

Terry Jelsing bio

North Dakota artist Terry Jelsing works in a variety of media to create two- and three-dimensional artwork and large public commissions. He holds Master of Arts and Master of Fine Arts degrees in Art and Art History from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. He was an undergraduate student at the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, when he was awarded a scholarship to Vienna's Institute for European Studies, where he learned classical techniques that he continues to employ today.

Jelsing has worked as an artist, teacher, arts administrator and cultural consultant and served on numerous national, regional, state and local committees and commissions. In 2000 he left his position as executive director of Fargo's Plains Art Museum to establish Eye in the Heart Studio and to teach at North Dakota State University in Fargo. In 2006 he relocated his studio to his family's homestead near Rugby, where he makes his home with his wife, Cathy, three studio cats, and a their dog, Sophie-Jack.

Since moving to "the farm," Jelsing has produced two major public art commissions for the North Dakota Museum of Art, "Conference of Mothers," an installation first displayed at the Rauschenberg Project Space in New York, and "Spirit Wall," a collaborative piece build with the people of the Spirit Lake Nation at Fort Totten, N.D. Retired from full time teaching, he subs at Rugby High School, conducts a semi-annual workshop for enthusiastic local artists, and continues to work as an architectural consultant on art-related projects. Most of the time, however – especially late at night – you'll find him in his studio making art.

Terry Jelsing artist's statement

Memory, environment and my formal training as an artist influence the subjects I choose, as well as the materials I use. I grew up on the Northern Prairie. The endless rolling grasslands, a vast and ancient sea, insulated me from everything but my imagination. Inspired by a sort of poetic loneliness, even as a child I made drawings that expressed my connection with that landscape and social environment.

In the late 1970s my exposure to the remnants of German Expressionism, the Dada Movement and Surrealism became another influence, with a similar lasting effects, first observed in Vienna and later absorbed as a graduate student at the University of New Mexico. Inspired by architectural, human and animal forms, I began making fantasy-oriented imagery, creating texture with paint and other fluid materials.

I view my paintings, drawings and sculpture as artifacts of universal human experience. The images and objects are as diverse as the landscape, relationships and observations from which they emerge. And yet, certain images — the house, the horizon line, animal/human forms — have become icons for human traits/emotion: loneliness, confusion, loss, spirituality, humor.

The sense of place in my work is non-literal, inspired by the real, but translated into surreal environments designed to stimulate thoughts or recollections of life moments. I hope to establish a context in which a variety of emotions can be expressed and create an interplay between the viewer's imagination and mine.

In many ways I function outside my work, like the director of a theatrical performance. A key element is creating a sense of energy and tension through implied or actual movement. By animating objects, I imbue them with human characteristics and capacities for physical and emotional change. The movement in the work also suggests incomplete resolution. Maintaining a state of tension holds energy in the artwork.

In the end, subject is second to making. The physical activity of making the art is what I care about most. It is what compels me to make new work. It is the joyful/painful act of making marks and shaping sculpture that drives all that I do.