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## **Harold Keller: Portals**

As playful as the distinctive art of Harold Keller is, he had profound, sincere, and relevant things to say.

This unprecedented exhibition of Keller's work, the largest to date, presents an extensive donation of over forty paintings, drawings, ceramics, and artist books along with three hundred working drawings to the University of Arkansas Fort Smith by the artist's daughter, Victoria Keller.

Keller had a prodigious artistic career of over seventy years and a teaching career of thirty-five. Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1928, he came to the University of Arkansas in 1946 to pursue a degree in medicine. With a greater interest in the humanities, he eventually earned a Bachelor of Arts in art and philosophy in 1949.

After teaching for several Arkansas high schools, he became professor of art at Fort Smith Junior College (now UAFS) from 1956 to 1962. As the sole art instructor, he transformed the curriculum into a robust program including studio art, art history, and art criticism, informed by his pursuit of a Master of Arts in Art Education from New York University, which he earned in 1961.

In 1962 Keller and his family returned to New York, where he continued to teach in higher education until retiring in 1985.

As demonstrated here, Keller worked prolifically throughout his life, exploring a range of styles, media, themes, and imagery until his passing in 2017. His work, especially beginning in the 1960s, is distinguished by a fusion of the fantastic with the everyday, a style known as magic realism. But the magical realms he conjured were also critical reflections on reality, his work imaginative configurations and reinterpretations of art, religion, culture, society, personal memories and interests, and immediate experiences.

In some instances, as in *Landscape with Abraham and Isaac* (1983), these themes were deftly organized into one composition. Such works reveal Keller's unique blend of remarkable skill, powerful lyricism, penetrating observation, and metaphysical insight, along with equal measures of erudition and wit.

The UAFS Gallery of Art & Design and the University of Arkansas Fort Smith would like to extend their gratitude to Victoria Keller for her generous donation and to Martha Bernard, Geraldine Cuite, Klara Varosy Hall, and Victoria Keller for loaning works from their private collection. We also thank the Windgate Foundation for their generous support.

To learn more about Harold Keller, see the website:  
[www.haroldkellerartist.net](http://www.haroldkellerartist.net).

## Arkansas Years

The paintings, drawings, and ceramics Harold Keller created during his years in Arkansas (1946-1962) display a variety of themes he explored throughout his life. These include classical mythology, Christian and Jewish subject matter, angelology, demonology, witchcraft, and the occult.

The work from this period also reveals the delicate, graceful, yet playful lines and forms that characterize his work, inspired especially by the Swiss-German artist Paul Klee (1879-1940). Like Klee, Keller developed a kind of visual irony to explore his religious and philosophical imagery, presenting thoughtful subjects through amusing language and imagery in ways that make them more accessible and relatable.

Much of the work from these years was created during his tenure here in Fort Smith. Keller's courses included studio art, art history and appreciation, art criticism, and courses for high school teachers. They also included night classes for continuing education students, of which he wrote in characteristically wry humor that the only difference "is that the teacher must keep reminding the student that he is enjoying himself."



## 60s-early 80s

Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, Abstract Expressionism was the popular trend in the American art world. While Keller explored abstraction in the early 1960s, focusing especially on the female figure, by the middle of that decade he returned to more complex and detailed narrative imagery. These paintings mark the development of his unique form of magic realism, work that blended the fantastic with the everyday, but which critically reflected on his personal and cultural realities.

Keller's fusion of the mythological and the everyday was inspired especially by the Renaissance artist Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1560) along with W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938), both of which focus on how daily life continues even as momentous events take place.

In Keller's alternate worlds, landscapes inspired by upstate New York are populated with automobiles, military vehicles, Manhattan landmarks, industrial factories like those along the Hudson River, subway maps, and imagery inspired by art historical sources such as floor plans, pyramids, and Cubist paintings. These are combined with Biblical and mythological imagery such as the Birth of Venus, Abraham and Isaac, the Annunciation, and Tyche (the Greek goddess of luck and prosperity). All these combined elements, his paintings philosophically suggest, are a part of lived experience.



## Working Process

When the Keller family moved to a farm in Greenwich, New York in 1969, the artist transformed the chicken house into his studio. Photographs of Harold in his rustic studio, along with a selection of his working drawings in the display cases, reveal the meticulous processes he used in his paintings and drawings from the early 1970s onward.



These works were composed of a series vignettes—figures, tractors, silos, jets—each initially drawn on tracing paper. He would then experiment with different combinations and arrangements of these sketches, pinning them to his studio walls.

Once a composition was finalized, he often taped several vignettes together to transfer them to canvas or mylar. For his paintings, he made a pencil rubbing on the reverse side of the tracing paper, taped the paper to the canvas, then retraced the illustrations, creating a graphite transfer outline on the canvas. With his drawings, he could trace the originals through the translucent mylar.



## **1980s**

In the mid-1980s, Keller began to reduce the compositions and thematic focus of his paintings. The mythological figure Nemesis dominates this period, the Greek goddess of retribution against evil deeds and undeserved fortune floating in sparse yet striking designs. These were mostly executed on circular canvases, or “tondo,” a popular format in Italian Renaissance religious paintings that give Keller’s images religious associations.

One of the first of these shows the direct influence of German Renaissance master Albrecht Dürer’s *Nemesis* (c. 1501). Instead of an idealized nude, however, Keller’s *Nemesis* initially took the form of a Jewish matronly figure of the type he recalled from his childhood home in Brooklyn. In place of the cup of reward and harness of restraint that Dürer’s *Nemesis* holds, Keller’s carries a shopping bag and a lasso.

Gradually, Keller’s *Nemesis* transformed into a nude figure balanced on her celestial orb and accompanied by planes soaring in nocturnal landscapes. However, she always carried her shopping bag and lasso.

## **Drawings**

In the 1990s, Keller continued his reductive compositions of the previous decade but turned exclusively to drawing, which he would focus on for the remainder of his life.

These exquisite works, with lyrical, fluid lines and gracefully posed figures, were executed with pencil and ink washes on mylar, a smooth plastic film once used by architects to produce blueprints.

Keller tended to work on extended series of Biblical and mythological subjects in his drawings. St. Michael Archangel was a particular point of focus. The examples here demonstrate the unique language he developed of angelic figures balanced on or floating near power line poles and junctions. St. Michael is portrayed not as a beautiful youth, but as an elderly, wingless, unidealized figure who is part of our reality and whose place in the heavens is dependent on these elevated structures. With various modern weapons, he fights fanciful, floating slugs and snakelike incarnations of the devil.

## Books

When Keller began to focus exclusively on drawing in the 1990s, he also began to produce books in collaboration with June Keller, his wife. These books, which focused primarily on figures from Christian and Jewish subject matter, were made from diazo prints (a printing process used by architects to make blueprints) using his original drawings. Each volume was then built by June, an accomplished bookbinder, who then tipped in the drawings. Together they created ten books, intending to produce ten copies of each.

In this example, *The Chief Ruling Princes of the Nine Celestial Orders*, Keller illustrated the leading celestial figures from the angelic hierarchy, using Gustav Davidson's *A Dictionary of Angels* (1967) as a source. Each gracefully floats near Keller's characteristic power line junctions, signifying their tangible presence in the modern world.

