

Loss of sight leaves local artist Lon Michels 'fearless.'

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[Beth Roessner](#), The Desert Sun 10:07 a.m. PST January 11, 2015



(Photo: Marilyn Chung/The Desert Sun)

After a lifetime of painting, Lon Michels' career came to a halt when he lost his sight while painting in 2003.

Michels' optic nerves became infected and in 15 minutes, he went completely blind. The next two years he underwent experimental procedures hoping that his sight would return.

His life changed dramatically. He stopped painting and soon fell into a depression.

After 24 months of treatments, Michels was able to see about an inch in front of his face. Progress.



Artists Lon Michels, 52, paints a portrait of model Melissa Ballard, 40, of Indio, in his recently opened art gallery in Palm Springs. The painting is Michels' reproduction of the 1656 painting by Diego Velasquez "Las Meninas." (Photo: Marilyn Chung/The Desert Sun)

And just a few months later, he regained his full eye sight.

"I really believe this was a miracle that happened," said Michels, who never gave up hope that someday his sight would return. "Really, it's how you feel about it that helps you heal."

Since reclaiming his quality of life, Michels, 52, is fearless.

"Every artist that starts a canvas, has butterflies. They have nervousness. I lost the fear of 'I can't do this,'" he said. "It really put into perspective what was important in life and what wasn't. My painting became free.

"We're our worst enemies in the world. We sabotage ourselves more than anybody else ever would with fear and doubt. To be shown our

capabilities and walk through our greatest fears and come out, gave me an attitude that was priceless."

Art surrounded Michels as a child, and was nurtured creatively by his mother. A reoccurring floral pattern, globular in shape, that he's doodled since childhood, still makes an appearance in every one of his paintings.

"My style is exactly the same as it was when I was a 7-year-old child," said Michels. "Every child is born with a style, just like a person is born with their voice."



Artists Lon Michels, 52, and Todd Olson, 55, in December in their recently opened art gallery in Palm Springs. (Photo: Marilyn Chung/The Desert Sun)

Michels' colorful artworks are somewhere in between neoimpressionism and orientalism, but he's more concerned with ensuring his style is truly his own. His colors are bold and his characters are whimsical. They're on display at his Palm Spring gallery, which he manages with his husband.

Since returning to painting after beating the condition, his choice of colors and techniques have changed. Shapes are more elongated and colors are brighter, more intense. As a person, he says he's become kinder and more conscientious.

"Before, life was getting dull for me," said Michels. "Everything exploded when I was able to see again in the most positive light."

Michels still has the painting he was completing when he lost his sight. The very spot he was working on, the knee of a prominent female figure remains unfinished as a reminder. He was working on the large canvas for two years prior to the infection, and after his miraculous recovery, it took him another two years to finish.

"That experience — of losing my eye sight — was the worst thing that ever happened to me in my life. But, it became the most beautiful thing that ever happened to me because when you're no longer able to look outside yourself, you're forced to look within."

Michels and husband, Todd Olson, share a unique bond through art.

"When I met Todd, I instantly knew I was going to marry him," he said.



Artists Lon Michels' brushes and paints. (Photo: Marilyn Chung/The Desert Sun)

Their paths crossed first in Key West and one year later, they met again at the University of Wisconsin. Olson recognized Michels by a pair of

shoes he wore at both events. On their first date seven years ago, Michels taught Olson to paint. Now, Olson's considered a protege. They married in 2009.

Some of Michels' style rubbed off on his own work, and that's expected, said Olson, but his color palette is looser, and each painting is fused with energy.

"He's noted by academicians as the Picasso of our lifetime," said Olson, 55. "Can you imagine being taught by someone like that? The amount of pressure?"

And like Michels, Olson believes in miracles, too.

"I was diagnosed with terminal non-Hodgkin's cancer," said Olson. "My doctors only gave me two months to live. That was it."

That was 23 years ago, he said.

Since overcoming their own health battles, the two regularly give back to the community.

"I'm never going to be too old to stop believing in magic, and I hope that comes across in my work, because miracles do happen to all of us," Michels said. "Sometimes, everyday of the week."

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To learn more about Lon Michels and Todd Olson, visit www.lonmichelsart.com. Or visit their gallery at 1601 N. Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs.