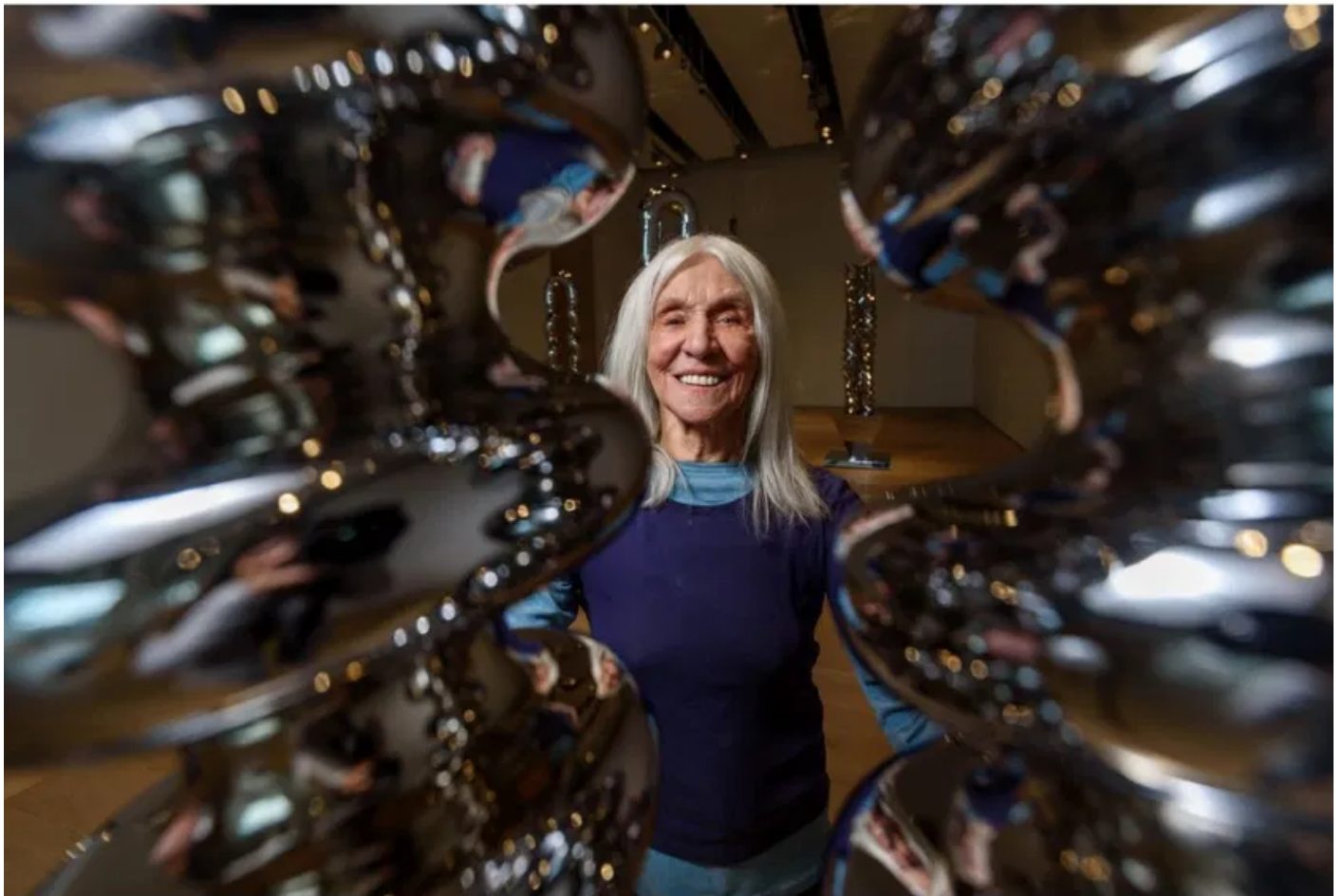


Motion art: Esker Foundation exhibit celebrates Katie Ohe's 60-year career

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Sculptor Katie Ohe poses for a photo with her sculptors ahead of her exhibition at Esker Foundation on Thursday, January 23, 2020. Azin Ghaffari/Postmedia *AZIN GHAFFARI / AZIN GHAFFARI/POSTMEDIA*

More than 40 years ago, Calgary artist Katie Ohe submitted a proposal for a public commission in the Gulf Canada Building.

It was to be a kinetic sculpture suspended within a backdrop of reflective material. Four aluminum bars would form branches that could be spun into motion by the viewer, creating a spiral pattern that would be reflected in the backdrop to give the impression of infinity and change.

The proposal was ultimately turned down. But Ohe couldn't shake the idea. So she went ahead with it anyway.

"Why did I do it?" she asks, somewhat incredulously, in an interview with Postmedia earlier this week. "Because it intrigued me. I could visualize it and it made sense."

The installation, titled Skyblock, made its public debut at the Alberta College of Art and Design (now the Alberta University of Art) shortly after Ohe created it back in 1981. It was the only time the piece was ever exhibited. After that it was stored at the rural home near Springbank that Ohe shares with her husband, artist Harry Kiyooka.

That's where it has sat until now.

Skyblock is one of dozens of beautiful and meticulously engineered pieces on display at the Esker Foundation in Inglewood, which is presenting the first major retrospective of the 83-year-old Calgary artist's work in more than 20 years. A pioneer of abstract and kinetic sculpture, Ohe has been a fixture of the local arts scene for six decades as an artist, teacher and mentor.

It's likely that a number of Calgarians are already familiar with her work, even if they don't realize it. Her interactive, large-scale kinetic sculpture, Garden of Learning, sits outside the administration building at the University of Calgary. The abstract Nimmons Cairn in Bankview's Nimmons Park commemorates the family of settlers who worked the land in the 19th century. The playful Cracked Pot Foundations, inspired by Ohe accidentally destroying a clay pot in a kiln as a young artist, sits in Prince's Island Park. Other works are held in private collections or in corporate lobbies throughout the city.

But the Esker Foundation exhibit is likely the largest and most comprehensive collection of Ohe sculptures ever displayed at one time, offering a retrospective that even the artist found eye-opening.

"Every piece leads to the next," says Ohe. "They are all interconnected imaginatively and thoughtfully and experientially."

The eponymous exhibition, which runs until May 3, traces the artist's evolution from traditional figurative sculpture to more abstract work and her eventual arrival at kinetic sculptures that invite touch and participation from the viewer.

At 16, Ohe left her family farm near Peers in west-central Alberta to study at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art (which later became the Alberta College of Art and Design and is now the Alberta University of the Arts). But she traces her fascination with "moving space and form" back to an experiment involving a potato that her father performed when she was a young child.

"He peeled the potato and placed the spiral of the peeling on a needle on top of the peeled potato and then put the peeled potato on the stove," she says. "Soon, the steam would rise from the wet potato and the spiral balanced on the needle would rotate. I've never forgotten that experience. I could have been three or four years old. That could be a former stimulant that would manifest itself in my sculpture later."



Katie Ohe in the studio, 2019. Courtesy of AvidEye Productions. *CALGARY*

When Ohe joined the institute in the early 1950s there was no sculpture department and she had intended to study drawing and painting like most people attending the school. But at the encouragement of one of her instructors, pioneering abstract painter Marion Nicoll, she began studying sculpture after discovering she “could visualize my idea as a sculpture sooner than a painting of a drawing.” Ohe became one of the first Alberta artists to make abstract sculptures. She would eventually study in Montreal, New York, Verona and, later, Japan. By the 1970s, she was experimenting with kinetic sculptures that encouraged interaction with the public. The Esker Foundation exhibit will be a rare chance for viewers to touch, spin and (gently) play with art work.

Ohe says the idea of creating work a viewer could physically interact with the work may date back to her time in New York. She remembers reaching out to a sculpture once and being told quickly and in uncertain terms that there was “no touching” allowed.

“I’ve never forgotten that,” she says with a laugh. “I think, for me, it’s important for the surface to seduce the viewer to touch, and the touch to stimulate the movement, for the viewer to fully comprehend that experience of space and form.”

The sculptures’ motion, while fluid and graceful, gives many of the pieces a certain playfulness. Monsoon is a series of roundish sculptures made of polished welded steel and automobile paint that can be spun in mesmerizing, meditative patterns. Chuckles, which Ohe created in 2015, are bell-shaped sculptures made of lacquered stainless steel and springs, which she rescued from a scrapyard, that can be pressed down on to bounce along the floor. One of Ohe’s most famous creations on display is 1975’s Zipper, a towering chrome and stainless steel sculpture that usually sits in the University of Calgary’s science theatres and is often spun by students for good luck before exams. The exhibit’s curators waited until after December exams were over to take the piece, but there was still some social-media consternation from students about it being taken away.

“She says she wants the works to cause you to touch them before you think you really shouldn’t,” says Shauna Thompson of the Esker Foundation, who co-curated the exhibit with Naomi Potter and Elizabeth Diggon. “You know, turn off the gallery etiquette and just go for it.”

Zipper is part of a roomful of pieces that has been dubbed “the chrome forest” at the Esker Foundation. Many are on loan from corporations or organizations that have them displayed in a lobby. When the shiny sculptures are all engaged at once, the room gives off playful if slightly surreal vibe. The machining is so precise, there is no grinding or catching in the fluid movement despite some of the sculptures being more than 45 years old.

“A lot of the work generally lives in lobbies,” Potter says. “In some sense, we’ve released the work and what is really lovely is that all of this work has never been in the same room together.”

But the collection spans her whole career. Six Figures is a steel and copper figurative sculpture from the University of Calgary collection dates back to 1961. Doodle Clusters is a colourful piece made with intricately tangled garden hoses filled with stainless steel that Ohe finished a few weeks ago.

Potter says she hopes Esker’s reputation and reach help give Ohe’s work the national exposure it deserves. While the artist is well-known in her home province, she has been somewhat overlooked in the rest of the country. Some of that may be due to her focus on teaching over the years. Ohe has taught at the University of Calgary and the Banff Centre, but spent more than 40 years as a sculpture instructor at Alberta College of Art and Design. Some of it may have come down to gender, Potter says.

“What we’re seeing right now is almost a revision in art history across the globe, in which women that had very strong practices for entire careers are only now having solo shows, and often only after they are dead,” she says. “There’s an interesting moment in art history where there are constantly women coming up that you had no idea (about). I think (Ohe) is of that generation. She is someone who was overlooked. This work could sit in a room with any of the (work from) major minimalist, modernist male sculptors and hold their own. They would probably blow them away.”

Katie Ohe will be at the Esker Foundation until May 3.

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