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Phoenix artist enjoying solo shows in her 80s

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Artist Nancy Kravetz next to her painting "Desert Botanical."

Courtesy of Jewish News

Nancy Kravetz has been painting since she was a teenager and now, at 85, she sometimes spends eight hours a day in her home studio creating art.

Currently, more than 20 of her abstract paintings are on display at The Gallery at Mountain Shadows Resort in Paradise Valley. The exhibit, "Sunshine in the Garden," will run through March 31.

Kravetz gets her inspiration “from life experiences” and several pieces in the exhibit were based on a concept created by accident.

She was working on a three-canvas piece, inspired by large buds from a delivery of Stargazer lilies. When she went to assemble the three panels, something wasn't fitting properly.

“I was trying to figure out which panel was warped, and I finally realized it was the middle,” she said. But she also wanted to make sure that the other canvases weren't crooked. “I went over to my easel and there's a ledge that you can put your canvas on. I knew this piece of wood was level, straight and not warped, so I stuck it between the panels.” She liked how it looked so much, she ended up removing the middle canvas entirely and replacing it with a strip of wood that she said reminded her of the stems of the lilies.

She said that kind of thing happens often, she'll have an idea that doesn't work and a whole other idea will come up.

“I can't explain how it happens,” said Kravetz. She called the piece “Desert Botanical” and it inspired several other works, all with a grooved piece of wood dividing two, or sometimes three, canvases.

She primarily works in acrylics now, but she started painting with oils at the Sargent School of Painting in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1951. She didn't study art in college, instead receiving her bachelor's degree in home economics.

In 1965, she moved to Arizona with her husband, Dr. Robert Kravetz, and the first of their three sons. The couple became members of Beth El Congregation in Phoenix and have been involved in the Jewish community through the Bureau of Jewish Education, the Arizona Jewish Historical Society and multiple other Jewish charities.

“When I came to Phoenix, I was blown away by everything being so different from the East Coast,” she said. “At first, I didn't think it was so beautiful because we came here in the summertime. It was over 100 degrees with a little baby and a non-air-conditioned car. But it didn't take me long to love this place.”

Kravetz took some classes with artist Don Ruffin and decided she didn't want to work with oil paints anymore. She said they were messy, took a long time to dry and were hard to clean up.

She had heard of acrylic paint and wanted to give it a try.

“There was an art shop on Central Avenue that sold supplies and I went in there and asked for a recommendation for an art teacher who worked in acrylics, and that’s how I met Dorothy Fratt,” said Kravetz.

Fratt didn’t live far from Kravetz in her Central Phoenix neighborhood, and she started taking classes with the artist. “I took several classes with her over a period of two years,” she said. “I took a drawing class with her and learned to use acrylic paints in different ways.”

Fratt also taught her watercolor painting, how to create collages, design and color theory. Fratt died in 2017 and some of her pieces are currently for sale through Christie’s, the London-based auction house.

Kravetz entered her first show in 1971, at Fratt’s suggestion. Then in 1973, she got her first solo exhibit at the Lawyers Club in Phoenix.

“For a long time after my first show, many of my paintings won prizes at the Arizona State Fair,” said Kravetz.

Kravetz took a hiatus from painting for a few years to work on a family history book, “Remember Me to the Little Ones,” printed in 2010.

“Looking back, I feel I was torn; I love to do artwork so much and working on the book was stressful — I never did anything like that before,” said Kravetz. “It took a long time but in retrospect, I feel like it was so worthwhile. Even to this day, some relative will call and say I love looking at the book and remembering such and such. Or a grandchild will call and say I used the book for a project.”

When she returned to painting, her family told her that she should find a gallery space to have a show for her 80th birthday. She wanted a place that could host a party and an art exhibit at the same time.

After being told “no” by several galleries, Kravetz reached out to the Shemer Art Center in Phoenix. They had space for exhibits and events — though not together. Tess Mosko Scherer, the center’s artistic director at the time, agreed to meet.

“I owe a debt of gratitude to Tess Mosko Scherer, who was willing to go to the board to ask them to do something they hadn’t done before, and they said yes,” said Kravetz. “And that was a new beginning for me.”

The Shemer show was followed by three solo shows at galleries inside the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale and Phoenix.

“I’m happy that my paintings went there because people with lots of problems go in and out of those buildings,” said Kravetz. “If it cheered up even half a dozen people or took them away from what they were thinking about or worrying about — it was good.”

She is excited about her latest solo exhibition at Mountain Shadows. Her husband joked that he is approaching the Louvre Museum in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City for her next exhibition.

“My children said we ought to put a sign on the house that says MoMA like the sign for the Museum of Modern Art,” said Kravetz. “Only it would stand for ‘Mom’s Own Museum of Art.’”

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For more information, visit nancykravetz.com.