

Paul Gentry (1954-2020)

Paul Gentry, 65, a nationally recognized artist, died on August 30, at his home in Independence, Oregon. He had been a member of the River Gallery in Independence since 1999.

“Paul mastered everything he touched,” says gallery partner, Richard Bunse. “He was an exceptionally fine painter, photographer, woodworker—and his wood engravings are brilliant.”

Gentry worked in several artforms, but “my passion is the woodblock print,” he wrote in an artist’s statement. “The physical act of cutting a design into a block and seeing the stark clarity of the print excites me like no other medium.” Influenced by the Depression-era American realists, Gentry rendered many rural landscapes—old houses, farms, pastures, livestock and meticulously detailed trees and birds. He was also drawn to industrial forms and intricate metal structures, such as grain elevators, airports and bridges, as well as the human figure. “Gentry had a masterful control of composition and captured the dynamic play of light and shadows so effectively,” explains Western Oregon University art professor, Rebecca McCannell. “River Gallery lost one of its stars.”

Producing nearly a 100 woodcuts and engravings, Gentry received top awards from the American Print Alliance and Library of Congress, and was collected widely by some the nation’s best museums, including the Portland Art Museum, The Nelson-Atkins, Smithsonian, Whitney, and Guggenheim. He received commissions from local wineries, universities, and publishers. I was fortunate to work with him on several projects, including two Everyman’s Library anthologies of angling literature. We fished together a few times, and he took photos and did follow up research. The finished images were brilliant, and the art director at Random House thought they were some of the best engravings he’d ever seen.

A tall, big-boned, balding, and bearded man with a penchant for sweatpants, sleeveless t-shirts and moccasins, he lived on modest means with his cats in the house he owned on South Fourth Street in Independence. He remained close to his only sibling, Karen, a retired nurse. “Paul was such a dear man, so smart and funny,” says fellow artist and friend, Christine Hannegan. “We’ve lost a beloved soul.”

Gentry was born in Decatur, Illinois, and the family moved often to small towns in Idaho and Oregon, following the father’s work as a manager for King’s Variety

Stores. He often talked about a wonderful boyhood year in Warrenton at the mouth of the Columbia River. “My Uncle Dave was a bar pilot and he showed us all around the waterfront.” Gentry remembered some of the last days of whaling in America. “As kids, we watched them bring in and flense a sperm whale. It was gross but interesting.” This lifetime fascination with nature and industry, combined with an unflinching eye for authentic detail, deeply informed his art.

Gentry lived several years in Seattle, working as a paint technician for Daniel Smith, an art supply manufacturer. In 1998, he moved to a rural property outside Monmouth, Oregon, with his then wife, Peggy Ashcroft. He joined the River Gallery in 1999, where he remained a member for twenty years.

In addition to being a successful artist, Gentry was a self-taught intellectual who could speak on many subjects with knowledge and understanding. “He was a thinker,” says the ceramicist, Gerry Brehm. “And he loved to talk, laugh, eat and drink—and drink.” He made no apologies for a lifestyle of excess—art and wine were his great passions. One of Gentry’s favorite bits of advice was from Hunter S. Thompson: “Buy the ticket, take the ride.” And so he did.