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ED & NANCY KIENHOLZ

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# Ed and Nancy Kienholz

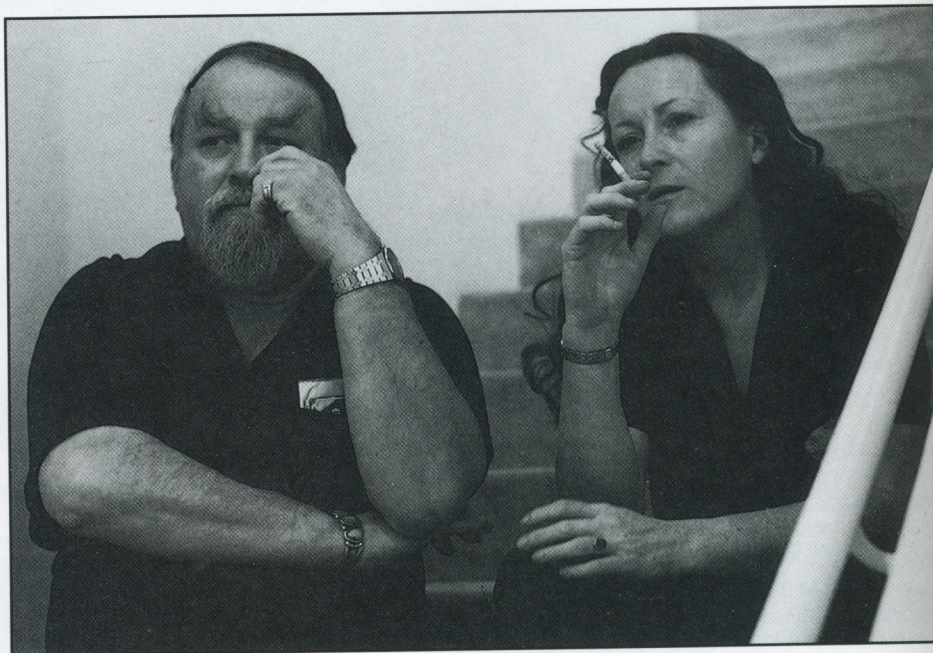
*The renown artists from Hope talk about their art and times*

BY SUSAN DRINKARD

**C**HILDREN in Europe have stopped Ed Kienholz in the street and told him where and when he was born — facts they had learned in art history class. That may attest to the strength of European art history courses, but it also demonstrates the influence of Ed and Nancy Kienholz' artwork. Sculptors of international stature, Ed and Nancy have pieces in at least 15 art museums around the world.

And they make their home — at least part of the year — in Hope, Idaho, where they work with a team of assistants on sculpture that offers potent commentary on social problems. Their work is often unsettling, even difficult to look at. Their scene is the human one; the themes are timeless, and essential. Take "Sollie 17," where three versions of one man gazes out a window, sits on the edge of the bed playing Solitaire and then reclines with a paperback. (They cast the body of Sandpoint artist Russell Rosander for this piece and the head is a framed photograph of Hope poet Paul Croy). It's a piece about loneliness and the incarceration poverty can engender.

The Kienholzes live in a very old, comfortable log house Ed bought for \$300. There is a gallery — The Faith and Charity in Hope Gallery — on the premises, which is open 12 hours each year. While I sat with them at the table in the porch off the kitchen, an artist from Ireland working at the Kienholz studio came in with his 16-year-old son. Smash, the dog, was running around the long table. The phone was ringing. Construction workers pounded nails on the new garage going up next to the house. Ed's son, Noah, came in. The 64-year-old Ed was sitting with shirt open, itchy from fiberglass he'd worked with all morning. Nancy came downstairs, freshly showered, her long hair wrapped in a towel. She can't possibly be 48. And so it went. A place of energy. And stepping into the



immense studio is like stepping into another dimension; there's art energy here. I felt a bit transported as we began the interview. This was no ordinary day.

**Q. Sculpture, it seems, is a big-city experience in a way other kinds of art are not. You, however, live in a very small community. Obviously, there is great beauty here. Is this what drew you here?**

Ed: I've been around this area from the time I was a kid. Paul Croy (*the poet from Hope*) taught me to fish on the banks here. I've always resented what you just said; art should be for all people. I don't like pretentiousness.

Nancy: I don't believe the artist tries to make it pretentious. It's the galleries and dealers who do. When we first opened the gallery here, people were afraid of it. Now, they're comfortable with it and they give their opinion and that's a good thing. Also, nothing's for sale, so economics don't enter into it.

**Many people believe the purpose of art is to create beauty. Your work is often shocking and disturbing. I've read your work is now more reflective than angry. Is this a matter of personal growth, or**

**does it have anything to do with place?**

Ed: In the beginning I made art as ugly as possible to find out what beauty is. It has evolved for me. I have an aesthetic. If pieces aren't tough and nasty it's because I'm a lot older and I'm happier now. This has a lot to do with being with Nancy for....how long, dear?

Nancy: Hmm...18, 19, 20 years. I think it has to do with there being more idealism in youth, that you think you can save or change the world.

Ed: And then you find out that all you can do is help your own life out and maybe raise some good kids.

**Are nearly all your pieces political and social commentary?**

Nancy: Not political. Social.

Ed: Politics are too cheap. We don't use politics as a point of departure.

**Is your purpose to educate and remind us of ourselves?**

Ed: It's not to educate as such. If people benefit, that's good. It's for ourselves. It's amazing how many ideas come through when you take a project to completion.



# KIENHOLZ ART: TWO PIECES

“Our best audience is kids ... I think it’s because they’re short and can see from a different angle, and their minds aren’t encumbered by what they’re told art should be.”

Nancy: Yes, it’s cathartic.

As I watched reports of the slaughter of 100,000 people during the war, and watched Americans fall for Bush’s campaign to get them waving flags and yellow ribbons, I felt immense despair. When you work on anti-war pieces, does it help that despair? Will you do something with the yellow ribbon?

Nancy: No, nothing with the yellow ribbon. But it isn’t necessarily war. War is the cause. It’s the effect of death. It’s the loss of the young and strong, the civilians, the uncles, fathers, husbands...

Ed: Why the young are indoctrinable is much more interesting than why people put yellow ribbons on themselves... They want those kids who are standing on street corners, the ones like young deer in the forests, who are still bumping their heads trying on their manliness. They take the cream of what we raise. It’s an insidious design to use a generation of kids like that. What bullshit.

Unlike a painting, sculpture dominates a room. You can turn your back away from a painting. A sculpture defies one to ignore it. Is that why most of your work is in museums?

Nancy: No, it’s the same. It’s just that the sculpture takes more space.

Ed: There are waves in art where painting will lose fashion and sculpture comes in and painting will come back...

Nancy: Yes, and the figure is “out” now in painting, but you paint what you paint. True artists don’t have a choice. You’re stuck with it.

Ed: If you hitch your wagon to a fad star, you have no true foundation.

Take Ed’s “The Illegal Operation,” which is the depiction of an abortion site. That’s very strong.

Nancy: That would be a very difficult piece to live with. It’s very powerful. But abortion isn’t going to stop anymore than



“The Potlatch.” 1988. Private collection. 8’x8’x4’9”



“Sollie 17.” 1979-80. Private collection. 24’x14’x8’6”



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prostitution, the oldest profession, will. No one wants to have an abortion. It's not an easy decision, but sometimes it's a necessary one.

**I see artists locally who are making commercial artwork when they'd really like to do what they consider serious art.**

Nancy: There were lots of lean years. They should have other jobs. Be a waiter or a waitress and do your artwork at night. Or admit to yourself that that's what you are...and where's that going?

Ed: Artists make a big mistake when they use up their art energy to teach. It's too draining.

**Nancy, there are people who refer to Kienholz art as though it's only Ed's work; these are people who know better. This must be aggravating to you.**

Nancy: It's people who don't know better. It's just a male thing. Ed is more bothered by it than I am.

Ed: I call people on that.

**Some of your pieces seem to be feminist statements.**

Ed: Yes. I know male thinking... there's an attempt to understand female thinking and present it properly.

**Do people understand your artwork?**

Ed: Yes, because I'm not interested in obscurity or mystery. That's the way art should function. It has little to do with the bullshit that grows up around it...museum patrons, etc.

Nancy: Our best audience is kids about age 8 through 13, before they hit the "I know everything" stage. A teacher took her class to a big show at the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis and told them to pick out one piece and do a drawing of it. They made connections that we hadn't thought of! I think it's because they're short and can see from a different angle and their minds aren't encumbered by what they're told art should be.

Ed: Art is something very, very spe-

cial. Every person should make their own art.

Nancy: People don't think they can because it's taken out of them in school when they're told the house they've drawn "doesn't look like that."

Ed: Everyone is creative. An electrician is creative because he makes aesthetic decisions. There are limits within aesthetic decisions, of course.

**The name of your gallery — The Faith and Charity in Hope Gallery — is that from 1 Corinthians 13 in the New Testament? Aren't you an atheist?**

Ed: If you changed the word "God" to "Nature," I'm a believer.

Nancy: He's a Pantheist. I'm not atheist, probably more agnostic than atheist. (Ed gets out the dictionary and reads aloud the definition for pantheism. He likes it.)

**Do you still live in Berlin part of each year?**

Nancy: Yes. Berlin is the Paris of the East. Everyone comes through. And we need a city for materials. We go to the flea market in the city, sometimes for specifics, sometimes for magic.

Ed: The city is a good place to watch people. But I'm always watching.

Nancy: The pure voyeur!

Ed: No, there's a vocabulary of gesture I study and store. For example, the way you (Susan) are holding your hand right now is not natural.

**Maybe I'm nervous. You know, there are people who are intimidated by you.**

Nancy: (Laughing) I'm glad there are people who are intimidated. Ed works on that. Before openings he eats big plates of garlic spaghetti. He reeks of garlic!

Ed: (Grinning). It keeps the majority of people away.

Nancy: Look at this place! There's enough people out here. We couldn't handle more! ■

Susan Drinkard lives in Sandpoint and has written for this magazine under various bylines.

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