

Harold Zisla's works on IU campuses preserve his legacy

Mar. 25th, 2018

In any workplace, meetings can become a chore. But faculty members in the fine arts department at Indiana University South Bend from 1966 to 1989 had something to look forward to after sitting through a meeting.

Harold Zisla, a professor and eventually chairman of the department, would draw caricatures, and at the end, others wanted to look at what he came up with. (One piece, for example, has the title “Self Portrait at the Chairman’s Meeting Listening to the Discussion on Telephones.”)

Zisla, who died in 2016 at age 90, was well known for his sense of humor, but his art was always a serious endeavor. His family is still working to show that side of him to the world.

“He was very funny and very outrageous,” his daughter, Beverly Zisla Welber, said. “Some people didn’t understand how serious he was in terms of his art.”

Welber and her brother, Paul Zisla, have worked to preserve and chronicle the life and works of the artist. As part of those efforts, paintings by their father now hang at IU Bloomington, IU Southeast

in New Albany, Ind., IUPUI in Indianapolis and IU Kokomo. The acquisition adds to the eight works he'd already loaned to IU South Bend, which the family now plans to donate to his home campus.

Sherry Rouse, curator of campus art for Indiana University, worked with the family to place the works on the various campuses. "It's one of my great pleasures to support the work of our professors and to show them around the state," she said.

Rouse said she enjoys Zisla's work and welcomed the family's idea to display it beyond the campus where he spent most of his career. Spreading the works across the various IU campuses also helps reaffirm Zisla's dedication to teaching, Welber said.

"He was a very committed teacher, and he was certainly a very loved teacher," she said, and he took his role as educator and mentor very seriously. He taught from a place of affection, Welber said, with the capacity to extract something positive from any student's work and give him or her something to build on. "That's a real gift."

Students returned that affection, often in fun and humorous ways. One day in 1980, Zisla walked into a design class and found all of the students wearing sweatshirts with a self-caricature he'd doodled. "If you didn't have real affection back, you wouldn't do that," Welber said.

Zisla's volume of work is evidence that, beyond his work in the classroom, his own art continued nonstop. At his home in South Bend, where his wife, Doreen, still lives, "every wall is covered with

paintings,” Welber said. Add about 600 paintings her brother recently moved from the attic into storage, and the many works given to individuals and institutions, and there’s no way to question how serious he was about exploring his own mind to create art.

In his late 80s, Zisla told his daughter, “I will run out of life before I run out of ideas.” His art speaks for many of those ideas, as he was not fond of talking about his work.

“Statements about oneself or one’s work always have the taint of untranslatability and too often are self-serving,” Zisla wrote in a 1985 artist’s statement. “There are probably too many paintings, drawings and words in the world already. I have enough concern about having added to the first two without adding more to the third.”

Welber, who’s now retired and has worked as an art historian, never tires of finding more of his works and putting them out in the world.

“There’s so much, and people should have it and people should enjoy it,” she said.

It’s been a big job to catalog Zisla’s works, but the family’s work curating collections, donating works and creating an informational website has chronicled the journey of his artistic and intellectual mind.

“Because he wasn’t really striving for recognition, he focused on a kind of personal exploration and seeing where the art took him over a period of many years,” Welber said.

In a short video clip at haroldzisla.com in which the artist discusses his process for abstract works, Zisla said the following:

“Among the things that I hold to be very important for any truly serious producing image maker is that there has to be a commitment that involves a great deal of mileage.” He spoke these words surrounded by a room filled with his paintings. The words are now online next to photo galleries of even more works, including the feature “My Zisla and Me,” in which friends and admirers from around the world pose next to their Zisla paintings.

Although Zisla reached his final mileage two years ago, as his works are uncovered, studied and hung for public viewing — and as his former students continue their own explorations into art and pass it on to the next generation — his lifetime commitment endures.





- **“Actress, Acting?”**

Paul W. Ogle Cultural and Community Center, IU Southeast

4201 Grand Line Road, New Albany, Ind.

- **“Dennis Drive Renaissance”**

Van Nuys Medical Science Building, IUPUI

635 Barnhill Drive, Indianapolis

- **“Mark Twain, Marked”/“Who Said You Couldn’t Use Yellow?”**

Cyberinfrastructure Building, IU Bloomington

2709 E. 10th St., Bloomington, Ind.

- **“Monet Squinting”**

Cultural Arts Gallery, Campus Center, IUPUI

420 University Blvd., Indianapolis

- **“The Scientist Knowing That It’s Only Temporary”**

Library, IU Kokomo

2500 S. Washington St., Kokomo

- **“Wisped Shapes”**

DeVault Alumni Center, IU Bloomington

1000 E. 17th St., Bloomington, Ind.