

Venture Out

Ventura County poetry series features pairs or trios

■ First up: Couple with contrasting styles, voices

By Karen Lindell
Special to The Star

Ruin is not a wall, more like a hand with many fingers reaching through the pines to grasp the house.

— Marsha de La O, from her poem “Coyote Song Wildfire at Witch Creek”

We are wild here, our feet tracking in the debris, the holy debris, anointed truth.

— Phil Taggart, from his poem/video/art installation “This Stop”

Two voices musing in tandem can be ... extraordinarily dull.

Phil Taggart and Marsha de la O avoid such harmonic monotony.

They are a married couple speaking the same language — poetry — yet with distinct voices. Pair them up at a poetry reading, and the result can be extraordinary.

Hear two of Ventura County's most distinguished — and accessible — poets when de la O and Taggart open the Arcade Poetry Series at the Carnegie Museum in Oxnard Saturday night.

“Arcade” sounds grand, and although the Carnegie Art Museum is indeed a neoclassical building with impressive Greek columns, the Arcade Poetry Series actually started in the 1980s at a much humbler abode, the City Bakery in midtown Ventura, near Arcade Drive.

Founded by the bakery's owner, George Keenen, the series bounced around over



TROY HARVEY/SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Poets Phil Taggart and Marsha de la O pose for a portrait in their home. The two will kick off the Arcade Poetry Series at the Carnegie Art Museum in Oxnard on Saturday.

the years before landing at the Carnegie in the early 2000s.

The series, hosted by Oxnard bard Jackson Wheeler, continues monthly through June, featuring poetry readings by pairs or trios of poets, mainly from SoCal.

Taggart, a longtime local literary arts advocate, was just named Ventura County's second poet laureate by the Ventura County Arts Council. Those who have attended an 805 poetry reading know that Taggart probably organized or hosted it and likely read some verse, too. His books of poetry include “Opium Wars,” “Cowboy Collages” and most recently “Rick Sings,” featuring poems about his brother Rick's struggles

with schizophrenia.

In fall 2015, De la O, a retired teacher who worked in Santa Paula for many years before becoming a poet, released “Antidote for Night,” her second collection of poetry. It won the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award, a biennial honor from the prestigious non-profit literary press BOA Editions. Her debut book of poetry, “Black Hope,” received the New Issues Press Poetry Prize.

Both Taggart and de la O edit and publish the literary journal Askew, which comes out twice yearly. They're working on issue No. 18.

And both are frequent readers on the local poetry circuit, which is thriving

despite the county's small footprint — and the world's often-misplaced skepticism of poetry.

Saturday will be the first time de la O and Taggart are featured at the Arcade series together on the same bill.

Yet each will read as an individual poet.

“We're very aware that we're a couple, of course,” Taggart said. “We once did a kind of Valentine's reading, where we wrote poems to each other, but we're not doing that this time.”

“We're so different in our poetic voices that it's kind of a contrast,” he said, then added, with a laugh, “I try to do my best not to follow her: She's such a dynamic reader.”

In a poetically tidy “how we met” story, De la O and Taggart first encountered each other at a reading, but the air was hardly infused with romance.

“It was an avant-garde thing, at the old Franky's,” De la O recalled. “Phil had a bullhorn, and he was working with a trumpeter.”

At the time she was married to someone else and not interested in romance, but was captivated by Taggart's artistry. Eight years later they started dating and finally married five years ago.

A poet officiated at the marriage, and one of their literary colleagues stood up during the ceremony to give a surprise reading of an ode to their relationship.

2016 ARCADE POETRY SERIES

The series features monthly poetry readings at 7 p.m. at the Carnegie Art Museum, 424 South C St., Oxnard. Admission is \$3 or free for Carnegie Art Museum members. 385-8158 or www.carnegiemam.org.

Jan. 9: Marsha de la O and Phil Taggart

Feb. 13: Suzanne Lummins and Glenna Luschei

March 19: Sojourner Kinkaid Rolle and Lois P. Jones

April 16: Lynne Thompson, Carol V. Davis and Jennifer Kelley

May 14: Florence Weinberger and Amy Uyematsu

June 25: Angel Garcia and Teddy Macker

Despite their differences, Taggart said, “We both come from a working-class background, so we have that vision of social awareness. We both write about the downtrodden quite a bit.”

De la O sees commonality in all poetry.

“I think that any art that is done with language contains at its heart a conundrum, a working-out of a tangle of some kind,” she said. “We both have a sense of how grief permeates life.”

Both De la O and Taggart agree that a poetry reading isn't an “easy” form of entertainment.

“You have to pay attention to get anything out of it,” de la O said. But the poet and listener “are respectfully creating something deeply personal and human for one another.”

“It's a true way to communicate,” Taggart said, “like getting little bits of people's souls.”

