

Late Catholic artist's work tells biblical history with brush strokes



BY CHAZ MUTH - CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

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The late Karen Laub-Novak was fascinated by biblical history -- and visitors to the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington can see how the Catholic artist captured narrative from the Bible in her paintings, lithographs and sculptures.



A painting of Moses by artist Karen Laub-Novak is displayed Oct. 26 during an exhibit at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington. - CNS photo/courtesy Pope John Paul II Cultural Center

Laub-Novak has been recognized as an inspirational and world-class artist, and officials at the cultural center were eager to display her colorful, dark and often haunting paintings and sculptures, said Luis Peralta, exhibit associate.

Knowing the 71-year-old artist was battling cancer, Peralta said he was hoping to open the exhibit during Laub-Novak's lifetime.

Sadly, the opening came after her Aug. 12 death in her Washington home.

"She left a legacy of work behind that we're all so fortunate to experience," Peralta said. "We can see her interpretation of the word of God."

Visitors to the cultural center near The Catholic University of America campus in the Northeast section of Washington will be awestruck by the vivid images in the exhibit, which officially runs through Nov. 15, he said, adding that he hopes to extend the showing through December.

"Karen's artwork is passionate and fierce," Peralta said. "It's about strength and life. It's about struggle and the human nature to strive for better."

Laub-Novak's daughter -- Jana Novak Miller -- said her mother didn't consider herself a religious artist -- but was indeed fascinated by the periods of uncertainty and doubt that are so prevalent throughout the Bible.

"Those moments are when she felt we truly live -- and learn -- and are therefore the most important moments in life," Miller said. "She did her best to illustrate these moments of true reality and emotion in her art, as both snapshots of real life, and as inspiration for others."

Born Aug. 25, 1937, in Minneapolis, Laub-Novak grew up in Cresco, Iowa, and earned a bachelor's degree in 1959 in art from Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., and her master's degree in 1961 in fine arts from the University of Iowa.

She married Michael Novak -- American philosopher, journalist, novelist and diplomat -- in 1963 and the couple had three children, Tanya, Richard, and Jana.

Laub-Novak worked at the National Endowment for Democracy and at the Institute on Religion and Democracy -- both in Washington -- and taught art and humanities at several colleges, including Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., and Jesuit-run Georgetown University in Washington.

In a written statement about her own paintings, she said: "My primary concern is to express certain human emotions: Our attempt to find ourselves. Our struggles with hope and despair. Our moments of love and separation, sexuality, isolation, suffering, death. I am constantly excited and frustrated by tensions between verbal and nonverbal, mind and emotions, intellect and body, silence and communication, privacy and community."

Catholic blogger Santiago Ramos in September wrote that Laub-Novak's "most memorable works are lithographs inspired by the written word: on St. John's biblical Apocalypse; on Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Duino Elegies'; on T.S. Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday.'"

Peralta said Laub-Novak had the unique talent of capturing the word of God and illustrating biblical stories in great depth by the careful strokes of her paint brush -- and the creative molding of her sculptures.

"One of my favorite series is that of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," he said. "In this series we get to see how we as human beings get to suffer the wrath of God because of our sins and thank God for Jesus Christ who was sent to us as a savior" so we can be redeemed.

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