



# Oregon

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The Curse of Jackson Pollock: The Truth Behind the World's Greatest Art Scandal



PHOTO BY MICHELE TAYLOR

## The Curse of Jackson Pollock: The Truth behind the World's Greatest Art Scandal

By Richard Taylor

Ruth Kligman knew all about the darkness that haunted the world of Jackson Pollock. Fifty years earlier, when she was his mistress, she had seen it firsthand the night the notoriously troubled artist drove off a narrow country lane, killing himself, her best friend, and traumatizing Kligman for life.

The first time I talked to her, she warned me of how the New York art scene was littered with victims of Pollock's curse: artists, art dealers, and criminals hoping to sell Pollock-like paintings for large sums of money were all touched by it. The curse got so ugly that the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, charged with authenticating paintings in the past, refused to consider new works after 1996.

But in May 2005, a New York art collector announced that thirty-two potential Pollocks had been found in an old storage locker owned by Alex Matter, the son of a friend of Pollock. Were they the find of the century?

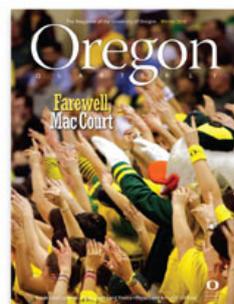
Forced to reconvene its authentication work, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation asked me to help out. When my findings appeared in *The New York Times* the following year, Kligman called me. "The curse has got you now," she said.

Reporters from Reuters, the Associated Press, and the BBC had also called. In the reasoned atmosphere of the University of Oregon physics department, I had to admit that my prospects for evading the Pollock curse weren't looking good. I peered at the darkening February clouds outside my window. Was this how curses descend?

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Pollock shocked the art world back in the 1940s by pouring paint directly from a can onto canvases laid out horizontally across the floor. The results were staggering—vast, tangled webs of paint. I was ten years old when I first saw them in a Pollock catalog. The pages were yellowed and crammed with arcane art terminology; the paintings were printed in serious

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monochrome. But the black and white images could not diminish the magnificence of Pollock's patterns from my hungry eyes.

Although I was excited by art, my fascination with patterns took me into physics. I studied electronic devices and explored the way electricity flows through them. This flow resembles a river spreading into tributaries: the main channel branched into smaller rivers and these in turn split into smaller and smaller streams. This repetition of patterns at increasingly fine sizes is called fractal. They occurred not only in my devices, but also throughout nature.

The more I looked at fractal patterns, the more I was reminded of Pollock's poured paintings. And when I looked at his paintings, I noticed that the paint splatters seemed to spread across his canvases like the flow of electricity through our devices. Using software designed for detecting fractals in our electronic devices, I determined that Pollock filled his canvases with nature's fractal patterns. In 1999, I published that study in *Nature*. Collaborations with psychologists followed, showing that the human eye had a natural ability to spot fractals, and this detection reduced the viewer's stress levels. We concluded that the presence of these relaxing fractals in Pollock's work might be the secret behind his success.

The Oregon sky was an optimistic blue when Adam Micolich, the coauthor of my *Nature* article, came to visit in the summer of 2005. We discussed the newly found trove of Matter paintings while canoeing around Waldo Lake. I told him that my UO group had been asked to perform a fractal analysis on them, and the results would be top secret. The request had come from the guru of the Pollock world, Francis O'Connor. I was thrilled! O'Connor had authored the Pollock catalog I picked up as a kid.

At first glance, O'Connor and I had little in common. At sixty-eight, he had spent his life mixing with the New York art crowd. O'Connor wrote the Pollock *Catalogue Raisonné* and was on the authentication committee at the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. I was a forty-two-year-old physicist living in Eugene, a sleepy town whose greatest art legacy might well be the tie-dyed T-shirt. Yet we were drawn together by the growing crisis surrounding the Matter paintings.

I saw O'Connor as a sentinel, serving as the last defense line for Pollock's legacy. He told me he could tell the visual signature of a real Pollock in seconds, but his evaluations were so intrinsic that they were hard for him to describe in words, especially in nasty court cases brought on by disappointed collectors. Over the years, he'd been sued many times. Although the lawsuits were never successful, he'd lost his appetite for making his opinions known.

Paddling across the lake, I told Adam about our recent Pollock results. When the computers searched through known Pollock imitations, none of them had the specific fractal signature of the real thing. Perhaps O'Connor's eye was a natural version of our software, serving as a sensitive fractal detector that could distinguish between genuine Pollocks and copies. Our computers could then provide the quantitative support that O'Connor's visual assessments needed. That's exactly what O'Connor had in mind when, several weeks earlier, he inquired, only half jokingly, if FedEx made it out as far as Oregon.

Soon after, transparencies of the Matter artworks arrived at my office, and the investigation of the world's biggest art controversy shifted from New York to Eugene. My research group started three weeks of round-the-clock work. I paced the corridors, knowing that the department's cultural horizons were being expanded. Renowned for studies of optics and astronomy, we were now headed for the untested territory of art.

In the meantime, with a fortune at stake and professional careers on the line, two of the main Pollock authenticators went for each other's throats. The Pollock curse was in full flow, and the press loved it. Ellen Landau, an art historian and previous member of the foundation's authenticity team, called the disputed artworks "pure Jackson." Another of the foundation's authenticators and *Raisonné* coauthor, Eugene Thaw, retorted that he would never endorse them. O'Connor declared his skepticism but expressed his open mindedness to any evidence that might emerge. At this point, only he knew that my fractal analysis was under way.

His faith in my work grew to a point where, after having read in *The New York Times* about birds attacking pedestrians in downtown Eugene, he said I should avoid the area at all costs. The results must get through to New York!

In early July, I flew out to the foundation's office near Central Park to deliver our findings. I finally had come face to face with O'Connor, thirty years after poring over his Pollock book. The meeting started with a formal declaration by the foundation's chairman: "Gentlemen, you may remove your jackets." Unfortunately, I wasn't wearing a jacket. But I was secretly pleased that I had stopped in an army surplus store on the way to the meeting to ditch my shorts in favor of long pants. Protocols were quickly swept aside as the sentinels from art and science joined forces to protect the Pollock legacy.

We all acknowledged the unprecedented nature of the meeting. For the first time, computers were playing a significant role in determining the fate of artworks. Furthermore, this new game was being played out in a physics laboratory located among the forests of far-off Oregon, not in the back rooms of New York galleries. We left the meeting in agreement that the authenticity reports shouldn't be released until they were integrated with the more traditional research under way. This included a team of detectives checking the history behind the discovery to see if it was consistent with Pollock's life.

This search for new information about the paintings had no bounds. When we heard that *The Independent* newspaper in England was due to publish a story about the history of the discovery of the Matter paintings before American newspapers, I called my mum into action. She walked down to the village store in the north of England, bought the paper, and faxed the article to me. I faxed the article on to Francis, who was astonished that I, in hippy-dippy Eugene, could get news faster than the foundation's network of spies.

The summer of 2005 took me on a roller coaster ride of excitement and trepidation. I remember visiting a street fair in Seattle where a young kid had a contraption that measured stress. When he wired me up, the needle shot off the scale. In November, the stakes were raised even higher when a genuine Pollock sold for \$140 million—the highest price ever paid for a painting. Soon after, word leaked out that computers had been employed to unravel the growing scandal. It seemed the whole world wanted to know if the disputed works bore the fractal signature of real Pollocks.

Rumors circulated in the increasing void of information, including that of a photograph showing Pollock in front of one of the paintings. If true, this would constitute proof of their authenticity. As 2006 rolled in, and rumors for and against authenticity grew, the foundation decided it was "put up or shut up" time. Our conclusions were released to *The New York Times* on February 9. The front-page headline announced: "Computer Analysis Suggests Not Pollocks." If evidence existed showing the paintings were genuine, then our release would hopefully trigger a counter release of opposing evidence. It was finally time for all to show their hands.

The press reported that some of the paintings had already been sold. I decided to phone the foundation to seek reassurance. "They're not happy," I blurted out to its lawyer. "What did you expect?" he replied. "You've just lost them at least \$40 million." With Kligman's words reverberating in my mind, I sensed the hunger of lawyers for new victims of the curse.

The foundation said that the majority of Pollock scholars wouldn't express their opinions for fear of being sued. Francis and I were two of only a few voices daring to be heard. We weren't braver than the others; we simply had the advantage of standing behind scientific data. His eye and our computers agreed that the paintings were so varied that several artists might have been involved.

So began a waiting game that dragged on for the longest year of my life. The mysterious photograph never surfaced. Lawsuits didn't materialize either, despite Matter's litigation specialist telling *The Wall Street Journal* that fractal analysis was "dubious." I was, though, warned to expect public attempts to discredit our analysis.

Eventually, a student from Landau's university told *The New York Times* that she believed Pollock paintings weren't fractal. The media initially relished the "student takes on expert" story but it fell apart when Benoit Mandelbrot, the scientist who discovered fractals, publicly backed our results.

When more worrying threats to "get me" surfaced, opportunities to work in New Zealand started to look very attractive. I phoned O'Connor for advice. "Flee," he said, "and forget this nonsense." But he told me that I must return, hinting that the strategy behind the release of our reports was working: people were coming forth with information and other researchers were joining the investigation. Flying back from New Zealand a month later, I stopped off in Easter Island to find that, even in this remote place, the local newspaper was covering the controversy.

Finally, in January 2007, scientists from Harvard released paint analysis of the disputed works, showing that some of the pigments weren't commercially available until the 1980s, thirty years after Pollock's death. This was supported by paint analysis from another group showing that the initials "JP" were also added after his death. These investigations supported our conclusions. Matter's lawyer described the science as flawed. But when a renowned pigment expert denounced his criticisms as "unlikely to the point of fantasy," the game was over.

Asked why the "Matter matter" had dragged on so long, one Pollock scholar, Pepe Karmel, concluded: "Fear." Science had broken through this fear to defend the Pollock legacy. Today, more than a dozen groups around the world use fractal analysis to examine artworks. The art

world will never be the same again. For me, the curse has lifted.

*Richard Taylor is an associate professor of physics at the University of Oregon. His book, Fractal Expressionism: The Art and Science of Jackson Pollock, will be published by World Scientific early in 2011. This essay was a finalist in the 2010 Oregon Quarterly Northwest Perspectives Essay Contest. Taylor dedicates this article to Ruth Kligman (1930–2010).*

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