

NEWS

He's leaving his imprint

SARAH L. STEWART Sun staff writer

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Printmaker Ken Kerslake has experimented with a broad spectrum of techniques. His basic technique, however, is etching, a type of intaglio printing that dates to the 15th century. The composition, above took months to complete.

Old Army barracks housed the University of Florida art department when Ken Kerslake joined the faculty in 1958. A nearby grove of orange trees sent an overpowering aroma of blossoms wafting in the building, which had no air conditioning.

Amenities weren't the only thing the art department, now the School of Art and Art History, lacked - it also didn't have a printmaking program. At the time, the University of Miami was the only in Florida where students could learn the centuries-old crafts of intaglio, lithography and relief, and the emergent screen printing.

"It was pretty primitive," Kerslake says.

Just a year out of the University of Illinois, Kerslake arrived in Gainesville to establish UF's printmaking program. Nearly 50 years since, the program has churned out numerous successful graduates and merged traditional methods with modern computer technology; in the same span, 76-year-old Kerslake has left an imprint of his own on the Gainesville artistic community and beyond. He's received national accolades, added his work to collections from Washington, D.C.'s National Gallery of Art and the Library of Congress to Gainesville's Harn Museum of Art and has a current exhibit at Oak Hall School's new Cofrin Art Gallery.

"He's certainly one of the leading printmakers in the Southeast United States," says Michael Kemp, a Micanopy printmaker and painter and former student of Kerslake's. "He's always been at the leading edge of printmaking stylistically and technically."

In recent years, Kerslake's innovation has meant teaching himself how to use Photoshop and incorporate the computer into his work, a technological enhancement that has helped him continue working despite his ongoing battle with cancer.

"I'm in the studio as much as I can be," he says. "This illness doesn't help."

Though surgeons have told Kerslake there's nothing more they can do, he's turned to alternative medicine such as acupuncture for relief. His art, he says, is also a kind of therapy.

"I suppose it always was," he says. "I never thought of it that way."

His labor

In a half-century of printmaking, Kerslake has experimented with a broad spectrum of techniques. His basic technique, however, is etching, a type of intaglio printing that dates to the 15th century.

The technique requires a metal plate covered with a waxy substance, into which the artist etches a design. The plate is then dipped in acid, which eats away at the metal where the etching has occurred, providing a depression for ink to reside in once the wax has been removed and ink applied to the plate. When rolled through a printing press, the ink transfers to paper, with colors layered onto the print one plate at a time. The process produces a unique piece of artwork each time the plate is rolled.

"You have to be perseverant and you have to be very patient," Kerslake says. "It's not so difficult, it just takes a long time to do."

Decades of work fill the split-level Gainesville home Kerslake shares with his wife, Sally. In a spare bedroom lay dozens of prints on crisp artist's paper, stacked like bills might be in another home. Some, like a colorful composition of a patio chair and potted plant, took months to complete. The living room walls showcase large prints, paintings and examples of his latest experiment, frames of transparent images layered within plates of Plexiglas.

"My work kept evolving over time," he says.

Kerslake, who grew up just north of New York and would venture to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with his parents and on school trips, got his artistic start as a painter and a

musician. But after transferring to the University of Illinois, he met professor Lee Chesney, who changed his direction.

"It really wasn't the medium that attracted me, it was the teacher," he says. "I sort of fell in love with the medium."

His legacy

In 38 years of teaching, Kerslake had the opportunity to have the same effect on his own students.

Former student Michael Kemp says Kerslake is the most supportive teacher he's ever had.

"He just knows so much about all the resources, styles, influences," Kemp says. "I would say that he's one of the wonderful people in the world."

Marcia Isaacson, current director of the School of Art and Art History, says Kerslake was the first person she met when she walked in the doors for a job interview at the school in 1973.

"He really wants to see students do well," Isaacson says.

Kerslake's legacy extends beyond the students he taught. As 1990 to 1992 president of the Southern Graphics Council, a well-regarded printmaking organization, Kerslake came in contact with colleagues from around the country and the world.

"He knows everyone and everyone knows him," Kemp says. He recalls visiting Kerslake when he was hospitalized during the SGC's annual convention. Kemp estimates there were 100 letters in Kerslake's room, all written on napkins from the convention.

Despite his impact on the outside world, Isaacson emphasizes the value Kerslake places on personal relationships, perhaps the greatest example of which is his wife and two grown children. The couple, who celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in August, met at the University of Illinois and decided to get married the day after their first date.

"She's still my inspiration," Kerslake says. "There's many a print that would not have been made if she hadn't been by my side."

Over the years, Sally has helped her husband in the studio, and now he's teaching her how to use the computer.

"We raised two children together and raised Ken's art together," Sally says. "Every day is precious."

Sarah Stewart can be reached at 338-3103 or Sarah.Stewart@gvillesun.com.

- **Occupation:** Kerslake founded UF's printmaking program in the School of Art and Art History and has received national attention for his artwork, which is part of the collections at such museums as the National Gallery of Art and the Harn Museum of Art.
- **Personal:** married 50 years to wife, Sally; two children; three grandchildren and two step-grandchildren
- **Current exhibit:** His work is on display through Nov. 17 at the Oak Hall School's new Cofrin Art Gallery, 332-3609.

ABOUT THE ARTIST