

South Bend artist Harold Zisla dies at 90



Harold Zisla, retired Indiana University South Bend art professor, stands in his home and studio in front of a self-portrait in this 2013 file photo. Tribune File Photo/GREG SWIERCZ

By Andrew S. Hughes South Bend Tribune

SOUTH BEND — For more than 60 years, Harold Zisla played an intimate, provocative and influential role in South Bend’s artistic community.

“More than anyone else in the arts, Harold was supportive of individuals,” longtime friend and local artist Michael Beatty said Friday afternoon. “Until his health made it impossible, if there was an opening, he showed up. You can’t say that about anyone else. He and Doreen went to everything.”

Early Friday morning, the artist, teacher and administrator died at the age of 90 with his wife, Doreen, and their children, Paul Zisla and Beverly Welber, by his side.

“The first word that comes to mind for me is irascible,” Beatty said about Zisla. “The second word is intelligence. The third is creative. I think the thing that was really special about Harold was that he not only had tremendous creativity, but he paired that with his intelligence.”

Born June 28, 1925, in Cleveland, Zisla graduated from what are now the Cleveland Institute of Art and Case Western Reserve University and moved to South Bend with Doreen in 1952.

He worked at Uniroyal as a designer and then directed the South Bend Art Center — now known as the South Bend Museum of Art — from 1957 to 1966. He left the Art Center to become a professor of art and the first art department chair at Indiana University South Bend, where he taught until he retired in 1989.

Local artist and teacher David Allen knew Zisla for more than 40 years, first as his student at IU South Bend in the 1970s and then as his friend.

“He would say things like, ‘You only teach from affection.’” Allen said about Zisla’s classroom approach. “That’s profound. You never approach a student with anything but the positive.”

In the summer of 1971, Zisla hired painter Anthony Droege and sculptor Tuck Langland to teach at IU South Bend in what Droege said was essentially a “restart” of the art department.

“Those were really exciting years,” Droege said by phone from his retirement home in Portland, Ore. “We all regarded each other as artists and as teachers.”

Under Zisla’s leadership, Droege said, the normal clashes of personalities and ambitions didn’t matter.

“Those things were there, but we had trust in each other as artists and teachers,” he said. “We gave each other freedom.”

“He gave us an art department that really began to crank,” Langland said. “It became one of the finer art departments in the area because of Harold’s choice of people — Tony, Alan (Larkin) and me, and Harold, too, as a teacher.”

But even decades after he left the Art Center and it underwent several name changes and became an accredited museum, Zisla continued to call it the South Bend Art Center.

A former curator at the SBMA and former student of Zisla’s at IU South Bend who said she likely would not have become an artist without Zisla’s encouragement, Kim Hoffmann said his ongoing reference to the Art Center was neither habit nor forgetfulness on Zisla’s part.

“He was a populist,” she said. “He was very supportive of the artists. I don’t think it was a mistake for the museum to become accredited, but I don’t think he ever got away from the idea that that place was there for people and for people to come in and take lessons.”

Trained as a representational artist, Zisla abandoned that form for Abstract Expressionism while in his 50s because he had become bored with representational art and came to think it lacked originality.

“One of my favorite aphorisms is, ‘Art is discovery through imagination,’” he said in a 2009 interview with *The Tribune*. “It’s got to be discovery. I’m not interested in virtuosity. I’m not interested in describing. It’s kind of peeling back layers that are psychological. It’s kind of Rorschachian.”

He favored aphorisms of his own and quotations from authors and other artists he respected, was a master of the sarcastic barb and the self-deprecatory remark, and held and dispensed well-considered opinions with forthrightness.

Zisla often said he believed in giving value to time and that it was important to work each day, which he continued to do until about two months before his death, when it became too difficult for him to stand at his easel.

“His artistic philosophy was paint them and put them away,” Langland said. “He just stacked them. Hundreds of them.”

But Zisla also made the decision decades ago not to pursue a marquee career in the larger professional art world of competitions and gallery shows.

“I think he was afraid, as most people are, of rejection,” Doreen said. “He also understood going out into the big world probably was not for him because he could not sell himself and do some of the things that are required. ... I think he understood how that worked and that he did not have the personality to do that.”

Zisla’s goals as an artist were serious, however, Allen said, and his style continued to evolve until he could no longer paint.

“I think his work was very profound,” he said. “It was not simple work. You had to live with it. For too many people, it was easy to dismiss, and I think because Harold was a wit and so jocular, his personality possibly obscured the importance of his work.”

Zisla’s life, however, included more than teaching and his art. He also was a voracious reader and daily golfer, and most of all, he had his family, beginning with his marriage to Doreen on Aug. 13, 1946.

“We laughed,” Doreen said. “We shared the same values. We enjoyed each other’s company, and we respected each other.”

“It is a true love story,” Hoffmann said Friday about the couple. “They are all for each other.”

She remembered one visit to their home in particular.

“He put on a record, and it was dance music, slow schmaltzy dance music,” Hoffmann said. “He just went over and swept Doreen onto her feet and they started dancing in the middle of the studio. I was finishing my wine and there they were dancing, and I thought, ‘These two folks are the luckiest people in the world.’ It was always remarkable how close they were.”

In 2008, IU South Bend established the Harold Zisla Scholarship Fund, which provides art students with money to purchase supplies, and in 2014, Zisla contributed to the book “Fine Arts of the South Bend Region: 1840-2000,” a project he spearheaded.

On Feb. 15, 2015, his daughter, Beverly Welber, launched haroldzisla.com.

One of its chief features, and one that Welber says brought her father pleasure, is titled “Me and My Zisla,” a section with more than 200 photos of people posed with paintings and drawings by Zisla that they own.

“He was very happy toward the end of his life with the website that came out and that people seemed to enjoy having his work around,” Doreen said. “That made him feel good that people responded in such a positive way.”