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'Harold Keller: Portals' reveals paintings, sketches and humor of late regional artist and former art teacher

January 24, 2026 by Monica Hooper



A hidden Picasso. Greek goddesses suspended above airplane propellers. The Archangel Michael nude and balancing on power lines.

Harold Keller's playful use of magical realism is one of the many "Portals" inviting the viewer inside the late artist's imagination in the Walton Arts Center's Alexander Gallery in Fayetteville.

"Portals," which opened earlier this month, is on display through March 8. The exhibit is divided by eras, providing an ongoing narrative in the story of an ever-evolving artist.

"He's a real artist's artist," said Thomas DeBari, director of visual arts for the arts center, regarding Keller. "He loves art, loves painting, he loves drawing, he loves sculpture, and he never let one discipline corner him or limit him."

"Portals" was curated by Matthew Bailey, who directs the Wichita Falls Museum of Art at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, Texas. Bailey curated a show of the same name in 2023 for the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith's Gallery of Art and Design, which received Keller's work as part of an extensive donation from Keller's family. Bailey said both exhibits examine Keller's work in an art historical context.

Throughout the gallery in the Porter Warehouse on West Avenue are large paintings, small ceramics and cases containing his tongue-and-cheek sketches of the religious figures in very human environments. On one wall are videos of art books by the artist and his wife. One of the biggest parts of the exhibit is a collection of his sketches on Mylar (tracing paper), which the artist used to create his work later in life.

"I chose to display his working drawings to demonstrate his artistic process and appeal to making audiences in the area and to demonstrate his meticulous approach in skill and thought, and how his works were puzzled together through deliberation and experimentation to become puzzles and portals in their final forms," Bailey said.

What strikes DeBari is the time and exactitude in which Keller developed his work, as well as Keller's tie-ins with other art through history. Keller frequently alludes to historic artworks within his pieces. One painting includes recreations of works by Paul Cezanne and Pablo Picasso. In another painting, Keller transforms Albrecht Dürer's "Nemesis" into what the exhibit describes as "a matronly Jewish figure of the type he recalled from his childhood neighborhood in Brooklyn."

Bailey enjoyed the surprise and delight from viewers at the opening reception, many of whom had never heard of Keller or seen his work.

"In his day he was a known artist in New York, and a very established educator. He exhibited frequently in Arkansas and Oklahoma during his time here. Since he left the area in the 1960s, his work has been forgotten. I received many questions about who he was, what his influences were," said Bailey.

"My favorite response was a visitor who found his works both humorous and scary, and they are. I think that's one of the alluring, perhaps uncanny things about his work. They can be at once whimsical, but also earnest, probing, off-putting, even disarming."

Another of DeBari's favorite pieces is a vase, created in the hourglass shape of a woman. On the back of the vase, a figure of a cat sits on the figure's buttocks.

"It's funny, right? It's unusual and it's surprising," DeBari said. "When I look at it, I can see it in the context of responding to what he's seeing in museums at that time and seeing in galleries."

"Most of that pottery was created while he lived and taught in Fort Smith, so they are very important to the collection. But they demonstrate a different style than his later paintings and drawings, exploring abstraction in a few of them," explained Bailey.

"Others demonstrate the influence of art historical styles, including ancient Cycladean (Greek) sculptures and South American pottery, both he would have seen at the

Metropolitan Museum of Art as a youth. And other of his works show direct influences of works from the Metropolitan Museum -- it was an influential wellspring from his youth and from later in life that he continuously referenced and drew from. All his work is personal and intimate in that sense and also very intimate in the unidealized nudity of many of his figures, especially in his drawings and books."

According to his biography, Keller was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1928. He originally planned to study medicine at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, where he met his wife, but instead earned a Bachelor of Arts in Art and Philosophy in 1949. Keller went on to teach at high schools in Ozark, Alma and Van Buren before being hired in 1956 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 returned to New York after completing his masters degree, bringing his family up north with him.

Bailey hopes the exhibit draws out more of Keller's work created while the artist lived in Arkansas.

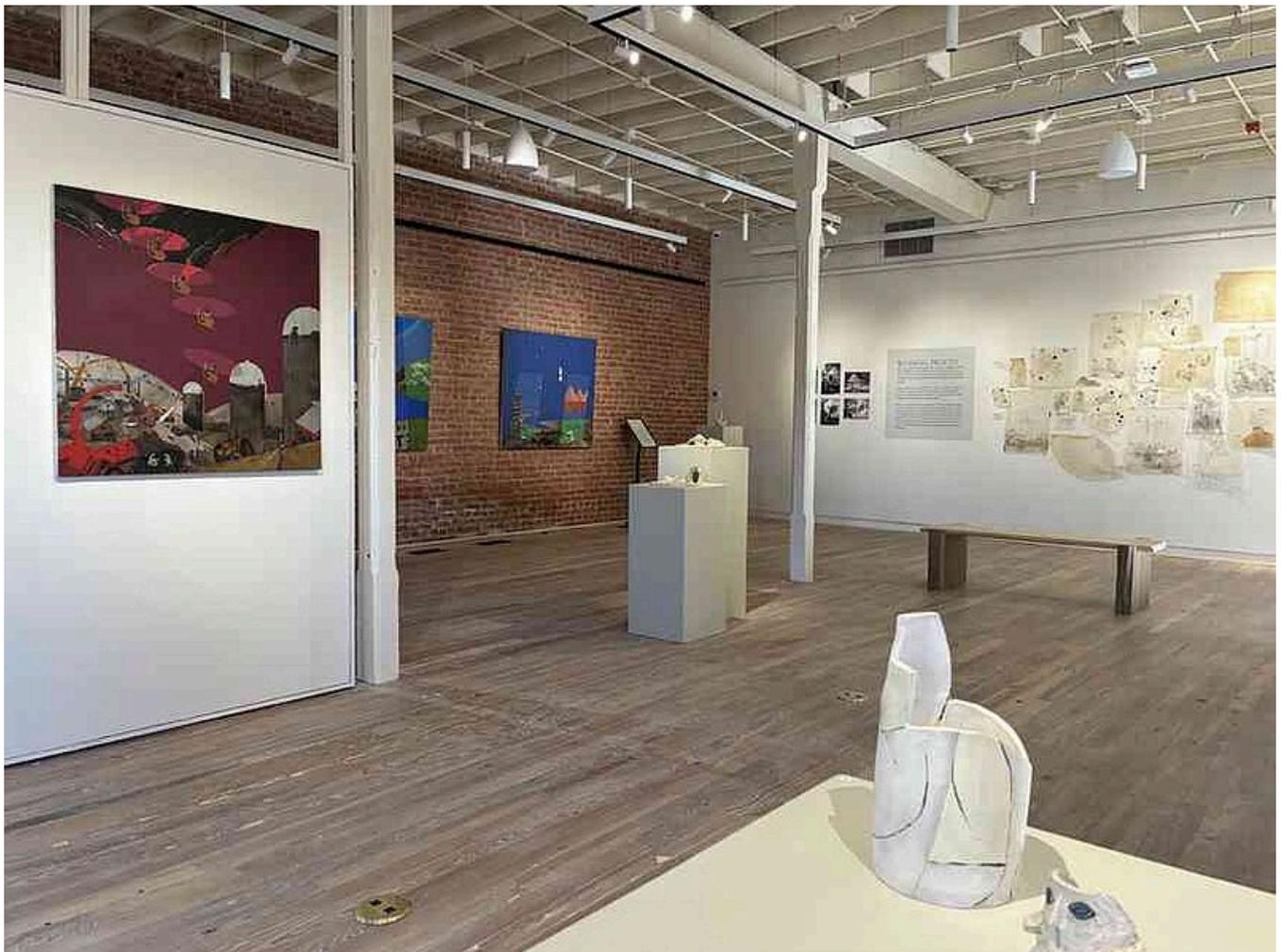
"I have been hoping that many of the paintings he created while living in Arkansas, which are documented and which were bought by unknown private collectors, will come out of the woodwork, so to speak," he said. He explained that the reason many works from when he lived in Arkansas weren't in the exhibit was because they're in private collections. "They are very distinct, and follow a unique style he explored in the 1950s and early 1960s."

All works displayed in "Portals" are on loan from UAFS. Keller's work is also held in institutional and private collections across the U.S. and abroad, including: Brandeis University, Rose Museum of Art; University of Rochester, N.Y., Memorial Art Gallery; State University of New York, Albany; University of Oklahoma, Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and private collections in the UK, Canada, Germany, Italy and Israel.

"Portals" is on display until March 8 in the Alexander Gallery at 212 N. West Ave. in Fayetteville. Gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 5-8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. waltonartscenter.org/visual-arts/harold-keller.

AT A Glance

"Harold Keller: Portals" celebrates the art of Harold Keller (1928-2017) with a collection of pieces from the University of Arkansas Fort Smith Gallery of Art and Design, which holds the largest repository of the artist's work. Paintings, books, pottery, sketches and books by Keller are on display through March 8 at the Alexander Gallery at 212 N. West Ave. in Fayetteville. Gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 5-8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. waltonartscenter.org/visual-arts/harold-keller.



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Monica Hooper

mhooper@nwaonline.com



Monica Hooper is an award-winning features writer specializing in entertainment news for Northwest Arkansas and the River Valley. Since 2022, she has interviewed a diverse range of luminaries, including Fran Lebowitz, Herb Alpert, Carlos Santana, Ricky Skaggs, John Waters and Kristin Chenoweth. While she enjoys spotlighting these renowned figures,

Monica's true passion lies in celebrating the vibrant local arts scene. She delights in uncovering and showcasing the unique talents of the musicians, artists, dancers, writers and actors who enrich her community.

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