

University of Southern Maine
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences
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Media Release: For Immediate Release

January 20, 2015

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Cutline: The University of Southern Maine (USM) Kate Cheney Chappell '83 Center for Book Arts will exhibit the installations, artist's books, rock collages, and travel journals of Richard Lee (1933-2008), Jan. 26-April 30, on the 7th floor of the Glickman Library, USM Portland campus.

USM Kate Cheney Chappell '83 Center for Book Arts To Present Posthumous Exhibition of Works by Richard Lee

PORTLAND, Maine – For acclaimed artist, teacher, and traveler, Richard Lee (1933-2008), creating art was a spiritual experience; a way of connecting to the earth and to people. The University of Southern Maine (USM) Kate Cheney Chappell '83 Center for Book Arts will exhibit "Richard Lee: Paper Trails," featuring Lee's installations, artist's books, rock collages, and travel journals, Jan. 26-April 30, in the UNUM Great Reading Room, on the 7th floor of the Glickman Library, USM Portland campus.

There will be an exhibition reception and lecture, "Handmade Paper, Field Trips, and Fourth Graders: The Artful Life of Richard Lee," presented by Christine Macchi, director of Maine Fiberarts and Lee's longtime life partner, at 4 p.m., Wednesday, April 22. The exhibition and the reception and lecture are free and open to the public.

"Richard Lee was an important part of the Maine arts community, an artist among artists, a generous educator, and a remarkable maker," said Rebecca Goodale, coordinator of the Kate Cheney Chappell '83 Center for Book Arts. "It is people like Richard who can inspire all of us to pursue a career with our whole heart."

Lee grew up in upstate New York on a dairy farm. After completing college and graduate school, he moved to a studio on Canal Street in New York City. There, he painted, immersed himself in a life of art and teaching, married, and had a daughter. Early on in his career, he took a job teaching overseas and immediately moved his family to Greece. During school breaks, he visited India, Italy, and the U.S., and he developed what would become a lifelong love of travel. It was the places he visited and the people he met that inspired Lee's artwork.

"Richard was fascinated with man's relationship to the environment," said Macchi. "He often didn't start with a preconceived idea. His plan evolved as he worked with his materials. 'Let the materials speak,' is something he always said. At times, he created a response to a place -- not what the place looked like, but what it felt like."

In the 1980s, Lee moved to Maine, and over the years, he exhibited his work at venues such as the Portland Museum of Art, Farnsworth Art Museum, University of Maine at Presque Isle, Hay Gallery, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, River Tree Arts Center, Frank Brockman Gallery, and Eleven Pleasant Street Center for the Arts.

"It was his daughter, Cathy, who inspired Richard to try papermaking," explained Macchi. "He loved natural materials, he knew Maine is a papermaking state, and he realized it could be an opportunity to get involved with local schools and students. Richard wanted to connect with everyone in Maine through papermaking."

That he did. For the next three decades, Lee visited elementary, middle and high schools throughout the state and taught hundreds of students how to make paper.

"He would come into classrooms, where the teachers had instructed students to be respectful by staying quiet and orderly," said Macchi. "Richard would come in with this wild, smelly, Japanese kozo fiber, and large, papermaking vats, and he would upset the apple cart."

"Richard had the kids laughing and up out of their seats to help in no time," Macchi continued. "He would ask the third graders to take notes, because that would impress their eighth grade siblings. Parents would hear he was in town and ask him to come back at night to teach another class for adults. He always said yes."

Lee shared his own artwork with the students, allowing them to pass around the journals he created while travelling through Mexico, Peru, Greece, Afghanistan, Ecuador, Newfoundland, India, Italy, Cuba, Guatemala, Spain, and Turkey.

"I would ask Richard why he allowed the journals to be handled, when they could be damaged that way," recalled Macchi. "He would say, 'nothing is too precious. People have to experience these things. Nothing is forever.'"

Lee's journals include watercolor paintings, drawings, and bits and pieces of places he travelled -- literally -- whether scraps of newspaper, a chunk of toast from a bed and breakfast, a clump of wet stucco from a Mexican casa, or specs of Grecian marble.

"This was his way of introducing the human element into his work," noted Macchi. "Many of his pieces included natural or manmade elements."

At the exhibition reception and lecture, several of Lee's journals once again will be passed around for the public to immerse themselves in the places he travelled.

Lee's work also included large-scale handmade paper installations, concurrently delicate and immense, and containing multiple layers and textures that draw the viewer into the world of the piece. Some works even allow the viewer to step right into them.

"His favorite fiber to work with was kozo, made from the inner bark of a Japanese tree," said Macchi. "It's the longest and strongest of fibers, and when the paper dried it was almost translucent. It was filled with light and energy and soul. That got him very excited."

In his later years, Lee created installations with wings and angels, and he loved to work with portals, windows, and tunnels.

"He had one piece entitled 'Stairway to Heaven,'" recalled Macchi. "Another artist visited his studio, and she remarked that he seemed to be preparing to depart, to move on; that the piece was a foretelling of his passing."

Macchi noted that most of all, Lee loved life and people, connecting to seen and unseen worlds, and inspiring other artists to create new art.

“He loved the experience of life almost as much as he loved art,” said Macchi.

Complementary Programming

LECTURE

Two Maine Artists: Arlene Morris and Deborah Klotz

7 p.m., Tuesday, Feb. 3

University Events Room, 7th Floor, Glickman Family Library, USM Portland campus

Free and open to the public.

WORKSHOP

Spirit Papers: Mapping Place

9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday, April 11

Wishcamper Center Multi-Purpose Room, USM Portland campus

Registration required. Fee: \$125. Visit <http://usm.maine.edu/bookarts>.

LECTURE AND EXHIBITION RECEPTION

Handmade Paper, Field Trips, and Fourth Graders: The Artful Life of Richard Lee

4 p.m., Wednesday, April 22

University Events Room, 7th Floor, Glickman Family Library, USM Portland campus

Presented by Christine Macchi, director of Maine Fiberarts

Free and open to the public.

The Kate Cheney Chappell '83 Center for Book Arts celebrates the innovative and engaging nature of book arts through lectures and workshops by national and regional book artists, and through exhibits of artists' books. For more information go to <http://usm.maine.edu/bookarts>.

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