

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT **Ellen Richman**



Artist-Instructor Ellen Richman in her studio with *Skip to Dance*, one of her most recent works (48 x 48-inches, oils).

Bring an empty canvas and an open mind and Ellen Richman will teach you to paint. With no literal reference, drawing exclusively from within yourself, she helps you create something of value from nothing.

And that is precisely what she has done for the Minnetonka Center for the Arts.

In 2006, Ellen brought her vision for a Contemporary Abstract Painting course to the Art Center and created curriculum from her own passion and experience. It was the first abstract painting class embraced by the community and, for 11 years and counting, continues to fill session after session.

“What I love about abstract art is that it is universal. Everybody [the viewer] brings their own mind and their own experiences to a painting and makes their own decision about what it is. You’re not dictating to them that the painting is something, because the viewer is going to make their own decision what the painting’s about,” says Ellen.

Abstract work is also known as Formalism because its tools are the formal aspects of line, shape, form, tone, texture, pattern, color and composition. Ellen likens abstract painting to a dance, an ongoing push and pull of contrasts to create a cohesive balance that works. “There has to be a certain quality to the painting in terms of its overallness. Sometimes it’s the unexpected.”

It takes a bit of courage to let go of all realistic reference, but what transpires in its place can be exhilarating. With the tools of line, form, value, etc., abstract artists are challenged to paint in their own voice. With infinite possibilities, each painter must make decisions about on what is or is not on the canvas, which is more difficult than it sounds.

Although her interest is geometric abstraction, Ellen’s own work continually shifts and changes, evidence that there is no fear constraining her expression or limiting her work to a predetermined style.

“If I stopped changing my paintings, I would feel like I wasn’t growing anymore as an artist,” says Ellen. “At the end of the day, I’m painting for myself. And because I am the eternal student and am always growing, I need to have my work continue to evolve with me.” She describes her current work as gritty, making order out of chaos.

Disciplined and hardworking, Ellen paints four days a week in her studio and teaches two days a week. Twice a year she supplies new artwork to the galleries representing her, Circa Gallery in Minneapolis and Thomas Masters Gallery in Chicago. Ellen’s paintings are featured in public collections at the Bentson Foundation, NorthMarq Companies, Deloitte, Boston Scientific, Phillips Beverage Company and eight other corporate locations.

New painters coming to Ellen’s class begin with only the primary colors of yellow, blue, red plus black and white and learn to create color. From there, it is an exciting journey as students explore making creative decisions based only on what is in front of them. There are no photographs to follow.

“It’s about thinking and the creative process. It can be very exciting intellectually,” says Ellen. “Don’t have expectations that you’re going to make this beautiful painting. That, in and of itself, is going to set you up for failure.”

Another mantra in the classroom: It’s just paint! Ellen encourages taking risks. She encourages ugly. Students reach, stretch and try new things, knowing that if it’s bad, they can just paint over it. In fact, layers are essential to Ellen’s own painting process.



Presents and Futures, 48 x 48-inch abstract oil painting by Ellen Richman.

Each of her creations is the culmination of 40-plus thin layers of oil paints, creating a rich, organic surface. She applies thin layer after layer, working on eight or nine canvases at a time. Sometimes wet on wet, sometimes wet on dry, almost always using a palette knife.

Ellen effectively and generously shares her passion and lights the flame in others, yet she says sincerely, “My students taught me to teach.” As they paint, not only do students

find new levels of satisfaction and fulfillment in their lives, an impressive number of Ellen’s Contemporary Abstract Painting students have launched their own successful careers as professional artists.

“There’s an illusion out there that art is for some elite group of people who are special, but art is for everybody,” says Ellen. Perhaps it’s that central belief that makes her class so popular.



Trilogy, 30 x 30-inch abstract oil painting by Ellen Richman.