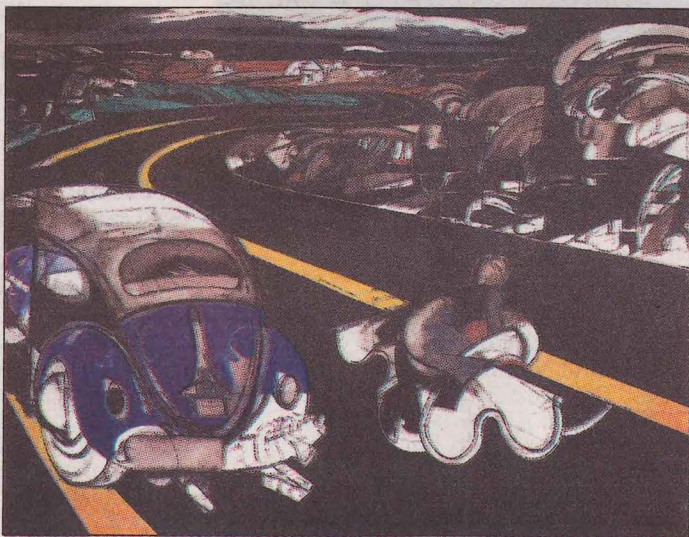


Harold Keller, 1988, Benz-Lane Studio.
(Courtesy Photo)

“Birth of Venus,” 1966, oil on canvas, reflects Keller’s “mystical, theological, and mythological themes, all of which he explored here in Arkansas but which also preoccupied him the remainder of his creative life,” Matthew Bailey, gallery director, says.
(Courtesy Image)



‘Magic Realism’

UAFS Gallery brings Harold Keller back to Arkansas

BECCA MARTIN-BROWN
NWA Democrat-Gazette

The Fort Smith Regional Art Museum has John Bell Jr. as the signature artist in its collection.

The Gallery of Art and Design at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith has Harold Keller — now that its collection of Keller’s works has grown by more than 40 paintings, ceramics and finished drawings, two artist books and more than 300 of the artist’s working drawings.

All of the drawings, paintings and ceramics are on show in “Harold Keller: Portals,” on show Sept. 8 through Dec. 16 at the gallery at 535 N. Waldron Road. The exhibition also includes paintings on loan from Keller’s daughter and other private collectors in New York.

“This is, indeed, a large show — and undertaking — for a university gallery such as ourselves,” says Matthew Bailey, gallery director. But it’s also huge in conceptual, not just physical, ways.

“First, acquiring such a large, unique donation speaks to the growing appreciation of the arts in Fort Smith and the prominence of the UAFS Gallery of Art and Design in that,” Bailey says. “It elevates our place in the art world, so to speak, since

it expands our already prominent collection of contemporary art and makes our permanent collection the largest repository of Harold Keller’s work. [And] stylistically, it makes us an important repository of the kind of contemporary ‘magic realism’ he practiced as well.

“In curatorial terms, this also elevates the gallery since it gives us a chance to present a scholarly curated exhibit that places Keller and his work in historical and cultural context in ways that make it apparent that such an exhibit — and our gallery — is an academic endeavor,” Bailey adds. “Not all appreciate or realize that, but it’s our focus as a university art museum that serves both the campus and community.”

Keller, born in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1928, came to Arkansas to study art at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Art and Philosophy in 1949, Bailey recounts, then taught at high schools in Ozark, Alma and Van Buren. In 1956 he was hired as professor of art at Fort Smith Junior College — now UAFS — where he taught until 1962 while also earning a Master of Arts in Art Education from New York University.

“Keller really transformed the art curriculum here, broadening it to focus on a wider variety of media along with art history and art criticism,” Bailey



“Local Showers” and “Local Showers 8,” 1972, oil on canvas, illustrates how Keller combined “rolling farmland with grain silos and tractors along with prismatic skies, helicopters and airplanes, along with abstracted subway maps, temple floor plans, and art historical references — along with angelic figures that reference Christian themes,” Bailey says. (Courtesy Images)

says. “At the same time he remained a practicing artist. Before and during his time here, he exhibited in shows in Arkansas, Oklahoma, Dallas, Chicago and New York, among other places.”

“He was a very influential mentor to his students and very popular in the community — in fact, we know that many of his works of art were collected by families from the region,” he adds. “The artist’s daughter and I are hoping this exhibit not only sheds light on the breadth of his career and the importance of his art but also helps us locate some of these lost works!”

Keller moved back to New York in 1962 and taught at several colleges, winding up his career at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey where he taught from 1965 until his retirement in 1985, Bailey says.

The UAFS Gallery already had two pieces by Keller when his daughter, Victoria, reached out to Bailey about a potential donation.

“The two paintings of Harold’s we already have are situated just outside my office and are the works most [visitors] stop in front of and study for some time,” Bailey says. “They pull you in as masterfully executed works with recognizable imagery, but their fusion of the fantastic and everyday is what provides their

real fascination. For instance, the way they combine rolling farmland with grain silos and tractors along with prismatic skies, helicopters and airplanes, along with abstracted subway maps, temple floor plans, and art historical references — along with angelic figures that reference Christian themes — makes them puzzles that draw viewers in and ask them to conceptually ‘fit together’ these puzzles.

“To have the chance to obtain a large donation of his work from across his career was one I couldn’t pass up,” Bailey adds. “His work fit perfectly within the gallery’s focus on quality contemporary art that expands ideas about art and culture. His paintings and drawings are demonstrations of superb craftsmanship but also demonstrate an adherence to the figural and narrative in art since the mid-20th century, often overshadowed by preferences for abstraction and various types of conceptual or mixed media art. ... Keller’s work is sure to have a tremendously influential impact [on students] in ways of inventively conceiving of narrative forms.”

While Keller did not live out his life in Arkansas, Bailey says Arkansas lived on in Keller’s artwork.

“Keller developed his artistic

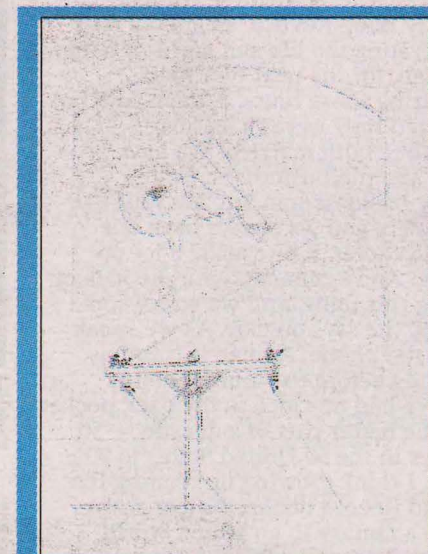
approach while in Arkansas, especially during his time in Fort Smith,” he says. “His work is characterized by a distinctive gracefulness and lyricism — the result of his deft command of line and drawing — along with a very unique synthesis of wit and erudition, his works at once humorous, sophisticated and earnest in their meanings.

“He was especially attracted to mystical, theological, and mythological themes, all of which he explored here in Arkansas but which also preoccupied him the remainder of his creative life,” Bailey muses. “I categorize his art as a kind of magic realism, a style which combines the fantastic and the everyday in uncanny ways.

“He not only had a deep impact on students and community here in Fort Smith, the region had an impact on him present in his art throughout his life. I think of this donation and exhibition as Keller’s work returning to its origins, conceptually and physically.”

Bailey says the timing of the donation is perfect, with expansion of the gallery coming soon.

“I should also mention in 2021 Victoria gave the Pebley Center in the UAFS Boreham Library Harold’s personal documents and archives, so it makes us the primary study center for Harold Keller overall,” he concludes.



FAQ

‘Harold Keller: Portals’

WHEN — Opens Sept. 8 with a reception from 6 to 8 p.m.; the exhibit remains on show through Dec. 16 during gallery hours 9 a.m.-4 p.m. weekdays

WHERE — UAFS Gallery of Art and Design, 535 N. Waldron Road in Fort Smith

COST — Free

INFO — uafs.edu/gallery