

ART & CULTURE



WITH PAINTER JOE FERRISO



Take a walk in the woods with artist Joe Ferriso, and you can see why he fled the Bay Area for the Sea Ranch three years ago. At one point, as he's walking under a fallen log, he poses for a photo, straining to make it look like he's supporting the mossy trunk with one hand. It's the same playful nature that brightens his paintings.

"I can hear myself think out here," Ferriso says. Coastal light often dictates where he roams on daily sojourns. If it's cloudy by the ocean, he might walk down into the river valley where it's sunny. He always carries a sketch book.

This morning, he hikes along a canopied redwood forest trail near the Gualala River. As he passes a vernal pool surrounded by ferns and green mossy trunks, it seems like something he might draw or paint in watercolor. He shakes his head no.

"I just look at this and think, I have nothing to add to this," Ferriso says.

But on regular walks past stark, angular Sea Ranch houses, designed to blend into the landscape in their neutral weathered greys and wooded browns, Ferriso has plenty to add, creating an alternate Sea Ranch universe that comes alive in bright pink houses, electric green skies, and powder blue meadows. "It just feels like they want to be inverted and subverted and filled with color," he says.

Ferriso's medium is leftover latex house paint, poured from orphan quart cans he adopts, whether "mis-tints" at hardware stores or from friends and neighbors eager to clear out their garages. They're perfectly suited for painting houses—but the vibrant hues would get you in serious hot water if you actually applied them to a house in the Sea Ranch, where even exterior wood stains have to be approved.

It turns out, though, that Ferriso's paintings are just the shot of color and whimsy residents needed in the Sea Ranch, where the average age is in the mid-60s. By turning the aesthetic inside out, Ferriso turned on new legions of fans and buyers. Since a show in April at The Sea Ranch Lodge, he's sold over 50 paintings. The Sea Ranch Lodge even sells a scarf emblazoned with one of his colorful houses.

A phrase he often returns to is "this will be an adventure." It's what the Long Island native said in 2009 when he left Manhattan for San Francisco, where he founded the furniture-art business Anzfer Farms. After getting an MFA at Stanford, he and his wife were raising a newborn and renting in Piedmont when the pandemic hit. Once again, "this will be an adventure" was on the tip of his tongue as they drove up Highway 1, looking at houses.

Living on the coast has been an artistic awakening. "The weather affects my work," he explains. "But also the natural colors that are here, the flora and fauna. There are all these rich colors that are maybe not so evident unless you're looking for them."

"I'm kind of super-imposing some of that onto the houses as a play to see what the emotional resonance is. I know color affects people emotionally, so I'm kind of playing my own experiment. If I didn't have a curiosity about it, it wouldn't be fun to make them. The fun comes from saying, 'What if this house is pink and the sky is green?'"

Near the end of a hike, as Ferriso talks about the colorful sunsets that paint Sea Ranch windows purple and pink at dusk, he comes around a bend that opens onto a meadow of twinkling blue forget-me-nots. "Now, look at that," he says, almost beaming. "Who says there's no color at Sea Ranch?"





Clockwise from far left: Sea Ranch artist Joe Ferriso paints abstract coastal landscapes in juicy colors. He walks the coast daily, often sketching in a small notebook. The swooping roofline of the Sea Ranch Chapel. Beniamino Bufano's Peace Totem soars above the rocky cliffs. Windswept meadows and tall cypresses at the Sea Ranch.



Check out the artwork of Sea Ranch resident **JOE FERRISO** on Instagram @joeferriso. Employing his woodworking skills, Ferriso also makes and sells maple building-block sets called "Jafies Joiners" (jafies.com), which have been kid-tested and approved by his 3-year-old daughter, Violet. joeferriso.com

Just standing in the **DODRILL GALLERY** in Bodega is an adventure unto itself. Each photo draws you in with limitless depth as light layers cascading hills into the distance or reveals secret tunnels along the coastline. It's quite possibly the only spot in Sonoma County that can transport you to the coast without actually traveling there. Jerry Dodrill also teaches world-class workshops from Greenland to Patagonia. *Dodrill Gallery, 17775 Bodega Hwy., Bodega, 707-377-4732, jerrydodrill.photoshelter.com*

Often called "the Hobbit House," the **SEA RANCH CHAPEL** is a stunning architectural feat to behold and well worth a stop along Highway 1 as you're driving through the Sea Ranch. Built by architect James Hubbell in 1965, the allure of this non-denominational sanctuary lies in beautiful stained-glass windows, a natural stone floor, intricate metalwork, and a ceiling embedded with local sea shells and sea urchins. Open 365 days a year, from sunrise to sunset. *40033 Hwy. 1, The Sea Ranch, thesea ranchchapel.org.*

The 93-foot-tall **PEACE TOTEM** rising above Timber Cove Resort along Highway 1 is a reminder that many of the dreams of peace in the '60s are still alive and well today. Also known as "Madonna of Peace" and "The Expanding Universe," the towering 20-ton obelisk was completed in 1970 by sculptor Beniamino Bufano just before he died. It lies at the center of a 60-foot circular state park, the second smallest in California [the smallest being Watts Towers of Simon Rodia State Historic Park]. parks.ca.gov

