun of the project lies in the show the McCoys chose.

Their carefully honed analytic skills were brought to bear on the '70s trash of "Starsky & Hutch."

Dip into the project's 277 discs — as curators at the Metropolitan Museum of Art did a little while back, when they proudly put their McCoy on display — and you get to survey "Every Disguise," or "Every Comic Criminal" or "Every Sexy Outfit." A TV show that was painfully formulaic in the watching becomes a pleasure in this work of art, which is an almost comic celebration of its formulas, an appealing crazy quilt of trivialities.

Rather than crying out against how television constructs the modern self, or begging us to break free of its formulas, the McCoys invite us to revel in the medium's absurdity. The "essential joke" of the piece, according to Jennifer, is its failure. It "critiques and laughs at the idea that those categories are sufficient to human experience."

Despite the success of "Every Shot," the McCoys soon began to move in another direction altogether.

Almost on a whim, and in the space of a week, they got a film crew and an actor friend to re-create a short

chase scene from the horror classic "Evil Dead II," which they shot and re-shot. Their pile of footage was then edited so it could be looped and scrambled, sped up and slowed down and reversed, ad infinitum, by a computer program of their own devising. Thanks to the McCoys, the poor slob will be fleeing forever, without escaping or getting caught but without ever precisely repeating his flight.

To a generation that grew up learning Indiana Jones by heart, with the best bits on slow-motion repeat, there's hardly any need for narrative or plot or closure. "Horror Chase" shows how a good chase is good enough all by itself, especially if it lasts forever and always changes.

Since the chase, the McCoys have moved on again, away from the disembodied imagery of film and television, toward a more material, almost sculptural approach. They made a bunch of crude tabletop dioramas, made of model train parts and shot by crowds of tiny video cameras, that mimicked scenes from different movie genres — from horror films, from French art films, from 1930s musicals. A computer was programmed to cut, live, among all the cameras' different views, generating an ever-changing tissue of filmic clichés that got projected on a screen.


An absurdly disjointed world becomes seamless once it's turned into a filmic narrative.

And that's the world we live in all the time, the McCoys' most recent art suggests. This isn't just about the structures underpinning film and TV. Our lives are built around the same Hollywood scaffolding: We think about the world and about ourselves and about our place within the world, according to the models that we've learned from TV and at the movies. Last spring in New York, for instance, the McCoys showed an installation called "Dream Sequence." One circular diorama, mounted so it can turn, reconstructs what goes on at night in Kevin's head: Tiny model railroad sets show scenes of terrorist attacks, medieval knights and sexy girls in class. As the setup slowly spins, the disconnected scenes pass before a video camera and are projected on the wall. Over the course of a revolution, we get to see the stream of unconsciousness that passes through the sleeping artist's head, as modern camouflage gives way to shining armor that gives way to miniskirts and desks.

Another similar turntable, also covered in six-inch model film sets, puts us into the head of his wife: Her rather more domestic dream is all about a peaceful fishing pond that morphs into a flood, which in turn gives way to a deluxe pool party. It's shown as half of a split screen it shares with Kevin's dream.

According to "Dream Sequence," we are all, down to our most basic male and femaleness, as much a tissue of hand-me-down clichés as any "Starsky & Hutch" plot.

"The humor here," the McCoys once said, "is that the personal revelations could almost be anyone's."

 **VIDEO ON THE WEB** To view clips of the McCoys' work, go to [www.washingtonpost.com/museums](http://www.washingtonpost.com/museums).