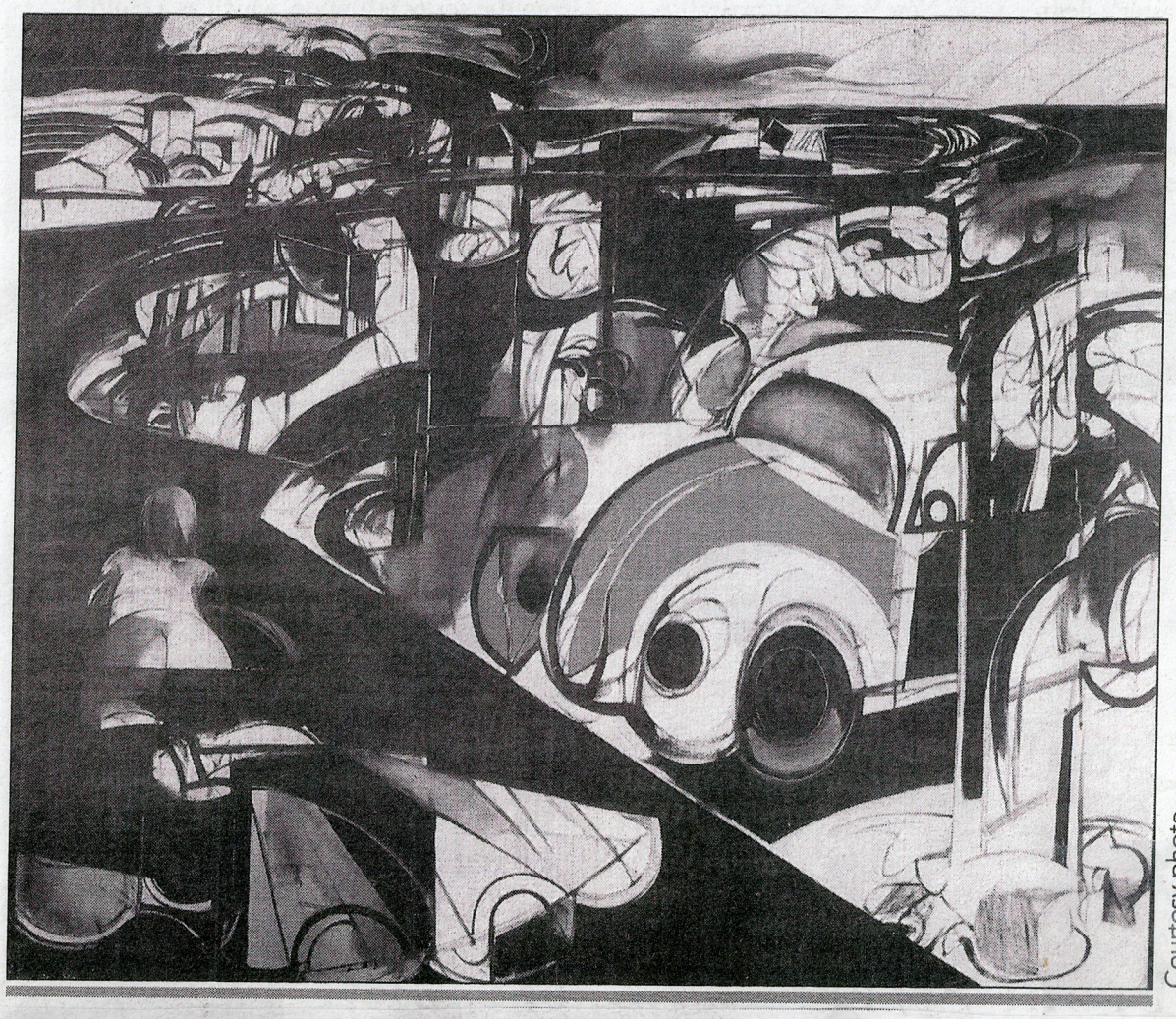
Arts & Culture

# Local scenes, literary themes

## Exhibit samples works of longtime area artist, teacher Harold Keller

By STACEY MORRIS
Contributing writer



Courtesy photo

Harold Keller's oil painting "The Birth of Venus near Saratoga Springs" (1966) is among works spanning several decades of his career that will be on view this month at McCartee's Barn Fine Art & Antiques in Salem, N.Y.

SALEM, N.Y.

The artist Harold Keller may have been born and bred in Brooklyn, but for most of his life, his heart was in Washington County.

It was in the county's rolling hills that he chose to settle and raise a family – and also where he found the greatest inspiration for his art, which often incorporated local landscapes into works inspired by literature.

Keller died in March 2017, leaving an impressive collection of drawings and paintings, many of them created in his studio in the town of Jackson, next door to where he lived for 50 years.

This month, a selection of his works will be displayed at McCartee's Barn Fine Art & Antiques in Salem. The exhibition, "Harold Keller: A retrospective of work," is curated by Keller's daughter, Victoria, and by Sue Clary, the gallery's owner.

Harold Keller was born in 1928 and grew up in Brighton Beach, a second-generation descendant of Eastern European immigrants. After graduating from high school, his original plan, set forth primarily by his family, was to pursue a career in medicine.

"He was the first in his family to go to university, and my father attended on the condition that he would study pre-med," Victoria Keller explained. "Dad was a nice Jewish boy, and his parents wanted him to be a doctor."

But it soon became clear both to Keller and his parents that his heart simply wasn't in the hoped-for career. With his mother's blessing, Keller switched gears to a double major in art and philosophy.

Already versed in drawing because of his years at Brooklyn Technical High School, Keller began an immersion in painting and drawing in the late 1940s.

"He became a fine draftsman at Brooklyn Tech," Victoria said. "Once he went away to college in Arkansas, things really got under way."

It was while studying at the University of Arkansas that Keller met and married his wife, June Pauline Clayton, in 1949, the same year he completed his bachelor's degree.

The couple remained in Arkansas, where Victoria and her older brother Clayton were born. Keller continued to draw and paint while simultaneously holding teaching jobs at high schools and colleges throughout the state, including at Fort Smith Junior College, which is now part of the University of Arkansas system.

"Back then," Victoria recalled, "Dad was the art department at Fort Smith, and he taught philosophy as well."

### Evolving technique

Between semesters, Keller drove the family north for several summers, encamping at his parents' home in Brooklyn while he pursued a master's degree from New York University.

"My father had a very, very delicate, strong line of figurative work," Victoria said. "His style is quite graphic, except for a good chunk of the '60s while studying for his master's, when he got very painterly. Hale Woodruff, his NYU professor, said 'Harold, you can do this work with your hands tied behind your back. Why don't you loosen up?'"

His professor's suggestion was the motivation Keller needed to break free for a time from his usual style of tight, linear drawings. Back home in Arkansas, a friend who was an interior decorator had given Keller a book of outdated wallpaper samples. The artist began a series of collages using the undecorated sides of the samples.

"That loosened him up," Victoria said. "One from the series is a nude, which as a child I always assumed was a picture of a black cat. Actually, it's a nude. Look long and hard at those curves made with wallpaper samples – you can even see a number from the back of the page. The wallpaper is glued to the canvas, and there's also an occasional use of oil paint."

Also part of Keller's collage work is a series on the birth of Venus, which includes highways and vehicles done with precision delineation, while Keller's Venus has a more amorphous representation.

One of the pieces in the exhibition is "Birth of Venus Near Saratoga Springs," a large oil painting from 1966.

"In it, you can see Venus being born, but there's a highly recognizable orange Volkswagen near the center and a farm landscape in the background," Victoria explained.

Another painting from the series, "Birth of Venus with a Yellow Submarine," also from 1966, has a protruding submarine, rather than the goddess, as its centerpiece. It's now part of the University of California Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

"It's a real important moment in my father's work in that particular series," Victoria said.

### North via Saratoga

Keller and his family had moved to Saratoga Springs in 1964, when he took a teaching job at Union College in Schenectady. It was his time in the Spa City, plus its proximity to the pastoral beauty of Washington County, that shifted Keller's artistic focus.

"He and my mom got to see the countryside and also got to know the community," Victoria said. "We lived on Phila Street and became great friends with Lena Spencer," whose local café had become a center of the national folk music scene.

The family's time in Saratoga Springs was idyllic but short-lived. They moved back to the New York City area in the spring of 1965 after Keller accepted a teaching job at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey.

"Even after we moved, my father kept visiting upstate – both to draw the landscapes and for two residencies at Yaddo," Victoria said.

Eventually, the family bought a summer home outside Greenwich in the town of Jackson. Growing ever fonder of the county's landscape and its cleaner air, Keller decided it would be the ideal place for his studio, and the family moved upstate on a permanent basis in 1969.

By this time, a third child, William, had been born. The new family home had an old chicken house on the property, which Keller transformed into his studio, eradicating the darkness of the small space by putting a window in the ceiling. It was the dawning of what would become an influx of city-based artists into Washington County for both full-time and seasonal homes.

"The late '60s and early '70s were a time when New York artists began looking at rural places where they could have studio space and also reach the city with relative ease, and many settled in Washington County," Victoria recalled.

Her mother, who died in 2003, came from a farming background and lost no time acquiring a small menagerie of cows, chickens and rabbits. She also found work at Greenwich Public Library while her husband commuted to a three-day-a-week teaching position at Fairleigh Dickinson. In 1973, the couple's youngest child, Tom, was born at the now-shuttered Mary McClellan Hospital in Cambridge.

### Mythical and the mundane

Throughout the five decades Keller spent at his Washington County studio, his daughter said he created prolifically, often drawing inspiration from the literary world but imbuing scenes with his own discerning perspective.

"He was very taken with the W.H. Auden poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts,'" Victoria said. "Auden talks about Icarus falling into the sea, and in my father's drawing of the scene, there's a man who's in a field plowing and not paying any attention. My father liked to illustrate, as with his interpretation of the birth of Venus, that life keeps happening around important events."

Keller's artwork reveals a fondness for the places he visited or called home: yellow school buses rolling past cornfields, the local railroad, the Batten Kill, his neighbor Anson Cary's farm, New York Harbor and the city subway all figure into his work.

"You'd find floor plans of French cathedrals or the New York City subway map in his paintings," Victoria said. "There's one that looks out from Brighton Beach over to Far Rockaway, you see ships coming in. It's not photographic, but you know it's a harbor scene."

His retirement from Fairleigh Dickinson in the late 1980s allowed Keller more time in his studio. He stopped painting in the '80s and focused solely on drawing until his death in 2017.

"There was a very strong line in his work that began in the '80s, and it never went away after that," Victoria said.

One of the later series her father did, from about 1996 to 2001, consisted of various depictions of the archangel Michael fighting the devil, including "St. Michael the Archangel and the Dragon" (2001), which is on the homepage of Keller's website.

"It illustrates one of the few times the Archangel Michael has managed to kill the devil, who's depicted as a giant slug," Victoria said. "We'll have about 10 of the St. Michael drawings in the exhibition. The devil changes throughout the series, from a long, snake-like creature with big ears to a giant slug, and St. Michael's weapons vary as well – from an ax to hoe to sickle to pruning knife."

### Finding humor in epic events

In 2007, Keller started a sizeable collection of drawings based on the epic Greek poem the "Iliad," which he was fond of carrying with him on subway rides. The drawings feature the death of Hector, the leader of the Trojan army, at the hands of the Greek warrior Achilles.

"My father liked Hector, not Achilles, because he thought he was very much the good brother and son," Victoria explained. "But what does Hector get? All the gods ganging up on him with Achilles."

Again, Washington County landscapes figure prominently in the drawings.

"All the battles were done in farmland, with silos in the background," Victoria said. "My father was very sorry when farmers began putting silage in trenches instead of silos."

The series – 30 drawings in total – was completed about five years prior to Keller's death.

"His belief was, there's always something to draw, … always something important to say," Victoria said. "He particularly enjoyed drawing Athena, whom he depicted with a helmet worn so her ponytail could stick out the back.

"People look at his work and say, 'Is it OK if I find that funny?' Dad always liked the Sol Steinberg level of humor," she added, referring to the longtime *New Yorker* cartoonist.

Clary, the gallery owner, said she has found it gratifying to help Victoria Keller choose pieces for the exhibit from among her father's considerable body of work.

"I find it fantastic that he places myths and biblical happenings into our upstate landscape and includes local highways plus rural farmyards – that 'The Birth of Venus' can happen in someone's pond near Greenwich at the same time as the kids are getting off the bus," Clary said. "This retrospective shows a personal glimpse into Harold Keller's life."

Victoria Keller said McCartee's Barn is the perfect place to pay homage to her father's career – and not just because of his love for the Washington County landscape.

"Only a small number of his friends knew what my father was doing out in that converted chicken house," she said. "My father was very low key about his artwork. What I'm hoping is that neighbors and those who knew of him will come see what it was all about."

*Paintings and drawings by the late Harold Keller will be on display throughout August at McCartee's Barn, at 23 East Broadway in Salem. An opening reception is scheduled from 2 to 4 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 3. For more information about the show, call (518) 854-3857; visit www.HaroldKellerArtist.net for more information about Keller and his work.*