

Jerry Kearns Unraveled

Revolutions! Injustice! Inequality!

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr and the death of Robert Kennedy were unconscionable. The death, destruction and atrocities of the Vietnam War were slowly revealing and unraveling in front of Americans. It was a tumultuous time in America during the 1960's and 1970's and the artist, Jerry Kearns, was sharply affected by these times. His art became his statement of the times.

Can political statements ever be neutral? Not right or wrong. Not one ideology against another. Kern's work through the decades has made political statements and he became known as a "psychological pop" artist.

Pop Art sprang into being in the early 1960's and was influenced, as all art is, by society and culture of the time. This was the first art movement that embraced and legitimized drawing from the influence of mass media. This was a time when pop artists could use styles and images from newspapers, films and comics creating a satirical celebration of commercial mainstream America.

Jerry Kearns was born in 1943 in Pennsylvania. In his early twenties he had the opportunity to attend school in Italy for two years. He was torn to attend as he so wanted to be a part of the revolutions happening in America. But as a budding young artist, this opportunity was just too important not to be a part of his experience as an artist.

Talented in so many ways as an artist, he was a sculptor, photographer, painter and writer. After returning to the States, he began his own revolution in his paintings. Throughout the seventies, he remained actively involved with many artist groups that were united through their political beliefs. They supported one another to protest the inequalities and brutalities that were a part of the climate and culture of that time.

His style was to juxtapose his paintings with two things that were together or close with a contrasting effect. He did this by superimposing comic figures over real people and situations. His intentions were to "leave it up to the reader to make their own connections." His use of color and overblown images were a statement of his socio-political views.

His wife, Nora Davis, was an accomplished singer/songwriter and they shared a passion that art was the center of the soul of reality. That creating art came from deep feelings and rooted beliefs. When his wife died of cancer, his only way back from his depth of grief was to start painting again. He was going to work through the devastation of losing someone to a horrible disease, by memorializing his wife through eight large canvases.

One of his paintings, *Right of Way*, 1992, is in the permanent collection of the Kalamazoo Institute for the Arts. In this painting, he took the work of Thomas Moran, 1875, *The Mountain of the Holy Cross* and juxtapositioned comic style armed soldiers. So here is this pastoral landscape with the cross representing the West during the late 1800's. This was a time when the American people were being encouraged to go west and take our values and beliefs to these new territories through the Manifest Destiny movement. It was during this time that our beliefs and christian values were the right and only way and that any one that was encountered on this journey West, would adopt these.

The irony of the cross on the mountain with the comic style soldiers are the roots of showing us what could be with the beautiful landscape, a utopian vision, but then the intrusion of the soldiers with their beliefs and values are going to shape what could be or could have been. Kearns belief was "I try to paint my response to the conditions I live in, using the dominant visual language of the day." The assumption is this approach will touch the realities of others and give them cause to think about the political and social realities of the current time.

Truly a fascinating artist who sent strong messages in his work. Jerry summed it up by saying "I am a realist but I don't illustrate appearance, or depict the natural look of things. On the contrary, I start with signifiers....newspaper photographs and comic book drawings...symbols of fact and fantasy. I juxtapose and examine them to reveal a conceptual rather than perceptual realism.". The paintings are narrative, boisterous, analytical and often combative. They question many of our prevailing social, cultural, political and spiritual values: What we know or don't know...How we know....What we know in particular ways."

My project on this painting was to use Visual Thinking Strategies. In retrospect, I believe a more open discussion would have been a better approach.

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