

Hearst Center for Arts
Larry Gregson

I was a student of K.C. Franks when I attended Roosevelt Junior High in Mason City from 1963 to 1966 and when I attended North Iowa Area Community College in Mason City from 1969 until 1971. Mr. Franks was, unequivocally, a formidable scholar, a master teacher, and an artist's artist, as well as an entertaining storyteller and skilled communicator. While any one of these would have been an accomplishment in itself, Mr. Franks was all of them. All of his talents were evident when he taught. What set him apart from other art educators I have known was his dedication to the discipline of art both as an educator and as an artist. He sought to instill in his students a similar respect for the knowhow that enables visual art forms to engage the sense of sight and, through sight, the emotions and the intellect. He developed a curriculum that raised the standards of art education and the quality of the visual arts. He was a pro.

I recall that at the end of ninth grade Mr. Franks told my class that if we retained what we were taught we would know more than 90% percent of the people within the arts. His prediction was too modest. Mr. Franks spoke endlessly about abstraction, aesthetics, and the fundamentals of design, subjects that were rarely if ever seriously discussed by other art educators who have taught me. He also had a gift for creating class assignments that were as innovative as the art work he created, so many ideas as to be too numerous to count. Some of my happiest memories are of the assignments his other students completed, which drew on a depth of commitment and emotions typically seen only in works of professional artists. Their works have been a source of inspiration to this day. These surprises were not a rare occurrence. Why should they have been? Creativity, he claimed, was not a rare gift but a skill that could be taught. Today, when I work in my own studio, I draw on ideas some of which I first encountered in seventh grade, over 50 years ago.

Mr. Franks was an accomplished and prolific artist, whose portfolio spanned many different styles and genres. The Hearst exhibition only scratches the surface. Of his works, I am especially drawn to his prints and drawings. If he had received the recognition he earned, I believe his works could have changed the art world's impression of the humble relief print and, more broadly speaking, of the creativity of artists working in the Midwest and elsewhere.

It has been 40 years since Mr. Franks spoke to me about The Stonehenge Series. While there is a narrative thread that runs through the series, I believe that aesthetically he was trying to evoke the narrative's emotional content primarily through the use of geometry. The appreciation of his work is many faceted. But, it always starts with the fundamentals. Sensing his own mortality, he transitioned in his last years from prints to drawing because he could produce more works in the time he had left. These later drawings were designed to be mistaken for prints. The only work from the series that I can recall him mentioning was "Dawn Trigger," which was about a human sacrifice.

In all of his explorations, he was supported by another formidable personality, his wife Lorraine.