DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR WILLIAM KELLY FEARING

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Wm. Kelly Fearing, professor emeritus, art and art history, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
General Faculty and Faculty Council

IN MEMORIAM
WILLIAM KELLY FEARING

William Kelly Fearing was born October 18, 1918, in Fordyce, Arkansas, to George David Fearing and Frankie Kelly Fearing. He died Sunday, March 13, 2011, of congestive heart failure at his home in West Lake Hills.

Mr. Fearing taught generations of artists during his four decades at The University of Texas at Austin. “There are hundreds of art teachers in this country who were inspired by Kelly’s lifelong devotion to visual art.” One such student, Anita Mills, shared these thoughts, “I’m sure my experience with Kelly is one that is shared with many who had the good fortune to study with him. Kelly was a masterful teacher and expert in leading his students to their own passions, supporting their interests, and in so doing, teaching us how to teach.”

A Texas Modernist artist who, on “the strength of his art alone, Kelly Fearing was a national treasure,” said Mark L. Smith, co-director of Austin’s Flatbed Press and curator of a major retrospective of Fearing’s work that showed in 2002.

Art became part of Kelly’s studies at Louisiana Tech University, after beginning as an accounting major. He later continued his art at Columbia University, where he received his master’s degree. In 1943, Kelly joined a group of artists known as the Fort Worth Circle who rejected the social realism and traditionalism that dominated Texas art at the time.

Artists such as Picasso and Miró, who embraced abstraction and placed an emphasis on the individual artist’s metaphysical interpretation of the world, became the inspiration for Kelly’s work. In the Fort Worth years, his work was abstract, surrealistic, and filled with allegory, all characteristics that would remain in his work over the decades. “We were considered way out at the time,” Kelly Fearing said in a 2002 interview with the Austin American Statesman. “But we were just doing what we liked.” He arrived at UT Austin in 1947, after having taught art for two years at Texas Wesleyan University, when the then-nascent art department was housed in on-campus barracks left over from WWII.

Using printed reproductions and slides, sometimes combining his slide shows with music, he was able to compensate for the lack of University museum galleries or any galleries in town to teach his students about art. Anita Mills also remembered the use of his home as a resource.

We met in Kelly’s home, first in his west Austin bungalow, which was chock-full of artworks by Kelly and others, hung salon-style, so that little wall was visible around the paintings, drawings, and prints; later in the new house he built on a cliff in a Northwest Austin canyon. Both were magical spaces, mostly because they were inhabited by Kelly, but also because of his wonderful collection of art, books, and objects. He had one of the finest personal art libraries I have ever seen.

Kelly Fearing inspired generations of young artists to think and create independently, to imagine worlds far beyond Texas, as he did. Fascinated with the natural world, he returned to it again and again as his subject matter, blending realistically rendered trees, rocks, and animals with idealized figures of poets and saints to
create his magical scenes. Exploring spirituality remained at the fore of his paintings and life. He traveled to India to study with mystic Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. The Christian mystic, St. Francis of Assisi, appears as a frequent character in his paintings. For all his free-spirited philosophy, Kelly found a practical way to extend the reach of UT Austin’s art education by creating the Saturday Art Project in the 1950s, a program that provided studio art instruction to junior high and high school students—a radical notion at the time. He also co-authored several important art textbooks. “Fearing was the quintessential Renaissance man,” said Ken Hale, artist and associate dean of UT Austin’s College of Fine Arts. “He was an artist, an author, and an educator. His talent was extraordinary.” The Blanton Museum of Art has more than eighty of Kelly Fearing’s prints and drawings in its permanent collection, and those with particular interest in Texas Modernism actively collect his work. Fearing retired from UT in 1987 as Professor Emeritus. In the past decade, he enjoyed rediscovery by a younger generation. In 2002, UT and Flatbed Press co-organized a major retrospective exhibit, “The Mystical World of Kelly Fearing,” and his work was included in several important shows in Texas modernism. In 2009, the artist-run Texas Biennial paid tribute to him with a solo exhibit, the only nonagenarian among the biennial’s bevy of young artist.

Kelly Fearing’s nephew, Charles Smith of Dallas, Smith’s wife, and their three children survive him.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Lee Chesney (chair), Donald Herron, and Melinda Mayer.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Fine Arts on November 6, 2012, and posted under “Memorials” at http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.