

# Adding poetry to the world

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## Multimedia

## Video

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**BY SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATION**

*University of Oregon*

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UNIVERSITY  
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**School of Journalism  
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*Eugene oil painter Jerry Ross catches the infinity of a moment in portraits and landscapes.*

**About this story:** The JAM [Journalism Arts Multimedia] Workshop was offered during the Spring 2014 term at the University of Oregon's School Of Journalism and Communication. Teams of students created profiles of local artists — a guitar builder, a ballerina, a belly dancer, a sculptor, a painter, a graffiti artist, a

jazz saxophonist, the band Mood Area 52, and more. Each profile entails written, photo, audio, and video elements.

**Story:** Elora Overbey, Kelly Wolfram, Barbara Marty, Mary Jane Schulte

From the closest road, it would be easy for anyone to miss it. The brick-colored barn is so well hidden in the verdant hills that it seems the perfect place to isolate oneself from the agitation of the nearby city. Once found, the field surrounding the old wooden building reveals quite a surprising population: furry alpacas quietly grazing in the grass. If you wouldn't expect those animals to live in Eugene, Oregon, that's not the only curiosity this barn shelters.

On the upper level, near the numerous bags of fur stored on one side, stand an easel and numerous canvases: the messy studio of the artist. While the saxophone of Gerry Mulligan's *As Catch Can* resonates in the room, the subtle noise of the repeated brushstrokes scratching the canvas barely pops up. Here's where Jerry Ross enjoys creating in solitude, inspired by the nature surrounding him and the calm of the place. Through his red round glasses, you can see a sparkle in his eyes that complements an impish smile triggered by some vivid memory or another. In the middle of a lengthy anecdote, he looks away, dreamy, and seems lost in his thoughts while staring at the panoramic view through the window. Like Ross' memories and stories, his paintings are vivid, colorful, and stirring. They seem to magnify reality.

### ***La Macchia***

In art as much as in life, Jerry Ross seeks beauty, poetry, and strong, independent characters. Beyond bare realism, his entire life mirrors his desire to add poetry to the world surrounding him. He layers paint in his artwork in the same way he layers facts and anecdotes in his stories. "In painting, a lot of people don't know how to add the poetry to the work," he explains. "In my opinion, you have to be accurate about nature. You have to copy nature, accurately, but that's not enough. You have to add something from within yourself so it's a form of self-expression."

Ross' artwork is mostly centered on landscapes and portraiture and is inspired by the European Impressionists as well as the Italian *verismo* — meaning "realism" — school of art. Both of these movements aimed in their own way to capture the instantaneity and emotion of a moment. In order to catch its essence,

the Impressionists were painting *en plein air* – outside. They depicted their “first impression” by working fairly quickly, most of the time without sketching or drawing. As for the *verismo* painters, they were trying to capture something about their subjects that had to do with their stories, their lives and personalities.

To depict that effect of instantaneity, Ross invokes a technique called *La macchia* in Italian– literally, “the stain,” “the spot” –used in particular by a group of Tuscan painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century called the *macchiaioli*. The technique typically requires the artist to use several layers of paint and very few drawings. Instead of starting with a detailed sketch, the painter lets his creation emerge from a series of dabs of thin paint. Once dry, he may scrape off much of the first layer with a razor and then work with a thicker layer of paint on top. Jerry Ross strives to never “overdo” a painting. The colors are barely blended so that each work has a fresh, almost unfinished quality. Viewers are not only aware of composition and colors; they are aware of the brushstrokes themselves.

Ross’ signature style is all about leaving the piece with a somewhat abstract and uncompleted aspect, thus adding a blurry yet moving dimension to his paintings. “Some people consider it unfinished or crude, but actually it can be very charming in the finished piece to see those abstract areas,” he explains. “Knowing when to stop is the key thing. I tried to teach this technique to many people, but they always want to go further. What happens then is that the life goes out of the painting very quickly.” What Jerry refers to as the poetry, “the life of the painting,” is the emotional dimension of his style. It makes a portrait like *Angela a Go-Go* so captivating and a landscape like *Oregon Veduta* feel like a happy memory.



*"Oregon Veduta" by Jerry Ross.*

### ***The gene of art***

Jerry Ross has taught computer and information science at the University of Oregon, so structure and precision are well known to him. Yet after all these years, art retains its mystery. "Why do I paint? Why do I make art? For me, it's probably a gene. It's something that I can't control," he explains. Identified as a promising talent by his elementary school teacher around the very young age of seven, Ross seems to have always experienced the desire to express himself visually, even though artists and art in general didn't surround him in his childhood. "It's very strange. I was only six or seven," Ross remembers, "and I kept bugging my dad for an oil painting set. I have no idea where that was coming from, but I kept bugging him, and finally he bought me one for my birthday. I think the first painting I made was a watercolor of my father's old automobile in the driveway."

Since then, the prodigy never stopped creating, even though his "formal" training stopped at the age of seven or eight, with the closing of the Art Institute of Buffalo, New York, in his hometown. His elementary school teacher had brought him there on weekends to attend workshops. Since then, Ross has been basically self-taught, and for him, painting remains a passion. "It's always new and different," he says, "and I guess that's what compels me to do more of it. Because it is a kind of joy of creation, it's a creative act: bringing something into the world that doesn't exist."

Ross' medium of choice is oil painting on canvas, a decision that may seem traditional or outdated in a world where technology is able to produce seemingly realistic, computer-generated images, but he cherishes the technique and its traditions. "The reason why I still work traditionally is kind of interesting," he explains. "Not having a formal art education, I tend to go with what I learned as a child, and that's probably the main reason why I stick with it. Even though I teach computer science, I prefer the tactile, manual feeling of working with real materials, like oils and brushes and pigments, canvas. For me, it makes a nice balance in my life."

***"So I am running away from the law ..."***



*“Angela a Go-Go” by Jerry Ross.*

Although this 70-year-old man with curly grey hair now leads a calm life, living in Oregon and Italy with his wife and muse Angela, his youth was marked by political activism and bold adventures. From working as a Tai Chi Chuan instructor to teaching computer science at the University of Oregon, he seems to have lived several lives in one.

Enrolled at the State University of New York in the mid-1960s in Philosophy, which he dubs “a degree in antiwar activism,” Ross developed strong political opinions and demonstrated against the Vietnam war. His membership in the antiwar group the Buffalo Nine entailed highly publicized demonstrations and trials, and gained “the attention of J. Edgar Hoover,” as he puts it. “So I am running away from the law and the FBI is hunting me,” Jerry says with amusement. “Then, as I still needed to make a living, I actually moved out west and changed my name [from Gerald Gross to Jerry Ross].”

His activism is in some ways inseparable from some of his artwork. Among the paintings he is most proud of is a portrait of Afro-Puerto Rican anarchist and revolutionary writer Martin Ramirez Sostre, which he made from police mug shots. Ross was the chairman of Sostre’s defense committee and believes his involvement helped catch the attention of Amnesty International and Governor Hugh Carey of New York, who finally granted clemency for Sostre after seven years in prison. Although he might look like an average Eugene retiree, Ross cultivates a sense of rebellion and political involvement that’s never faded. Many years after his activism in the 1960s, he still wears with pride a little clutch bag with a red star sewn on it. Jerry Ross tells his stories with gusto, from his confrontations with the FBI to the way he fell in love with his wife. (Not your average boy meets girl story: Decades ago, while high on Brazilian mushrooms, Jerry conducted a sundance and “prayed to the universe for a lifelong love affair.” He met Angela that night. As he puts it, “I like to think I found her through the Native American sundance ritual.”) It’s almost as if the way he describes his signature artistic style mirrors the way he sees his own life: “I like a balance when you have an accurate depiction of the scene, but fifty percent of it is your personality, your signature, your feelings.”

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