

Kathleen Caprario

The “A” Word, Column #5
Submitted November 17, 2019

SUBTLE SUBVERSION

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 both 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 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 that comprise our community. Dignity, work, the environment—sounds pretty relevant to me.

Ross gleans dual inspiration from the people and landscapes of both 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 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 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.

589 Words

RELATED LINKS:

<http://jerryrosspittore.com/>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macchiaioli>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/En_plein_air

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_verismo

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Political_art