

Sunshine ARTIST

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Patron
patterns
promising?

Switching
their pitch up

Picture 
imperfect



Troika Queen, Kathy Ross



Marvin Carlson

Suspended in perpetual motion

Kathy Ross
By Nate Shelton
SA Managing Editor

There are certain questions that every working artist or craftsman has heard during his or her career. For example, "Did you make this yourself?" Or, "Do you offer a discount for cash?" Perhaps even, "How long did it take to create this?" And, of course — "Where do you get your ideas?"

For 3-D mixed media artist and self-described perpetual-motion machine Kathy Ross, though, the question really is, "Where *don't* you get your ideas?"

"Sometimes there does seem to be an outer-space component," said the native Canadian and resident of Harstine Island in Shelton, Washington, "but really ideas come from noticing, combining [and] recombining elements from our own lives and experience.

"It seems to me I am always watching a river of ideas flowing past. Endless. The river has got the whole world in it and all I ever saw of it." And then some: Ross cites anti-war posters, space aliens, pizza, the Burghers of Calais, rattlesnakes with baby-doll eyes and much, much more as items she's seen in her "river" — and that river keeps on rolling.

Ross also maintains that she's three "quasi-independent" artistic personas in one. "Art-self A is the idea inventor," she said. "Art-self B is the technician [who] makes the art. Art-self C markets [and] exhibits."

So, how does "art-self B" go about its business? "A sign in my booth says, 'Inquiring minds want to know: How are these made?'" said Ross. "The short answer: I make a framework; I cover it with paper." In reality, of course, the truth is much more complicated, and it begins with her "art-self A."



Traveller in Hat Shop
(all work photos by Lynn Thompson)

All photos by Lynn Thompson

"I sit in the woods and drink tea for an hour or two every day... and write, sketch, think, doodle, listen to the wind and the chickadees," she said. "I sketch things out that might take 10 years to make, things that I have no clue how to make, lots of things I will never get to, or not until much later. But everything I make starts here."

Her "art-self B" rises come morning, when phone calls and emails are banished. "I can make something that takes a year to make," said Ross. "I can make something that is very unlikely to sell. I can even make something that's really just a little bit too big to fit into my truck."

By the afternoon or evening, though, the sensible part of her B-personality arrives and starts making work that must have a good chance of selling. "So — no figures with gun heads," Ross explained. Other forbidden subject matter includes dragons (but snakes are OK), anything green, weirdly headed figures and other nightmares and oddities, no matter how much her "dark side" might enjoy them.

Fortunately, that still leaves a wide range of possibilities, and Ross has certainly explored a lot of them in her quarter-century of professional artistry.

"Cats, dogs [and] angels: always saleable," she said. "That's OK — I like cats and dogs and angels. I'm grateful for them. I am sensible enough to repeat designs that sell, but I am not going to drive myself crazy doing only that. Have to take chances on new designs, too, all the time, even in the afternoon."

She also calls on a diverse array of materials to create her work. Ingredients can include wood, wire, plaster, concrete, cardboard, cloth, tape,



Elephant Queen

spray-foam insulation, glue — “I love glue,” Ross said — and *lots* of layers of paper. For accents, she might throw in maps, book pages, jewels and cut-up, copper-foiled and soldered cookie tins, all of which is followed by sealer and UV protector.

Ross’ “art-self C” takes charge when it’s time to market and sell the finished, commercial-friendly pieces. “I have been a self-supporting, self-employed artist since 1978,” she said, “balancing the necessity for bread and butter with the more one-of-a-kind artwork.”

To get her creations to the buying public,



Left: *Tin Head*; Right: *Bejewelled Overalls, Book Fest, Coat of Many Critters and Continental Drift, Flora & Fauna*

Ross has found that there’s simply no substitute for exhibiting at art and craft shows, which became a part of her life soon after she became a full-time artist.

“I exhibited soft sculpture at my first-ever fair at what was then called the Bellevue Street Fair [in Washington state],” she said. “E-Z Ups hadn’t been invented yet. So it was 2x2s and a roll of 3-mil plastic sheeting.”

She did that until 1988, after which she sold exclusively through galleries and wholesale avenues in addition to being displayed in museums. Throughout, Ross’ work and even mediums evolved, although she always stuck to the 3-D realm.

“But after about 20 years of that,” she said, “I was completely fed up with the wholesale business and discouraged by the art gallery/museum dance.” So she returned to the world of art festivals — and discovered it had also evolved and become truly majestic in its own way, too.

“What a change from the ‘80s,” Ross marveled. “Two days





to set up. Astonishing, huge bronze [and] enormous paintings. Serious tents that could withstand a lot of weather. Serious security at night. I could see right away that this was going to be a real alternative to galleries."

Art show patrons have been glad to have her back, too. "Show-goers often say to me, 'This is the most unique thing I've ever seen,'" she said, admitting that she finds such remarks to be gratifying.

Other comments, on the other hand, demand responses seasoned with a bit of diplomacy — and a lot of humor. "Once I overheard, 'I can't tell if these are really unique or really weird.' I pointed out a doll-eye-headed figure and said, 'Well, this one is really weird,' then I handed her a map-ified T-shirt and said, 'This one is just unique.'"

Ross has also found that it's helpful to hang signs in her booth in hopes of moving patron conversations along, but she's very tolerant when

those pre-answered questions come up regardless. "After all," she said, "if they are going to the trouble of actually talking to me, that is a door opening and that is an opportunity I need to pay attention to."

For the foreseeable future, Ross plans to continue with the art festival circuit while working on new masterpieces. (She's also involved with the Harstine Island art-studio tour, which she pioneered and is held Memorial Day, as well as Seattle's Pratt Fine Arts Center, where she used to cast bronze.) And despite the fact that she considers herself to be a "sociable recluse," she's having a blast doing it.

"I can go two weeks without speaking to anybody, but I'm extremely outgoing at art fairs," she said. "I can hardly believe the conversations I have with people — often very personal [and] intimate. Intensely fun; like a great party sometimes."

More of Kathy Ross' work can be found on her website, www.kathyross3d.com. 🌐



Left: *Travel Bug*; Right: *Puppeteer with Hat and Tea Table*