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Mar 23, 2008

Art show seeks to raise money for land conservancies

Fittingly, a reception and art show to honor the late artist Clara 'Kitty' Couch and raise money for local land conservancies - Honoring the Earth Series - will be held at Blue Spiral 1 Gallery in Asheville April 1 through May 11.

By [Lindsay Lancaster](#)

Spirals are a recurring theme in regionally-recognized ceramicist Clara "Kitty" Couch's art work.

"She was very much into spirals and the spiraling of the Earth," says her daughter, Katie Couch Breckenheimer. "It's going around and around. ... Everything is cyclical."

Fittingly, a reception and art show to honor the late artist and raise money for local land conservancies - Honoring the Earth Series - will be held at Blue Spiral 1 Gallery in Asheville April 1 through May 11. In good timing with April's Earth Day, Breckenheimer put her and her mother's shared passion for the environment to work for the cause.

"I wanted to honor her and tie it into my career - which is working with the environment," says Breckenheimer, an environmental activist.

The reception will include a multimedia presentation, poetry readings by Kitty's colleague and a short film screening. The event will be held at 4:30 p.m. Friday, April 4, at Asheville's Fine Arts Theatre on Biltmore Avenue. Following the reception, at 6 p.m. guests can move next door to the Blue Spiral 1 Gallery to view "Honoring the Earth Series," where 50 of Kitty's artists/friends have contributed art to be sold at retail value to benefit the Carolina Mountains Land Conservancy and the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy.

Kitty died in a car accident in Vietnam in 2004. She was 82 years old. She left her final body of artwork titled the "Earth Series" to her four daughters. The collection includes large ceramic, organic vessels in rich earth tones inspired by natural forms. One of the works from the series will be featured in the show as a silent auction item, which can only be bid upon online from April 1 through 21 on the project's Web site, www.honoringtheearthseries.com. The highest bidder will be announced on Earth Day, April 22. Several of the other pieces in the collection will be displayed, but will not be sold.

Pulling up to Breckenheimer's passive-solar Saluda home, her cause is immediately apparent. The tag on her gas-efficient blue Toyota Prius reads "Clean Car."

Just as water nourishes a plant, Kitty's appreciation for nature cultivated Breckenheimer's love for the Earth and the environment.

"She loved nature - my mom was my Girl Scout leader," Breckenheimer says. "They (her parents) really loved the land and loved the mountains." That love is still evident to those around her.

"She was a very soulful woman, and interested in more than objects, but in the lives that they come out of. And she was a congenital environmentalist," says Kitty's friend, teacher and colleague Paulus Berensohn, who will be reading poetry at the event.

After Kitty's death, her daughters worked with the Southern Appalachian Highlands Land Conservancy to create a post-mortum conservation easement on her 48-acre Burnsville home. Surrounded by nature, this is where she did most of her artwork - in a studio overlooking a pond.

"It's just gorgeous, pristine mountain land," Breckenheimer says. "Now her land is protected in perpetuity. It will never be developed."

The show will raise funds to prevent other properties from being developed.

"I have been dreaming for a few years about honoring my mother in this way, so it is truly a thrill to make it happen. Combining the show with protecting land in our precious mountains means so much to me," Breckenheimer says.

Kitty, who was born in Georgia, graduated from Agnes Scott College (Decatur, Ga.) with a biology degree. During her 40s, exposure to art during a trip to Europe inspired her to learn about clay. She earned an art degree at Sacred Heart College in Belmont before working to complete her graduate degree at the New York School of Ceramic Art at Alfred University in Alfred, N.Y. She then taught clay at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte.

The Penland Book of Ceramics features Kitty as a master ceramic artist, showing step-by-step photos of making ceramics.

"The Penland School is a nationally recognized school and it's in Burnsville - where my mother lived - so it was an honor for her to be in here," Breckenheimer says.

Breckenheimer smiles lovingly as she discusses her mother, pointing out her mother's hands working with clay in several of the book's photos. "She starts out kind of with a rolling pin," Breckenheimer says. "It's kind of like working with pie dough."

Then Kitty would make clay coils, smoothing them slowly into the bottom flat piece until it looked seamless.

"You never see where the coils intersect," Breckenheimer says.

Kitty smoothed the pieces together with a special ceramics tool called a surform. It took her roughly two weeks to create vessels like the ones in the "Earth Series." After the piece dried, it would be fired in a kiln.

Among her numerous honors and awards, Kitty was selected in 1989 as one of the top female artists in North Carolina for her exhibit "NINE from North Carolina," at the National Women's Museum of Art in Washington, D.C.

Breckenheimer sent out a letter to her mother's friends, asking them if they could contribute art to help raise money for two local land conservancies in her mother's name. Fifty artists contributed to the show. The artwork for the show can be viewed at the project's Web site.

"It was very gratifying to get that kind of a response," Breckenheimer says. "My mother had this charismatic personality - she loved people and people loved her. She was like a people-magnet."

Having 50 artist friends contribute at least one piece of art to this show speaks immensely of Kitty's character.

"She was a loved person in this community and a very respected artist," says Berensohn, who plans to contribute a small pinched bowl and possibly a book or drawing to the show.

He had the privilege of seeing the "Earth Series" in the works. "I watched it being made over the years," Berensohn says. "She worked in that manner for at least a decade."

Touching one of the earth-toned vessels, softly flecked with dark green colors if you look closely enough, Breckenheimer describes the series.

"They're amazingly thin," she says. "This is coil-built, hand-built, as opposed to wheel-thrown."

Kitty described her artwork in the series.

"It is about my relationship to the natural world of form and its mysterious content," she wrote. The vessels "are symbolic containers that seek to replicate the spiral movement of the Earth."

Kitty shared her interest in the Earth with many.

"She had an embodied relationship to the Earth," Berensohn says. "I certainly resonate with honoring the Earth, since we as a culture, have been dishonoring the earth for too long. It's one of the reasons I work with clay."

Sharing the interest in the Earth may be a part of why so many of Kitty's friends and colleagues contributed pieces of work to the show.

"Her friends didn't hesitate to honor her in this way," Breckenheimer says. "Every art medium, from jewelry to photography, is represented in the show, and many of the artists are tying into the earth

theme."

The reception will begin with a life-of-the-artist presentation in the Fine Arts Theatre. Friend, teacher and colleague to Kitty, Berensohn will do some readings inspired by Kitty. Berensohn is the author of *Finding Your Way with Clay*, a book Kitty read early in her career with clay.

"When she moved up to Burnsville, she sought me out, and we developed a real friendship that I'm really grateful for," Berensohn says.

The two had lunch about once a month and shared their love for poetry.

"She was a responsible consumer of the juice that poetry can carry to touch the soul," Berensohn says. "I will read some of the poems that I know she loved."

Some of the poets whose work Berensohn will read from include Mary Oliver, William Stafford, M.C. Richards and Rumi.

Then a short film by Jeff Goodman, videographer and instructor at Appalachian State University and a friend of Kitty's, will be screened.

The benefit is \$20 per person. Reservations are requested by Friday, March 28.

To make reservations, contact the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy at (828) 697-5777. For more information about the event, visit www.honoringtheearthseries.com.

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