

Queen Anne News

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Dream big, work small: Bill Ritchie evangelizes for art

By Mike Dillon

The little space at 812 Fifth Ave. N, Suite C-2, in the pocket business district on lower Queen Anne's east side, contains an expanding universe of creativity.

This is where Queen Anne resident Bill Ritchie, 71, former professor of art at the University of Washington, hangs his work, dreams big and works small.

In fact, small is beautiful here.

"I have to be very judicious with my remaining years," Ritchie mused. "If I live to be 100, it's like taking out a 30-year mortgage — it's very risky."

Ritchie is a printmaker. He's a serious artist whose work resides in private and institutional collections around the world. In the windows of his gallery/studio, several mini-presses are on display, designed and made by him in collaboration with Ballard steelwright Tom Kugler, Lilliputian versions of the traditional etching press.

They're not for show: These actually function. Instead of paying \$25,000 for a standard printmaking press, these start as low as \$1,295. Ritchie takes them on picnics, workshops, street fairs and other places. His aim is to spread the gospel on behalf of these inexpensive and portable machines, maybe even found a factory to make them, and to teach printmaking, employing digital- and virtual-world settings.

Ritchie has a lot else going on.

He's just self-published a novel, "Rembrandt's Ghost in the New Machine," a tale in which the old master used the kind of mini-press seen in the gallery window, brought to him by a 20th-century time traveler to get Rembrandt's career back on track.

That's not all: Ritchie is one of 36 Seattle artists commissioned for the Frye Art Museum's "Chamber Music," an exhibit featuring new work in response to musical compositions based on James Joyce's book of poems by that name. The show runs Saturday, Feb. 9, through May 5.

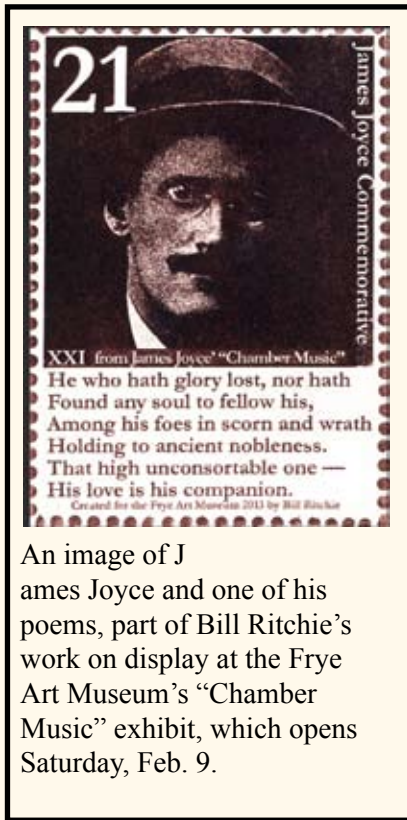
Politics and academia

Relief printing — making works of art by the old printing methods — probably originated in 14th-century China, using woodcuts pressed to paper. The technique made its way to Europe by the 14th century.

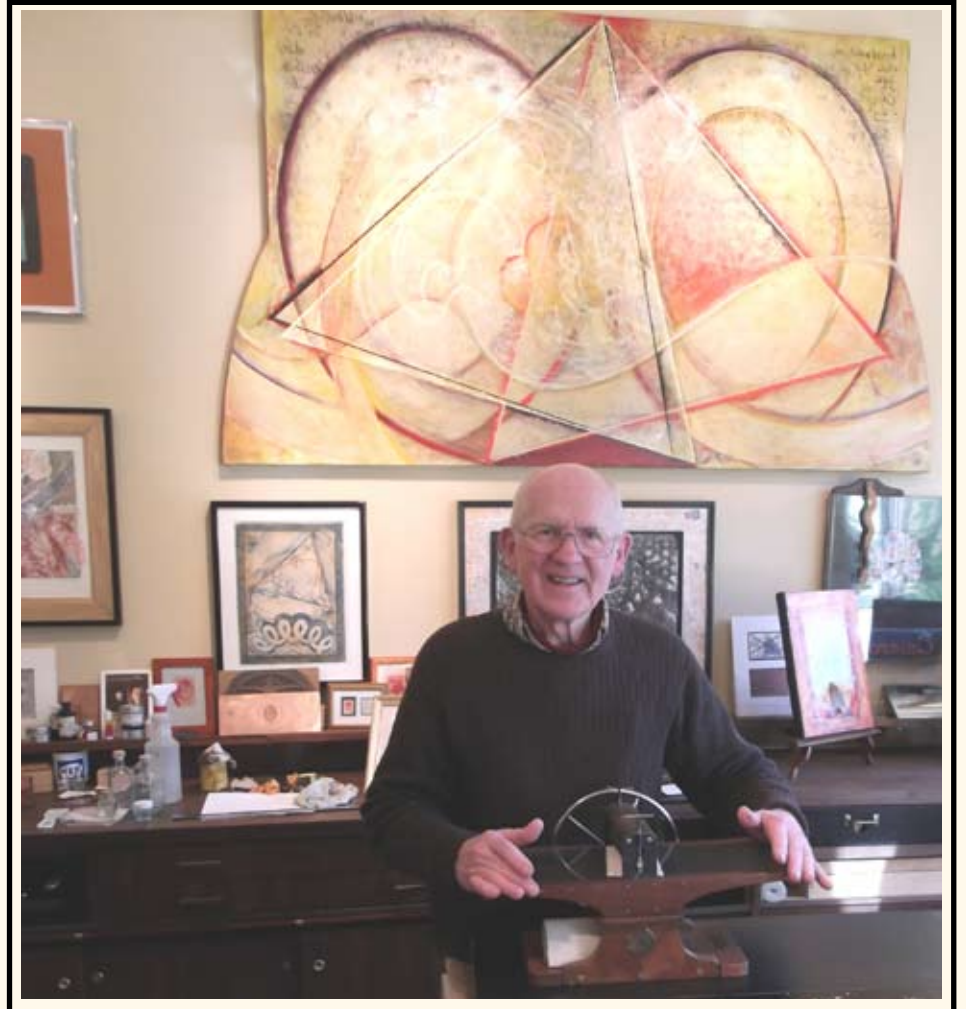
Ritchie always knew he wanted to be an artist — "I wasn't good at anything else" — and the Yakima farm boy, who earned his bachelor's degree in art at Central Washington University in 1964 and master's degree at San Jose State University in 1966, seized on printmaking as his path for artistic expression.

Printmaking was not a popular pursuit in art schools: "Too hard and smelly," he recalled.

With the conflict in Vietnam ramped up, these were precarious years for young men of a certain age. One week after finishing at San



An image of James Joyce and one of his poems, part of Bill Ritchie's work on display at the Frye Art Museum's "Chamber Music" exhibit, which opens Saturday, Feb. 9.



Bill Ritchie, with his 12-pound etching press, the Mini Half Wood, which can follow him wherever he goes. Photo by Mike Dillon

Jose State, a 24-year-old Ritchie heard from his draft board. A week later, he received an offer from the University of Washington to teach — his deferment was back in play.

Academia, he found, often meant politics and infighting. "It detracts from the mission," Ritchie said. "I'm a missionary."

An evenly soft-spoken man with a quiet sense of humor, Ritchie is also very focused.

Starting in 1970, Ritchie taught video art at the UW — a rare class in any American university at the time. His strong advocacy for the discipline in the face of departmental resistance caused Ritchie to leave the UW in 1985.

"I just didn't have the political skills," he reflected.

Printmaking, for Ritchie, is still

very much a mission. "It's closer to music, in my opinion," he said. "We work our instruments in collaboration, and repeat and vary. Finally, it's social."

Ritchie sees his portable printmaking machines as a way to reach out to a larger world. "We Americans need to be more giving," he said. "We have so much to share."

As what is his ultimate goal, Ritchie doesn't hesitate: "Fun."

For more information, visit www.ritchie-art.com

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