

SAY KEES

Exhibit celebrates Nebraska artist

BY BRET SCHULTE
Senior Reporter

Always underestimated when it comes to cynical modernist poetry, abstract oil paintings or WWII propaganda films, Nebraska is the home and alma mater to American renaissance artist Weldon Kees, whose paintings and poetry earned him fame in New York and San Francisco during the era of beatniks, bohemians and unprecedented subculture activity.

The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery is exhibiting the abstract artistry and collages of the Beatrice-born Kees through April 12. The Sheldon will also play host to poetry readings of the artist, two film screenings, a conference of art professors from around the Midwest and an interpretive performance by Lincoln experimental group Howlooseanation of Kees' music.

Bordering on an all-out festival, the exhibit celebrates a Nebraskan whose diverse artistic achievements are finally being recognized within cultural circles as among the most significant of the early American 20th century.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln Assistant Professor of English Nicholas Spencer, host of the Kees' poetry reading on Feb. 5, said Kees' accomplishments have long been overlooked.

"Kees is one of the most important writers to come from Nebraska," Spencer said. "I think we mistakenly associate Nebraskan art and literature with ruralism, and I think what Kees reminds us is sophisticated and complex literature and art is part of Nebraska's heritage, too."

Like most intellectuals of the day, Kees was more concerned with areas of personal interest such as current issues, society and the arts than his personal past, which is seldom discussed in his writing.

"The interesting thing about Kees is there are only one or two references to Nebraska in his poetry," Spencer said.

Kees is most notorious for his refreshingly

authentic depictions of an era when most artists and writers were consumed with high-brow cultural elitism and pretentious artistic endeavors.

Despite the fact that Kees was close friends with many members of the avant-garde and was influenced by them, his artistic output remained decidedly personal.

"He was interested in popular culture inasmuch as he wasn't completely turned off by it," Sheldon curator Dan Seidell said. "Most of his peers were completely turned off by it."

Born in 1914, Kees graduated from the University of Nebraska (now the University of Nebraska-Lincoln) with a degree in literature. He went on to write for the Midwest's premier literary magazine, *The Prairie Schooner*, and study library science at the University of Denver.

After his move to New York in 1944, Kees rapidly fell into the emerging avant-garde movement, a group of American and international artists and writers interested in pushing the boundaries of artistic expression.

Although first and foremost a poet and writer, Kees also experimented with abstract painting, collages and film, for which he won awards for his editing of World War II footage for newsreel clips.

The artist is most famous for his association with the beatnik movement in post-World War II San Francisco, where he was active in poetry readings organized by the infamous Kenneth Rexroth and Allen Ginsberg.

Kees allegedly ended his life by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge in 1955. His body was never found.

More than 40 years later, Kees has returned to Nebraska—at least in memory—and the variety of the Sheldon events spanning the next two months are a tribute to a Nebraskan whose diverse artistic achievements are long overdue for serious recognition.

Planned events include a poetry reading by Professor Nicholas Spencer Feb. 5 followed immediately by a showing of two short films by Kees, titled "The Apex" and "The Bridge." The evening's presentations will begin at 7 p.m.

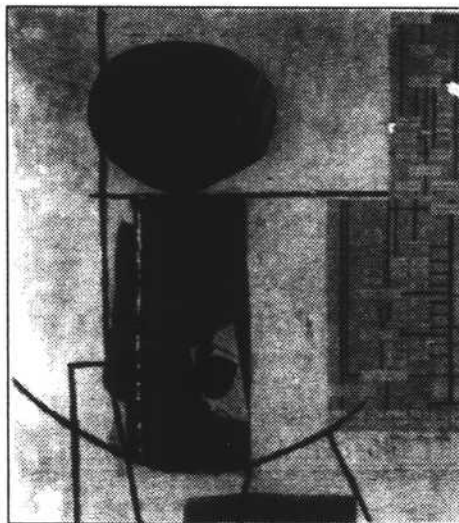
On March 4, the Sheldon's Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater will play host to a conference titled "The Subjects and Methods of the Study of American Art." The conference will feature art professors from the University of Iowa, Kansas and the State University of New York-Purchase. A panel for public discussion will follow the conference for continued dialogue on Kees and topics of modern art.

The musical group Howlooseanation, characterized by frontman Mark Baldrige as a "jazz-noise group," will give a performance of Kees' ragtime music on March 13.

Although Kees rarely cites his Nebraska background in his work, its influences are obvious and, according to Seidell, made the writer remarkable.

"He made fun of his hometown, I think," Seidell said. "Not in a vicious way, but of a small-town perspective."

"But he also made fun of the big town, that the New Yorker could be just as colloquial as a waitress in a Beatrice café."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY
PHOTOS: (TOP) KEES, who was a poet, author, painter, playwright, composer and filmmaker, also worked with collages. This untitled piece from 1946 is on display at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery. (ABOVE) "RAFFLE #2," an oil painting from the collection of Gertrude Stein, is just one of Weldon Kees' paintings on exhibit at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery.

Weldon Kees and the Arts at Mid-Century

Jan. 9 - April 12

Present-April 12

An exhibition of 34 of Kees' paintings and collages.

Feb. 5

Poetry reading by Nicholas Spencer, an assistant professor of English at UNL, followed by a presentation of two of Kees' short films, "The Apex" and "The Bridge."

March 4

"The Subjects and Methods of the Study of American Art," a colloquium featuring art professors from the University of Iowa, the University of Kansas and SUNY-Purchase, followed by a public forum on Kees and modern art.

March 13

Local group Howlooseanation will perform several of Kees' musical compositions.