

'Provocative Lines' offers look into the serious and whimsical sides of artist Harold Zisla

Mar. 13th, 2021

[Send to Kindle](#)

Lots of people doodle during meetings.

But few do so with the talent that the late artist Harold Zisla possessed, something that a recently published book, "Provocative Lines," demonstrates.

His daughter, Beverly Welber, is certain faculty meetings at Indiana University South Bend, where he taught from 1966 to 1989, bored her father.

"As my sister-in-law says, he was dutiful and he showed up, but he wasn't interested in the minutiae," Welber says. "The title of the first self-portrait — 'Self-Portrait at the Chairmen's Meeting Listening to the Discussion on Telephones' — maybe his eyes glazed over. He wasn't interested in this."

Zisla didn't hide his habit of drawing on 6x4-inch pads during meetings.

“People at faculty meetings apparently knew about them,” Welber says, “and they would come up to him after the meeting to see what he had done.”

But until recently, his colleagues — and an unknown typist — may have been the only people who had seen the drawings contained in “Provocative Lines.”

“He had said to me, ‘After I die, you are going to find stuff in this studio that will surprise you,’” Welber says. “He may not have been thinking of these, but he was right, we did find those things and other things that did surprise us.”

A surprising discovery

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 his wife, Doreen, in 1952.

He worked at the Ball Band division of 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 IU South Bend, where he taught until he retired in 1989.

Thursday marks the fifth anniversary of Zisla’s death at the age of 90.

“He said to me, ‘I’m going to run out of life before I run out of ideas,’” Welber says. “I think that was true.”

He left behind thousands of sketches, drawings and paintings in his home studio, which Welber, her brother, Paul Zisla, and Paul's wife, Debbie Zisla, have been organizing, photographing and cataloging.

Already, for example, Paul and Debbie have moved 700 paintings and 100 sketch books to their home in Minnesota as part of the process.

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

"I had no clear sense of the productivity and how he managed that," Welber says. "He must have been incredibly energetic."

While helping Doreen organize Zisla's studio, Debbie discovered the drawings that form the core of the book at the back of a shelf loaded with other works on paper and miscellaneous objects.

"She was surprised and enjoyed them and then showed them to my mother and expected her to know about them," Welber says, "but she didn't."

They held more mysteries than that.

The initial stack of drawings that Debbie discovered were all matted, mounted on corrugated cardboard, shrink-wrapped and affixed with a typed label — he didn't type, so someone else, perhaps in the art department, must have created the labels for him.

None of this was in keeping with Zisla's usual post-production habits.

"He was not of a curatorial bent," Welber says. "He was producing work, but once he produced it, he wasn't fussy about what happened next."

The drawings, she says, must have been in the house for more than 30 years, since her father's retirement from IU South Bend in 1989.

"The discovery of them was a surprise," she says. "Then, in the context of all that work, why did he preserve these?"

The family might not ever know — Zisla left no clues, so they've speculated.

"We wondered, did he have in a mind a little exhibition?" Welber says. "Or did he do them and decided that this was fun and he would put them away?"

'Playing with artistic conventions'

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

The drawings in "Provocative Lines," created around the time of that transition, partially harken back to his representational roots even as they display the quirkiness of his sense of humor with their distorted details.

“They’re not just doodles,” Welber, an art historian, says. “You can see that he was a portrait painter for years. They have those elements of white space. He’s also playing with artistic conventions.”

That includes his use of spatial relationships.

“I think he’s playing with different kinds of composition in a simplified form,” Welber says. “Some of (the faces) float. Some are anchored with a neck. Some go edge to edge. I wouldn’t say he was just playing, but I think they’re pretty loose.”

Zisla also varied the thickness of his lines in these drawings and employed some decorative elements he usually didn’t use.

“There’s one called ‘Dear, I’ll Just Have Wine,’ and there’s a lot of crosshatching that’s not in a lot of his work,” Welber says. “But you can see that it’s Harold’s hand because there are curlicues.”

The faces in the drawings are recognizable as such, but they aren’t totally representational or even seamless. Instead, they have a Cubist element to them that, Welber says, Zisla thought was at the base of his work.

“Kind of a collection of separate parts,” she says about the faces’ overall effect in the drawings. “The nose and the eyes and lips are being looked at not as a continuous thing but looked at as separate parts. ... It’s about seeing things sequentially, because we don’t perceive things all at once.”

They also, Welber says, recall Zisla's early years as an industrial designer at Ball Band.

"These rely more on the principles of design," she says. "The absence of color, variety of shapes, maybe a crisper orientation that you would need in design versus something freer that you could have in a more traditional drawing, a limited number of elements to keep a design clear and uncluttered."

'The Supercilious Shoe Salesman'

In addition to four essays by friends and family members, the 5x7-inch book includes 55 titled drawings and 15 untitled ones. Most come from the stack Debbie discovered, but there also are some from a second batch Welber found, with penciled labels on the originals.

The titles do reveal aspects of Zisla's personality — 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.

"Who else could come up with 'The Supercilious Shoe Salesman'?" Welber says. "Now, my dad, when he was in grad school, he worked in a shoe store. Is this a reference to someone he worked with?"

Other titles reference physicists, musicians, playwrights, philosophers, teachers and himself.

Some are weighty: “As a Physicist, I Can Tell You the Energy Problem Will Not Be Solved Technologically Because It Is a Spiritual Problem and It Is to the Artist, the Novelist, the Musician That We Must Turn.” Others, however, are silly: “I Swear I Saw Her Put Her Finger in His Ear.”

“It’s a glimpse into the things that interested him outside of art,” Welber says. “I think it does reveal his creativity and his oddness in a way, and I doubt that other people could have come up with these types of captions.”

But the humorous nature of the titles also worried Welber — she doesn’t want someone unacquainted with her father’s work to see them and conclude they’re the sum of him and his art. For that reason, the last image in the book is a straightforward self-portrait, the only figure in the book with a torso, albeit without arms.

“We wanted to communicate there were these two aspects of him, the socially adroit, quick-witted, life-of-the-party Harold,” she says, “and then there was the serious artist Harold. ... These drawings do not tell the whole story, but they tell an interesting piece of it.”

Eventually, she and Paul hope an art scholar will take on the years-long project of writing a traditional study of their father’s work and life — complete with a biographical essay, critical essays and full-color photographs. IU has requested his papers for its archives, and Welber is preparing those for that purpose.

For now, though, “Provocative Lines” “presented itself” to the family.

“It was manageable, which looking at the whole body of his work is not manageable,” she says. “We thought it would have the potential for a more popular appeal than something more serious. ... This was easy. It’s a finite number of works, it was a vehicle to say something about him as a serious artist.”

Doreen, who survived a recent case of COVID-19, turns 95 on Wednesday, and that also factored into Welber and Paul Zisla’s decision to publish “Provocative Lines” now.

“When we started to think about this project, we really wanted it to be finished so that she could enjoy it,” Welber says. “A multi-year project would not allow for that. Based on the events of the last six months, I’m really glad she has this book in her hands.”







SELF-PORTRAIT AT THE CHAIRMEN'S MEETING
LISTENING TO THE DISCUSSION ON TELEPHONES

THE LOGICIAN
COMING AND GOING
BUT MOSTLY GOING



THE MAÎTRE D'
EXPECTING



THE MATHEMATICIAN
WHO SAID A DIRTY
WORD: ALGORITHM



THE OLD ENGLISH
ACTOR WATCHING A
LOVE SCENE DONE
À LA "METHOD"



THE FUTILITY
OF DEBATE



THE PINE-TREE
MAN HEARING A
CHAIN SAW





Drawings by Harold Zisla. Available for \$20 at haroldzisla.com.