

# RUSSO ▲ LEE GALLERY

## Artist Statement

### *95 / 25: A THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION*

Thirty years is a long time. Then again, I made no attempt at all to show my work professionally until I was nearly thirty-seven years old, or this show might otherwise have been celebrating a lot more years, a lot more paintings. No complaints; I'm very grateful to be right where I am in my career.

And this thirty-year marker has given me the wonderful opportunity to look back – as I did for my twentieth anniversary exhibition – to consider what I've actually created over the years, to still find quite a strong connection with previous themes and imagery. And so, I've once again allowed earlier drawings and paintings to inspire the creation of new work. I think – I hope – that I'm a better, smarter painter than I was three decades ago. But my creative ideas, my external sources of inspiration, have remained remarkably consistent. And I'm gratified and relieved to be able to look back at those earlier pieces – surprisingly few of which makes me cringe! – and recognize the solid ideas or intent behind them. To my eyes at least, they still work. And what I was trying to say then, I still find valid; I still want to say those things.

For example, I've reimagined an image from my very first show in May of 1995, a humorous but fairly potent statement about gender identity. It was a tiny ink drawing then, and it's developed into a painting now, but it's still telling the same story.

Since I've spent so much of my creative effort working at the themes that I found most compelling, I've only rarely ventured into unfamiliar genres. So, the second major goal of this exhibition – as it was with my show ten years ago – was to allow myself the freedom to try something different, something unexpected, something even I might be surprised at. So there are several paintings in this group that, honestly, I would have difficulty explaining. My work is always carefully thought out, meticulously prepped, before I ever begin a piece. So to arrive at a finished piece that feels almost “channeled” by some unknown source is rather delightful.

While preparing the pieces for this show, especially during the last six months or so, I've spent a lot of time thinking about how and why I produce the work that I do, what I've created over these thirty years. I've even tried to assess what that work, the sum of three decades, is about; what's the point of it? In the past, I've often struggled with the idea that what I made wasn't “important,” that I didn't have something “profound” to say. My paintings are always lovely to look at, very often humorous. But is that enough? I've

always felt the confidence to paint only what I wanted to paint, but often wondered if I was what could honestly be called a “serious artist.”

But I’ve come to understand – and to be moved by the fact – that the most frequent response my work elicits in viewers is joy. There is also an appreciation for my skill, and for that I’m grateful. But the reaction I most often get to witness is delight. “Lovely to look at, very often humorous” makes people happy. How blessed I am that my paintings are able to inspire that reaction! I’m a “serious artist” because I’m indeed very serious about what I make, the hard work and skill I bring to it. And if the result of my imagination and labor is a painting whose viewing brings even a small moment of brightness to someone’s life? I finally feel that that is *more* than enough. And I can allow myself to feel that my work *is* important; it brings people joy.

Stephen O’Donnell - 2025