

By Carl Little

The Healing Arts

A few years ago, painter Nina Jerome was invited to show a group of her landscapes at St. Joseph Hospital's Gallery at 900, an exhibition space in its primary care center at 900 Broadway in Bangor. An enthusiastic group from the hospital's Healing Arts Commission visited her studio to pick out work for a three-month exhibition. She was impressed by its professional approach to the selection and installation process.

Since then, Jerome has shown in other parts of St. Joe's, most recently in the Center for Advanced Medicine building, attached to the



main hospital. For her current exhibition, which is up for a year, the commission chose 27 canvases spanning 40 years—a veritable retrospective—covering several series, including paintings from “Homage to the Ocean,” 2013, in which words related to climate change crisscross images of the sea.

The Healing Arts program started in 2014 with a mission “to provide uplifting art that promotes the well-being of St. Joseph Hospital patients, their families, the employees, and all other visitors,” writes volunteer artist liaison Mary Hollister. Among its first initiatives was launching the Mona Blitz art cart in 2015, which allows patients to select artwork for their room.

Interviewed on WABI-TV last October while hanging a show of Stonington painter Jill Hoy's

work, Healing Arts Commission member Jeff Wahlstrom averred, “We know that art can help in healing.” He noted its ability to soothe people and “make them feel like they're at home rather than in an institutional setting.”

With their bright colors and dynamic compositions Hoy's landscapes do just that and more: they transport the viewer to a familiar but animated Maine world. Which might be the primary motive of these shows: to provide respite from hospital hallways.

And to offer sheer delight: Another artist currently showcased, Bangor-based Diana

Young, paints lively images of Maine and beyond that frequently prompt a smile. Her approach to a subject, be it a baseball game, a working waterfront, or a Venetian canal, is highly expressive, with motion and color first and foremost.

Members of the Healing Arts Commission select the artists. “Often we know of Maine artists whose work reflects our mission,” notes

Hollister. Artists can also apply for consideration through an application process. To date, 30 artists have shown at the hospital, among them, Gail Page, James Linehan, Kat Johnson, and Dan Miller.

Exhibitions at the

Gallery at 900 change every three months which allows the commission to hang four exhibitions a year. Currently, the space features a group of portraits of women truth-tellers from Robert Shetterly's “Americans Who Tell the Truth” project.

According to Hollister, from its inception the gallery was to be an integral part of the building, with permanent artwork budgeted into the design. A granite wall made by sculptor Greg Ondo and students at the University of Maine



Above: Rob Shetterly with his *Americans Who Tell the Truth* installation. **Photo:** Chelsea Getchell, St. Joseph Healthcare. **Left:** A view of Nina Jerome's landscape paintings. **Courtesy of the artist.** **Below:** Jill Hoy during the installation of her paintings. **Photo:** Jlynn Frazier, St. Joseph Healthcare.

traces the coastline, rivers and islands of the coast of Maine near Bangor. Painter Constance Kilgore's commissioned cloud paintings span the wall behind the granite wall. Hollister notes that the Healing Arts Commission is planning an art-specific facility plan that will identify priorities for the placement of additional art.

“Traditional art is core to the Healing Arts program,” says Brad Coffey, Covenant Health senior vice president and foundation president, “but music, gardens and other forms of art are also part of it.” For many years a violinist and a cellist from the Bangor Symphony Orchestra performed twice monthly in the main hospital. In 2022 the BSO received a Maine Community Foundation grant to pay for these performances and expertise from a music therapist, Carla Tanguay.

The idea that the arts can play a therapeutic role is not a new one. And in Maine, at least, art in medical settings is almost commonplace. Maine Medical Center in Portland, Miles Memorial Hospital in Damariscotta, and Maine General Health in Augusta and Waterville are a few venues with special programs for incorporating art into their operations.

“Our culture often emphasizes the importance of art in galleries and museums more than the importance of art in everyday life,” Jerome noted in an email. The Healing Arts Commission at St. Joe's is dedicated to changing that paradigm, one work of art at a time.

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