

COAST LIFE

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The ARTIST & The ROCKET MAN

STORY AND PHOTO BY AMY BARTLETT
Siuslaw News

Leroy Krzycki can barely contain his excitement when he talks about work, either his or that of his late wife, impressionist artist Katheryn Davis.

"I couldn't wait to get to work. Kate was the same way," he said with a gaze that can bore through the walls of the idyllic home the couple shared on Sutton Lake, where each window frames a tranquil glimpse of lake and meadow.

It is difficult to imagine his mind ever at rest, even in sleep.

This past year was spent in typical Krzycki fashion. During 80-hour work weeks that included only short snatches of rest, the 75-year-old compiled a collection of 250 of Katheryn's paintings and sketches from an estimated 2,000 works.

The end result is "The Art of Katheryn Davis." Beautiful in execution and scope, the book pulls readers into the artist's process and describes the scenes and characters that were her inspiration.

Creating the book was a mission for Krzycki, driven by a remark never forgotten. The couple had been moving languidly over the lake in a paddleboat.

"She liked to quietly observe the beauty and watch the swallows," he said.

Krzycki broke the silence to tell her that clients had contacted him about purchasing prints of an original work. Although she often received requests for prints, she never allowed it.

"Kate wouldn't hear of that," he said. "She wanted to sell only originals. But this time she said, 'Nope I'm not going to sell prints, but when I'm gone I want my paintings to be seen.'"

After her death he wanted to respect her wishes and show her work. What better way, he reasoned, than through a book?

With Katheryn's paintings scattered throughout the world in private and commercial collections, and no available prints, it would seem an insurmountable task. That is, if you are not Leroy Krzycki.

Krzycki was born in the later years of the Great Depression on a farm near Columbus, Neb. It was a hardscrabble existence, but one that, ironically, prepared him to become a rocket engineer.

Some of Leroy's favorite memories are attending a one-room schoolhouse with his sister Beverly and the joy of reading any book he wanted; trips to town, where he would head to the stacks of old "Popular Mechanics" or just spending time hanging out at the hardware store.

"There were big bins of nuts and bolts and I would just go along and dip my hands in and feel the stuff," he said.

When he was about 12 years old he began earning money in the summer baling straw and hay for farmers 20 miles away.

To get to the jobs, he would drive an ancient John Deere tractor. He would ask his father, "What do I do if it breaks down?" His father's reply was "Fix it!"

Although he had only a fifth-grade education, Krzycki's father possessed an innate ability to "visualize things" and would convert old horse-drawn equipment to machines, just by looking at the pieces on the shop floor.

"He didn't have plans ... but he'd lay a piece of metal down from a chassis of an automobile then he'd place a cross piece and show where he had to cut it. Then he would arc weld it and make a new machine to go on the tractor."

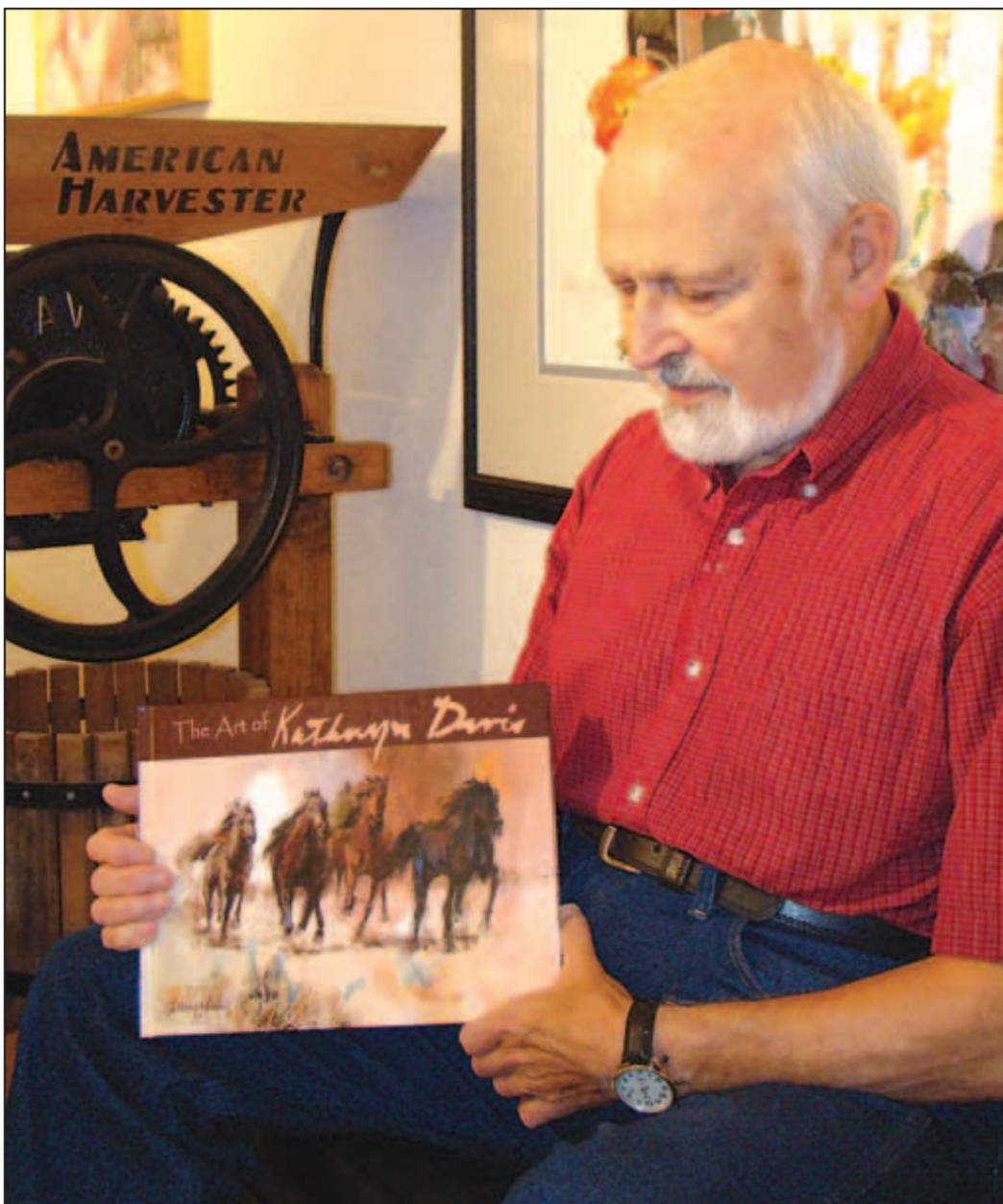
Whether nature or nurture, the gift of visualization and creation was passed from father to son.

Science fiction was another big love, and it sparked an imagination backed by a natural skill.

Testing at school revealed Leroy could perhaps go beyond the farm. He started taking subjects he grew to love, math, physics and chemistry.

He worked in the shops at school and at home experimenting, but not to improve farm equipment. It was something different.

"When I was a sophomore in high school I



Leroy Krzycki holds his completed book in the Quiet Waters gallery, flanked by a piece of equipment from his family's farm in Nebraska and one of his wife's paintings.

built a bi-propellant liquid fuel rocket engine. I built the test stand and the blast wall. It operated at 350 to 500 pounds per square inch with a flame 20 feet long out the back. I didn't get help from anyone," he said.

It was 1953, way before the Apollo program. He won second-place in a national science contest and was awarded \$75. Big shots came out from Omaha to Columbus and he received the award in a high school assembly.

Krzycki attended the University of Nebraska, earned bachelor's and master's degrees in mechanical engineering, and started working at

the Naval Ordnance Test Station, which became the Naval Weapons Center in China Lake, the Navy's largest research and development facility in the country.

"That was a great place. They gave you enough rope to let you hang yourself. It was just when Russia had put Sputnik up and we thought we were behind. Anything you could think of, you could get the funding to do. Real blue-sky stuff. I worked on a lot of interesting projects, some of them worked and most of them didn't."

In 1966, Krzycki self-published a book that caused a stir, "How to Design, Build and Test

Small Liquid-Fuel Rocket Engines."

"That was during the Cold War. The Russians ordered 12 copies and about a week after that I got an order for nine copies from an office in Virginia. Overall, in two printings it sold 4,000 copies."

The book was also used at MIT.

Krzycki found out later the "office in Virginia" belonged to the CIA.

He spent 32 years at the Naval Weapons Center and met people such as German rocket scientist and aerospace engineer Wernher von Braun and Edward Teller, theoretical physicist and early member of the Manhattan Project.

He headed up projects in which he could visualize, create and then take the finished product to NASA for testing. He was the last civilian aboard the top of Apollo 17, the final moon-landing vehicle.

"I couldn't wait to get to work in the morning and I worked until 7, 8 o'clock at night. I worked the weekends. But it was just more fun than going on vacation," he said.

Upstairs in Krzycki's home is a room converted into an office. The walls are covered with awards, clippings, certificates and photographs. There are letters from Washington, D.C., and plaques for his work on the Tomahawk Cruise Missile.

"This is my 'I love me,' wall," he said with a grin.

In semi-retirement he moved to Oregon and the North Fork with his wife, Bette, who later died of cancer after 22 years of marriage.

Two years later, he was invited to dinner at the home of John and Kely LaRocco. Kely's mother, Katheryn, happened to be there with a new beau.

It was the new boyfriend's first and last day spent with Katheryn. She and Krzycki were married six weeks later.

"A lot of people said that it would last just a little while," he said, "but it worked out really, really great."

The marriage lasted 22 years before her death on Sept. 14, 2009, at age 78, following a brief, devastating battle with cancer.

They joked about their differences. He was the organizer, whose tools in his workshop were lined up like soldiers in formation. She was the messy artist, who after cleaning her studio, would complain she couldn't find a thing.

What they both shared was passion for their work. When they married in 1987, Katheryn was given the freedom to paint as Krzycki had been given his freedom at the weapons center.

During those years of painting in her studio, traveling and conducting workshops, Krzycki remained the engineer to her artist.

When he had worked on his projects in the past, he took photos at each step in the process. That way, in addition to his notes, he was able to create an accurate, final report. He did the same when it came to his life and Katheryn's work.

Photographs of the camera-shy Katheryn were archived. He kept meticulous records of each painting sold and where it was located.

When he took on the project of her book, he had what few people would have had under the same circumstances: a perfect trail to follow.

He enlisted the help of friends and his late wife's five children.

A published author of not only his book, but numerous peer-reviewed articles, Krzycki had to do things right.

"I really wanted the book to be accurate," he said.

"It was a matter of identifying early paintings. The kids were my corporate memory; they would figure out the year something was painted, 'Tina was about 4 years old,' someone would say, so that was about that year."

Expert Charles Draper converted old, poor quality photographs into high-resolution digital files. Debbie Golob and Susan Canavaro provided technical expertise and guidance.

After a year of non-stop work, he kept the promise he made to himself. A meld of an artist's heart and daring and an engineer's dedication to detail, the neatly stacked books await their release from Krzycki's immaculate shop.

"Now everyone has the opportunity to see her genius," he said.

REVIEW — 'The Art of Katheryn Davis'

BY THERESA BAER
Siuslaw News

Katheryn Davis worked her entire life as an artist, finding success early in her career, but never stopping the study of art or pushing herself and her craft.

"Art is a lifelong study," she once said, "and I am an eternal student."

She painted in Florence for decades, creating some 2,000 works over her lifetime (Katheryn died of cancer in 2009), including portraits, landscapes, still life, abstracts and more. She painted primarily in watercolors, developing a distinctive style that earned many awards in the art world and quick recognition by her followers.

Now the essence of Katheryn and more than 200 of her painting have been collected and published in "The Art of Katheryn Davis."

The high-quality 11-1/4-

inch by 8-3/4-inch hard-cover book, approximately 250 pages, was carefully assembled by Leroy Krzycki, Katheryn's husband, with the help of her five children, and notably, photographer Charles Draper.

It could be called a "coffee table book" because of its size and vividly colored pages. But for the people of Florence it is in some ways a history of our area, with additional excursions into the life of the artist and the geography she covered.

She usually painted from live models and on location, so Florence readers will especially appreciate many familiar faces and places rendered through Katheryn's unique impressionistic strokes. Her florals, scenes of the ocean, lakes, marinas, our bridge, and woods capture what we love about this area.

Still, the compilation of this artist's life's work goes

much further than our town.

The book contains about 17 chapters that categorize paintings and sketches into such varied subjects as horses, florals, children and farms, then it takes us along on her travels abroad and to a second home in Maine.

Katheryn created a number of series, two of which are carefully reproduced in the book: one of group portraits, the Human Tapestry Series; one an amazing organic undertaking she titled "Seven Days of Creation," seven works painted over seven years.

Author and husband Krzycki included details of each painting, insights into Katheryn's life, personality and process and some historical notes on the art work.

"The Art of Katheryn Davis," by Leroy Krzycki, Quiet Waters Publishing, Florence. \$99.99 plus shipping and handling.