

Sculpture in motion: Pioneering Alberta sculptor Katie Ohe gets her due at Calgary's Esker Foundation

More than 100 works featured in the largest and most comprehensive solo exhibit of the octogenarian artist's career.

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Zipper, 1975, might be Katie Ohe's best-known work. It's a feat of engineering that shimmers and shines, and visitors are encouraged to interact with it and other works like it at the exhibit.

ELYSE BOUVIER/COURTESY OF ESKER FOUNDATION

Meant to be moved, Katie Ohe's kinetic sculptures are also tremendously moving. They are beautiful and playful feats of imagination and engineering that provoke wonder and contemplation – and often a good laugh.

In a long overdue retrospective, Ohe's sculptures are being shown together with many works from her archive at Calgary's Esker Foundation. The largest and most comprehensive solo show of Ohe's career, "Katie Ohe" features more than 100 works from early small-scale works made in the early 1960s when she was experimenting with form and material, to a large colourful installation, Doodle Clusters, 2019, created with segments of garden hose (and steel, Bondo and automotive paint). In this most recent sculpture, each circular segment – or doodle – is designed to rock in conjunction with the other doodles. "Everything is circular," Ohe says. "Every end is a new beginning."



A visitor interacts with Monsoon.

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Ohe, who turns 84 in February, is a pioneering Albertan sculptor who began making abstract sculptures in the 1960s. Born in Peers, Alta., in 1937, she began her formal arts education in the 1950s at what is now the Alberta University of the Arts, then trained in Montreal, New York and Verona, Italy. She taught for 48 years at what is now AUArts, where she is now professor emeritus. In 2019, she was invested in the Alberta Order of Excellence.

“She has influenced multiple generations of artists,” says Naomi Potter, the Esker’s director/curator. “When I first got to Alberta eight years ago, I kept hearing Katie Ohe’s name over and over again and it was really just like people were in awe of her. She just has this kind of aura that I think is the way she taught, how influential she was, how much of a role model she was, for particularly women.”



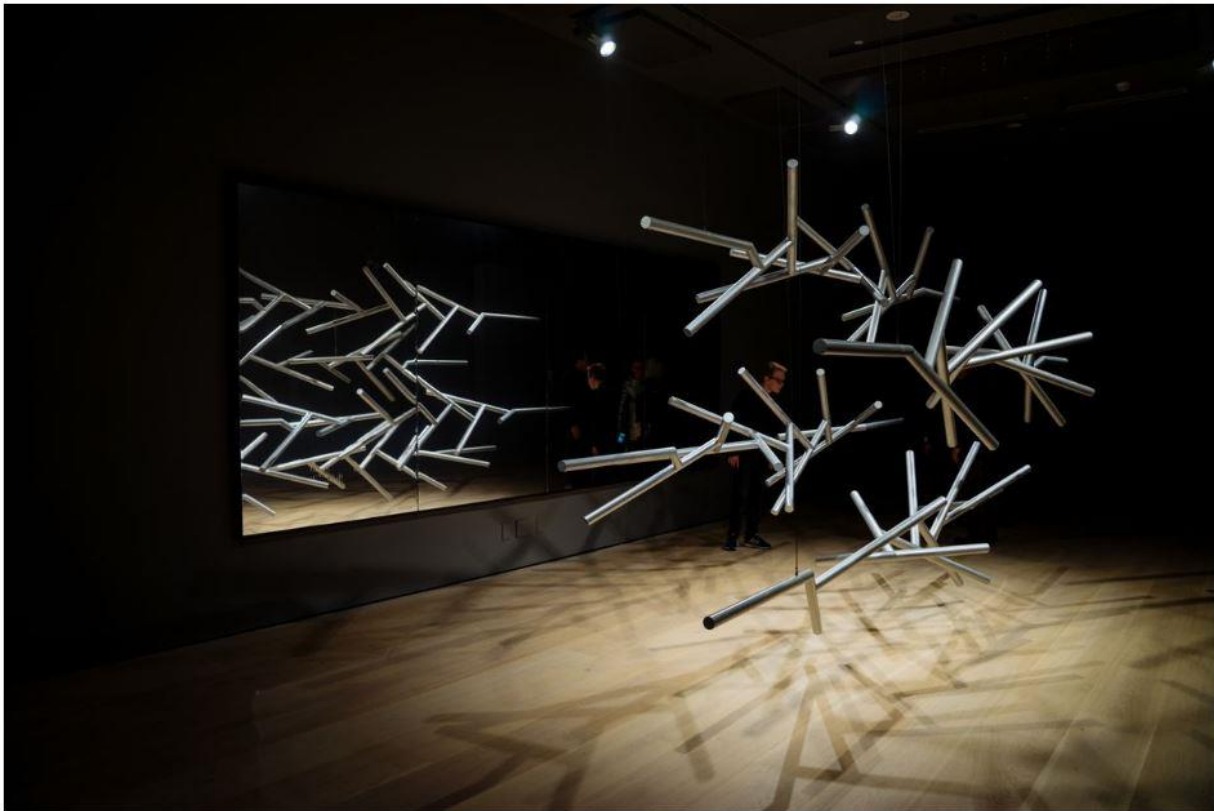
Venetian Puddle invites touch.

ELYSE BOUVIER/COURTESY OF ESKER FOUNDATION

I couldn't help but think of this when I encountered and became immediately enraptured with one of the earliest works in the show, *Riders*, 1961 – also known as *Six Figures*. Perhaps this piece is meant to represent a family, but as Potter spoke about Ohe's influence, all I could think about was younger artists being lifted onto the shoulders of more established mentors.

This part of the exhibition, featuring early work, also includes a number of maquettes for public art competitions and commissions. One of them was submitted twice for different competitions, but did not win. Ohe made it anyway.

The result, *Sky Block*, 1981-82, is installed around the corner in a gallery of its own, after spending nearly the past 40 years in storage. It is exhibited against a mirrored wall; the original commission had a waterfall component and Ohe had always imagined it hanging in a room that has reflecting surfaces. “So we’ve actually made that happen for her,” Potter says. Give it a push and watch – and listen to it – twirl and sway.



Sky Block, 1981-82, is installed in a gallery of its own after spending almost 40 years in storage. It is exhibited against a mirrored wall, and you can give it a push to see it twirl and sway.

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Yes, give it a push. Many of the works in this show are meant to be touched (some are not; the signs will advise you). Ohe often says her sculptures are designed to induce or provoke touch before you think that you really shouldn't. Still, it feels counterintuitive to not just touch, but to activate these works. But you must.

Perhaps Ohe's best known work is *Zipper*, 1975. Usually installed at the University of Calgary, it is a bold, shiny feat of engineering that shimmies and shimmers. It's like water flowing. Or dancing. It took Ohe some three years to figure out how to make *Zipper* do what it does. This work is one of six welded steel and chrome works installed together that are impressive even when they're not moving, breathtakingly delightful when they are.

In another gallery, welded steel and chrome kinetic sculptures from the 1970s sit closer to the ground. But make sure you look up: When you spin them, they throw mesmerizing patches of light onto the gallery walls. Especially in the case of *Horizontal Loops*, 1973; it's almost like a movie.

The whimsy travels to the titles of her works – names such as *Mrs. Squat Lady* and *Chuckles* (because it will make you laugh), the latter created with springs Ohe found at a scrapyard.



Chuckles was created with springs found at a scrapyards. Ohe says her sculptures are designed to induce or provoke touch, before you even think that you shouldn't.

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The first wall you encounter is the Offerings series, a kind of autobiography: 24 works that represent significant events or people in Ohe's life. Patanjali, 1998, is an abstracted steel snake, an ode to her time in India. Brother Pear, 1997, was made in memory of her beloved brother-in-law Roy Kiyooka, an artist who died in 1994. Janet's Crown, 1999, is a tribute to her friend, the painter Janet Mitchell, who died in 1989.

"It's a big retrospective of my work. So for me it was like seeing, looking backwards," says Ohe, who was moved by the thoughtfulness and thoroughness of the exhibition, co-curated by Potter, Shauna Thompson and Elizabeth Diggon. "I'm very, very grateful to that team. They turned over every stone."

The airy Esker is an excellent fit for Ohe's sculptures, which are well known in Alberta. But her work demands to be recognized more widely.

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Ohe's work is part of another venture nearby. She and her husband Harry Kiyooka, who is also an artist, established the Kiyooka Ohe Arts Centre in Springbank, just outside Calgary, and are developing a large sculpture park with working studios on 20 acres of land they have donated. It is home to more than 100 works which visitors can see in warmer months.

But there are more than three months to visit this unmissable exhibition at the Esker. Go in, go play. Give it a whirl.

Katie Ohe is at the Esker Foundation until May 3. <https://eskerfoundation.com/exhibition/katie-ohe/>

A walking tour of KOAC with Katie Ohe is scheduled for May 2. <https://www.koartscentre.org/>