



A longtime staple in the local art scene, painter Ellen Gabehart still challenges, and delights, with her work

GABEHART REVIEWS HER WORK IN HER STUDIO

PHOTO: TRASK BEDORTHA

BY KELSEY ANNE RANKIN

Eugene painter Ellen Gabehart's home is far from a Martha Stewart-esque suburban rambler stocked with Ikea purchases. Gabehart has art covering every inch of her cozy space, furniture included. She reminds me to check the art in the bathroom before we sit down in her studio.

Gabehart strikes me as the epitome of a Eugene artist with a history of activist work, community building and a mix of both trippy and political art pieces.

"Realism with impressionism," she says of her style. "I'm not photographic, but you'll recognize my works."

Gabehart's workspace is a white-walled nook with loads of old sketchbooks stacked in the corners. When asked about her journey as an artist, or how she knew she was destined to be creative, she replies with a soft, "Oh, I just don't think about that."

Gabehart is an artist who simply creates — who shares her creations and doesn't question the pursuit itself. A New Yorker who relocated to Eugene in her late 30s after spending time in California, Gabehart has made the Northwest her home now for some 45 years. She had children and hit other life milestones, but she never stopped making or sharing her art.

"When I was a little girl, I went to the School of Music and Art in New York," she laughs, "but my parents wanted me to be a secretary." She flunked every typing class.

Gabehart has the whole "give back to the community" attitude down pat. She started teaching art in Eugene at

Maude Kerns Art Center and now teaches at Willamalane Adult Activity Center in Springfield — a few of her students have even become professional artists around the country.

Cool, you might tell yourself, *another story about the life of an artist*, right? That kind of attitude is exactly the point: We aren't caring about our artists, Eugene.

"They don't idolize artists," Gabehart says of the city's art scene over the past few decades. "They're not really giving to the artists."

Gabehart mentions that The New Zone Gallery, which is hosting some of her art, is closing downtown and moving to a different location come August. Longtime local artists who set up the downtown Second Friday Art Walk in Springfield (of which Gabehart has been a consistent member) receive minimal funding from the Springfield Arts Committee, and have been actively looking for sponsors to keep the event afloat.

"It's awful," Gabehart says. "[People] have worked so hard to bring a lot more art into the community."

The hiccups in Eugene's art scene don't stop Gabehart. The work she produces continues to focus on the community, reflecting issues of homelessness and corrupt medical resources while also depicting in portraits the familiar faces of local musicians around town.

Gabehart's most recent piece on gun violence resonates on an immediate level. "I cried while I painted this," she says as she pulls out the canvas, larger than herself. "I woke up one night after reading so much in the paper about this one and that one getting killed for no reason at all."

She adds: "It came to me that I had to do this."

"When Will It End?" is the gun violence piece Gabehart created; she says the name was suggested by a commentator on Facebook who had lost her own son to what Gabehart recalls as senseless violence. The painting is on display at New Zone through the end of July.

The piece shows an array of communities affected by the increasingly commonplace tragedy of mass shootings. People of varying creeds and colors lay dead in the face of guns, which jut onto the canvas from multiple angles.

Gabehart sent a photo of the piece and a letter to President Barack Obama, and to Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, as well as to other politicians, writing:

"So many innocent people dying by someone shooting them with a gun or rifle. Must these horrible events continue to plague our nation?"

She says her letter "was a prediction" in light of the June 12 mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, a foretelling "that these things will keep happening and happening." She called upon the politicians to eliminate the frequent tragedies, but says she received no response.

Gabehart is teaching plein air classes this summer (all mediums welcome; July 11-14, through the Willamalane Adult Activity Center, \$86-\$103) and she also teaches at Cascade Park twice a month to the residents. Her next show is coming up in November at Washburne Café.

It's pretty evident she's not giving up on the local art scene any time soon, which got me thinking: Is Eugene caring about its artists as much as its artists care about Eugene? ■

'I cried while I painted this. I woke up one night after reading so much in the paper about this one and that one getting killed for no reason at all.'