

THE 'A' WORD

The subtle subversion of Jerry Ross



Kathleen Caprario

Art has functioned as a vehicle for societal reflection and communication far longer than for what is considered individual expression or “art for art’s sake.”

I’m not suggesting that artists haven’t always invested themselves in the work they create or that personal expression isn’t also infused with ideas and issues that extend past the individual maker; on a Venn diagram, most artworks would intersect the public and private spheres of intention and influence.

As my own work ventures into socially-charged territory, I am acutely aware of the socio-political implications that are part and parcel of many contemporary practices. I immediately think of the tradition of social protest art and any number of graffiti and street artists, of whom Banksy probably has the greatest name recognition. These artists punch hard and walk the line between propaganda and aesthetics — if such a line can be definitively identified or considered.

The fact is, not all socially engaged work resides at that obvious end of the political art spectrum. Opposite on that continuum is an

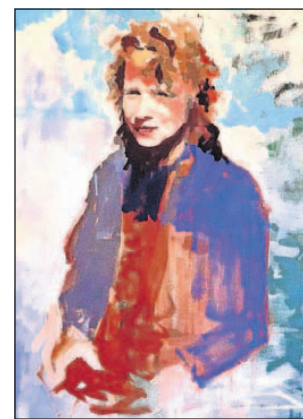


“Mighty Oregon” by Jerry Ross.

area I would identify as “subtle subversion,” and that takes the form of beautifully manipulated materials and familiar subjects that attract the often unsuspecting viewer, allowing for the underlying message to seep into their consciousness as they appreciate and enjoy the artwork. I consider that strategy an aesthetic sleight of hand and an effective means to present challenging and layered concepts to a wide audience using

an accessible form. Eugene artist Jerry Ross’ lushly painted canvases belie his political underpinnings and are works that at first glance might be overlooked by those seeking easily identified relevance in their art. However, underneath the structure of Ross’ technically confident oil paintings are aspirations for the environment we are dependent upon, the society we are a part of and an appreciation for the strength, work and

dignity of the individuals who comprise our community. Dignity, work, the environment — sounds pretty relevant to me. Ross gleams dual inspiration from the people and landscapes of his home in the Willamette Valley and his strong ties to Italy, as well as the “poetic realism” of the 19th century Italian movement, the Macchiaioli. He is a self-proclaimed practitioner of the “American Verismo” approach to painting. Full disclosure — I



“Portrait of Angela” by Jerry Ross.

have known Ross and his wife, Angela, for several decades. During a recent conversation with them, I gained a new appreciation for Ross’ deep interest in history, politics and the humanist approach that he brings to his process. His work is clearly rooted in direct observation; Ross has studied the Western canon and values the order, craft and development of form found there that he then applies to an examination of his own authentic experience.

There’s a freshness in Ross’ paint application that allows the image to breathe and flex, expressing the physicality of his subject. The different spatial layers and the paint itself — its color and gesture — are the visual hooks that invite the viewer to enter the work, wander its terrain and develop a relationship with the place or person that Ross has depicted. The payoff for the



Painter Jerry Ross.

viewer who “looks slow” and invests the time is an increased empathy and self-awareness. Empathy is key because without it we tend to circle our metaphoric wagons — be they political, religious, aesthetic or economic — tighter rather than expanding our own humanity through the recognition of others’.

The idea of art being integrated into every aspect of daily life and, as Ross said in our conversation, “art as a healing, aesthetic vibration,” that becomes the connective tissue for a strong, caring community — I’d say that that’s a pretty subversive notion.

Kathleen has been an artist in Eugene since moving to the Emerald City in the late 1970’s. As a part-time instructor at Lane Community College and a founding member of Gray Space Project, Caprario hopes to foster curiosity, appreciation and understanding for all arts in the community.

DID YOU SEE THAT?

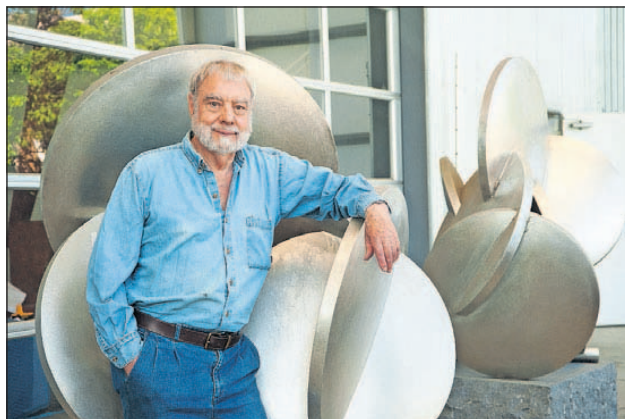
It’s hard to miss ‘Big Red’

By Matthew Denis
The Register-Guard

Pieces of public art tend to fade into the background for many commuters.

However, those driving by Washington Jefferson Park, under the overpass at West Seventh Avenue, between Washington and Jefferson streets, can’t miss “Big Red.” The sculpture sticks out like a strange, bright crimson, geometric swan swimming upon a green, grassy pond.

Sculptor Bruce Beasley oversaw construction and installation of the steel sculpture in 1974. According to the Smithsonian’s Art Inventories Catalog, “Big Red” was funded with a National Endowment for the Arts, Art in Public Places grant. In addition, the city chipped in funding along with Lane Community College, Lane County, the Portland Art



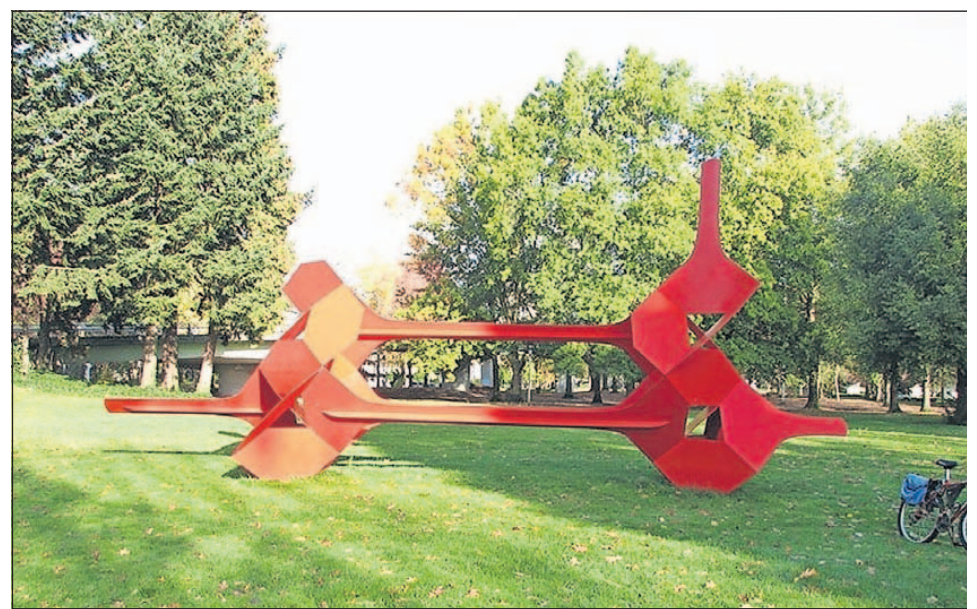
Sculptor Bruce Beasley. [TERRY LORANT/COURTESY OF OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA]

Museum, the University of Oregon and the Oregon Arts Commission.

Beasley aligned fabrication of the sculpture with the Oregon International Sculpture Symposium held in June 1974. The symposium’s mission was to provide the public with an opportunity to observe the creation of a major art work — how it was constructed and what the artist meant to convey with it.

With studio space provided by the University of Oregon and Lane Community College, Beasley constructed “Big Red” at LCC and then a large truck and crane transported it to its current home.

Beasley’s extensive sculpture work during the past five decades employs wood, steel and bronze in geometric shapes that represent an intersection of nature and the



The side view of “Big Red” by Bruce Beasley.

human-made world that sits within it.

On his website, the sculptor explains, “Nature arrives at this perfect point between change and stillness, between form that is evolving and form that is complete; nature does this most easily and with rare mistakes. Nature remains the ideal guide and the great resource; without it, there is no warmth, no heart

and I insist that my work have both.”

Curious about other art you’ve noticed in a public

space? Throw us a comment on Instagram @ CAFE_541 or email Matt at mdenis@registerguard.com.

ART EXHIBIT HIGHLIGHTS

- Backstreet Gallery:** Watermedia by author-illustrator Kathryn Damon Dawson and ceramics by Phyllis Laird, through December. 1421 Bay St., Florence. 541-997-8980.
- Coos Art Museum:** “Betty LaDuke Retrospective,” David Carmack Lewis, “Seasons of Home: Ruth Armitage,” through Saturday, 235 Anderson St., Coos Bay. 541-267-3901.
- Coos Bay Public Library:** Paintings by Sharron Kay Womack, through December, 525 Anderson St., Coos Bay.
- Don Dexter Gallery:** “The Hour Before Dark,” photographs by Sandy Brown Jensen, through Dec. 23, 2233 Willamette St., Suite B.
- Elkton Community Education Center Library Gallery:**

- Works from 13 Gallery Northwest artists, 15850 Highway 38W, Elkton. 541-584-2692.
- Emerald Art Center Gallery:** “Small Treasures” featuring photography by Ann Mitchell and Rhonda Lashley Lopez, through Jan. 3, 500 Main St., Springfield. 541-726-8595.
- Island Park Gallery:** “Oregon’s Special Places,” photography by Daniel Schlender, through Jan. 30. Free reception 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. Dec. 13, Willamalane Adult Activity Center, 215 W. C St., Springfield. 541-736-4444.
- Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art:** “Journey to the Third Dimension: Tom Cramer’s Drawings and Paintings 1974-2019,” through Dec. 29, 1430 Johnson Lane, University of Oregon. 541-346-3027.

- Karin Clarke Gallery:** Adam Grosowsky “Bread, Shelter, and Circus” oil paintings, through Jan. 11. Opening reception 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Friday, 760 Willamette St. 541-684-7963.
- Lincoln Gallery at OSLP:** “Limitless,” a year-end showcase and retrospective by OSLP artists, Friday through Jan. 24. Opening reception 5:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. Friday, OSLP Arts & Culture Program, 309 W. Fourth Ave. 541-636-3119.
- Maude Kerns Art Center:** Art for All Seasons Membership Show, Club Mud Holiday Show and Sale, to Dec. 20, 1910 E. 15th Ave. 541-345-1571.
- New Zone Gallery:** “Faces and Places ... a Watercolor Retrospective,” featuring Barbara Aten, Friday through December.

- Opening reception 5:30 p.m. Friday, 22 W. Seventh Ave. 541-683-0759.
- O’Brien Photo Gallery:** Black and white landscape photography by Walt and Sandi T O’Brien, through Jan. 9. 2833 Willamette St. Suite B. 541-729-3572.
- The Photo Zone Gallery:** Group show, through December. Opening reception 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Friday. Gallery inside New Zone Gallery, 22 W. Seventh Ave.
- White Lotus Gallery:** “Gifts from my ancestors,” clay, bronze, wearable art, prints and glass by Northwest Native American artist Lillian Pitt, through Saturday, 767 Willamette St. 541-345-3276.
- WOW Hall Lobby Gallery:** “Stupid Monsters,” works by Davis Koier, through December, 291 W. Eighth Ave. 541-687-2746.

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