

Ray Gerring
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Artist Paints His Way into New Style

Ray Gerring has painted all his adult life, specializing in representational landscapes that capture the delicate fall of snow on a mountain peak, the stillness of a sunrise, the detail of shadow on a rock wall.

Fifteen years ago, he woke at 1 a.m. with something terribly wrong. A trip to the ER, and visits to specialists determined Gerring had experienced a retinal veinal occlusion, a stroke-like event that literally destroyed 80% of the sight in his left eye overnight. A repair attempt went awry and left him completely blind in that eye. Then the unthinkable and unexpected happened in December 2004: a second veinal occlusion ruined the vision in his right eye. "I can see color. I can see contrast. I can just see enough to organize."

Gerring was pretty depressed for several months. "I had lost so much," he said. Painting was a daily practice. Gerring and his wife, June, were adventurous world travelers. They regularly played tennis with friends at their winter home in Sun City West, Arizona. Gerring enjoyed shooting baskets outside of their Shoreline, Washington home.

But then in May of 2005, Gerring picked up a brush again and started to paint. Working with acrylics on large panels of inexpensive MDF board, he has developed a new style for himself, using his expertise with composition and color to create vibrant, emotive works of abstract art.

Gerring has always enjoyed trying new things. After attending art school and completing military service, he worked as a successful commercial artist and art director for advertising agencies in Seattle, Washington. He also freelanced as a graphics designer, illustrator, and cartoon illustrator.

Fifteen years into his career, he changed course and went back to school to become a teacher. "I realized I didn't care if people ate potato chips or not," he said. Those were hectic years for the family. Gerring kept his full time job as art director and also freelanced 10-12 hours per week. There were Boy Scouts and Camp Fire activities with the couple's three children. Also during this time Ray partnered with Henry Petterson, Seattle Public Schools Director of Art, to write Exploring with Paint, an art resource book for teachers.

Gerring obtained his Master's degree in art education at the University of Washington. After a year as a high school art teacher, he moved on to Seattle Central Community College, where he developed an effective and well known advertising art department. "The job description was made for me," he commented. Gerring worked at Seattle Central for 25 years as administrator and teacher. Students, typically 26 years of age with a college degree, came from all over. "It was very satisfying," said Gerring, who retired in 1988 at the age of 62.

In 1970, after "the kids grew up and the dog died," the Gerrings took dance lessons and began to enter dance competitions, winning trophy after trophy. This led them into post retirement work as dance instructors on 41 different cruises all over the world.

Gerring has also tried his hand at writing and acting. He participated many years in the Puget Sound Group of Northwest Painters' annual fundraising show, starring in many short plays, writing three and directing two. He and friend Glen Oberg performed many skits of

“lowbrow Scandinavian humor” as “Lars & Oscar.” Seven years ago, Gerring completed his 220-page autobiography, entitled Still Growing Up.

Now Gerring is learning new ways to paint. He started with a simple design in two colors last May and thought it wasn't bad. The next day he painted another one. Then he used a bigger panel. “I have dripped, splashed, and used knives and other tools,” he said. Previously Gerring worked primarily in water colors. Now he paints exclusively with acrylics. Many of his paintings are abstract compositions of color and form, but some are of dancers, structures, trees or owls. All his years of work in various styles have trained his eye to a fine degree. “I'm using everything now.” Some of his works sold at a recent gallery show; others are on display now.

In June, Gerring will use his teaching and art experience in classes for people who are visually handicapped. “They don't need to be artistic. The goal is to help people feel they have accomplished something they can show others. The point is to encourage,” said Gerring.

Meanwhile Gerring will go on painting. He plans to explore other opportunities to exhibit his work. Said Gerring, “It feels great to be painting. I really don't miss the old style.”