

## Neighbors of Easton

Join the discussion. Engage in local democracy. Support local businesses and local farms. Real change happens from the ground up, so welcome aboard!"

### Local Activists Captured by Photographer Judith Joy Ross, at Pace/MacGill Gallery in Manhattan



© Judith Joy Ross, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

Last summer I was invited to attend a meeting of the Lehigh Valley Community Rights Network (LVCRN), being held in the evening at Northampton Community College's Fowler Campus on Bethlehem's South Side. A group of about fifteen residents attended, to discuss a new push to encourage local communities to draft ordinances emphasizing the right to local self-governance, like the ordinance that Pittsburgh drafted last year, which banned [fracking for natural gas](#) within their city limits.

---



© Judith Joy Ross, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

At the meeting, I noticed an mischievous woman with white hair and glasses, tip-toeing around in the background, positioning herself at various points of the room to snap pictures with a large old-fashioned camera. At one point, she introduced herself quickly as Judith Ross, a photographer who would be showing her work at a gallery in Manhattan. *Yeah, right*, I thought. I mean, who *knows* in advance that they are going to be featured in a New York Gallery *before* they shoot the work? And why would anyone be interested in our meeting? But I couldn't help but smile at her approach, which was to tell us all how *beautiful* we looked (we were the farthest thing from fashionable) and what a great thing it was that we were doing and how she hoped it was ok if she took some pictures of our meeting. I looked at Easton's often-grumpy community watchdog, Dennis Lieb (center of photo, back row, facing forward), who looked kind of bewildered at being called "beautiful" and then shrugged his shoulders. We continued meeting and Ross continued shooting. Just before she left, she thanked us and rattled off her email address quickly, before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

To my surprise, several months later and true to her word, Judith Joy Ross is being featured in a show at the [Pace/MacGill Gallery](#) in Manhattan. A peek at her biography reveals that Ross is an accomplished cultural documentarian whose solo shows have been featured in numerous exhibits across the U.S.—including New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to name a few. A retrospective of her war portraits are exhibiting this year at the Die Photographische/Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur in Cologne and the Fondation A Stichting in Brussels. Her work has also been featured in over 50 group shows in the U.S. and Europe, and the Allentown Museum of Art presented her first retrospective in 1997. She is also a recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship (1985), the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1986), the Charles Pratt Memorial Award (1992) and the Andrea Frank Foundation Award (1998). Ross has an extensive body of work compiled over the last few decades—mostly portraits—featuring adolescents, school children, visitors to the Vietnam Memorial, members of Congress, and protesters of the Iraq War. Most recently her attention has turned to protesters of energy corporations introducing high voltage power lines and fracking for natural gas to rural communities in Pennsylvania.

Now a resident of Bethlehem's west side, Ross grew up in Hazelton, PA. Growing up in coal country gave her a passion for environmentalism and a desire to stop the devastation of the energy industry throughout the state. "They ruined it (Hazelton)—it's all unproductive land now. I've seen a lot." A couple of years ago, she attended a Democracy School workshop offered by the [Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund](#) (the same volunteer legal organization that ran the [Democracy School in Easton](#) recently, and helped Pittsburgh to draft their new ordinance). "Martin Boksenbaum of the [Alliance for Sustainable Communities](#) brought CELDF in for the Democracy School, and we kept in touch afterwards and he told me that the Lehigh Valley Community Rights Network was going to be holding its first meeting, so I wanted to document it. The picture's so sweet—all these odd little smiles—and a tension about it all—it's important, what you guys are doing. And the colors are beautiful."

As an artist and a cultural documentarian, Ross seeks to capture the world around her, "I'm making art, I want to show the truth of something—that this is what being an American is at this time in our world. But that doesn't mean that everything will be immediately clear. Art shouldn't tell you what to think. I've made something that's meaningful yet mysterious. It's not even clear to the artist always, when the artist makes art. But that's also a contradiction, because I want to stop fracking and other things that are going to ruin Pennsylvania forever. I'm heartbroken—more than half of PA is under siege by natural gas. And now they want to take away our municipal rights to stop it. The pictures are not for everybody—it's grim—an artist works like crazy and then very few people see it, and out of those, very few get it. I was thrilled that Pace/MacGill wanted to do this show."

Ross' process that is unique today in that she still shoots on film, on an 8 x 10 view camera. The color negatives for this show were scanned digitally, then printed from the scan. "It's the first time I've ever done color work, and the first time I've ever made prints larger than the 8 x 10 negative. 8 x 10 has incredible fluidity and sharpness—the size of the print is the size of the negative, and the colors are beautiful. There's no grain—it represents the world as best as possible. the photograph reflects the world, not the photographer's ideas."

"I think I've defined what it is to be alive in this culture...it wasn't my purpose...I do portraits. I take pictures of what I see every day looking at people around me —it's what happened...local people, and Congress, and all these wars—Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan. I commuted to the Vietnam War for two whole years to photograph it. It's an honor to be a photographer and make a poem about anything that you want out of ordinary people and events. The people in this meeting (the LVCRN meeting) are ordinary, and yet there's an odd tension between everyone..."

As to whether or not she considers herself an activist, Ross says, "I care about it—I'm heartbroken about it. These energy corporations are a great horror—they want to put in these high voltage power lines along the Delaware Water Gap, destroying the landscape forever—we don't even *need* that power—our machines are using less power than before, not more—they're just so greedy about it. And the fracking—destroying our drinking water—for what? But I just don't have what it takes to sit through those meetings. People need to do what they're good at, so I take pictures. see a lot of beauty in these meetings—it's important, what these people are doing. But the people in them don't see the beauty."

Judith Joy Ross' exhibit, *The Devil Today and Reading to Dogs*, can be seen Tuesday – Saturday during the show's final week at the [Pace/MacGill Gallery](#) in New York. Click the gallery link for more information, [to view more images](#) and read a [full biography of the artist](#).