

Harold Zisla



by Andrew S. Hughes

Harold Zisla believes in “surround art.” And a visit to the artist’s studio in his home on South Bend’s south side gives physical definition to what he means: Dozens upon dozens of finished and in-progress paintings line the walls, the overflowing bookcases, and the floor.

“I think it’s kind of an aura, a kind of environment that I feel comfortable in,” he says. “I think a gallery isolates the work, and you don’t get the same kind of feeling. ... It’s kind of a Zen thing, or a Tao thing. You just kind of live in an environment. To me, it’s an environment that also needs books and music. Without that, the art doesn’t really work.”

Zisla trained as a traditional, representational artist, but in his 50s and discontent with his work, he shifted to Abstract Expressionism, which he knows makes his work complicated and difficult for people to accept.

“Believing is seeing,” he says. “If somebody believes what I’ve done is art, they’ll see it. If they believe only Realism or landscapes are art, they won’t.”

Zisla seasons his conversation with aphorisms of his own and quotations from favorite artists and

writers. With regard to finding objects in his abstract fields, which he readily agrees has the quality of taking a Rorschach test, Zisla appends his own continuation to artist Frank Stella’s statement that “what you see is what you see”: “What you see is what you see, what you see is me, and what you see is you.”

“Do I put things in there?” he says. “Maybe, accidentally, but if you see an eye or a hand, that’s your trip.”

A humanist, Zisla was more interested in painting portraits when he was a representational artist, and each of his abstract works still begins with a “blind gesture” drawing taken from a photograph or portrait of a person.

“My relationship is to people, not to trees, not to landscapes, seascapes,” he says. “As the thing grows, it starts to move away and become abstract. ... The blind gesture is just to light the fuse. Once that’s there, it’s time to get in there and start screwing it up.”

The paintings generally make wide and vibrant use of color, although a recent series of semi-monochromatic paintings are among Zisla’s most stunning in their simplicity and tight, spare use of color.

“For me, it’s totally intuitive,” he says about how he works. “Art is discovery through imagina-

tion. The great art is not based on description or virtuosity, but art that is based around a system that has never been developed before.”

At 83, Zisla continues to paint or draw every day, but he has declared a recent solo exhibition in the Raclin School of the Arts Gallery at Indiana University South Bend will be his last.

“‘Exit’ really means I’m 83 and death is there,” he says about “Exit: Fertile Densities.” “I’ve run out of the feeling of the need to display it. ... I feel comfortable now, here, after many years, in my golf game, my marriage and my painting, and that’s a real achievement.”

IUSB suggested the exhibition as a fund-raiser for a new scholarship named for Zisla that will provide art students with the money to purchase art supplies, something he and his wife, Doreen, often did anonymously when he was a professor of art and department chairman at IUSB from 1966 to 1989.

Born June 28, 1925, the Cleveland native graduated from what are now the Cleveland Institute of Art and Case-Western Reserve University. Zisla and Doreen moved to South Bend in the early 1950s when he took a job as a designer at Uniroyal before becoming the director of the South Bend Art Center from 1957 to 1966.

He and Doreen still golf every weekday, and during their 62-year marriage, they raised two children, Beverly Z. Welber of Florida and Paul of Minnesota.

Given an audience, Zisla will dispense his opinions or engage in self-deprecating humor, but at home, Doreen says, he’s “very, very serious” and “quiet.”

“He’s extremely involved when he’s working and reading,” she says. “It’s not fun and games.”

One of Zisla’s favorite quotations, from the painter Eugène Delacroix, illustrates that point: “We work not only to produce but to give value to time.”

“An artist must work to produce something that has a moral weight to it,” Zisla says. “I’d like to think that, deep down, some of the images weren’t made to make something beautiful. It’s a compulsion to say something profound about what happened in my lifetime.”

Andrew S. Hughes is the arts and entertainment editor for the South Bend Tribune.