

Entertainment/Visual Arts

Greg Kucera, leading force in Seattle art world, leaves for his castle in France

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Gallery owner Greg Kucera in his gallery in Pioneer Square with a current artwork on exhibit by Humaira Abid. Kucera has purchased a castle in southern France and is moving there. Longtime employee Jim Wilcox and his wife, Carol Clifford, are buying the gallery. (Alan Berner / The Seattle Times)

By

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When [Greg Kucera opened](#) his Pioneer Square gallery in October 1983, it cost \$350 in rent and received the briefest of mentions in a Seattle Times calendar entry: “Greg Kucera, best known as an artist, last night opened the doors of the Greg Kucera Gallery at 608 Second Ave.”

He wouldn’t be “best known” as an artist for long. “I knew I would never make art again,” he said earlier this October, almost exactly 38 years after Greg Kucera Gallery’s first exhibition. “And I haven’t.”

Instead, through a combination of hard work, shrewd choices, good luck and some courage, Kucera built his gallery into a leading force in the Seattle art world, playing advocate and broker for a suite of early-, mid- and late-career artists. Now, hundreds of exhibitions later, he's leaving the city and moving to France — [a castle in southern France](#), to be specific, which he purchased with his partner and a very good friend in 2020. The gallery will remain, carrying Kucera's name but under the care of longtime employee Jim Wilcox and his wife, Carol Clifford, who are [purchasing the enterprise](#). (Kucera, now 65, will remain co-director for some unspecified years and expects to slowly decrease his involvement over time.)



Greg Kucera, here standing amid Jody Isaacson's works currently on exhibit, opened his namesake Pioneer Square Gallery in 1983. He is retiring and moving to France. He'll continue to co-direct the gallery for some unspecified years as it transitions in ownership to husband and wife Jim Wilcox and Carol Clifford, and then decrease his involvement over time. (Alan Berner / The Seattle Times)

Kucera and his four siblings were largely raised by their single-mother schoolteacher in Western Washington. He spent a few early years working as a shoe salesman in local department stores, but would come to exhibit some marquee and art-history-textbook virtuosos: Robert Motherwell, Morris Graves, Helen Frankenthaler, Kerry James Marshall, Frank Okada, Jacob Lawrence (who was also Kucera's drawing teacher at the University of Washington), others.

Big names are big names, but Kucera's more impressive and original contribution has been to champion important, largely local contemporary artists. The gallery currently [represents around 40](#), and even if you don't recognize all the names, you've probably seen some of the work: the big driftwood horses cast in bronze ([Deborah Butterfield](#)); the explosively loud portraits of slinky young adults with iPhones and the detritus of quick consumption ([Anthony White](#)); the acerbic paintings pulling from pop art and ukiyo-e (17th-19th century Japanese woodblock prints) that wrestle with

American racism and mass culture ([Roger Shimomura](#)); the meticulously beaded animal heads and abstract, bent-wire shapes ([Sherry Markovitz](#)).



A sculpture by artist Deborah Butterfield, who uses driftwood to sculpt horses, often cast in bronze. (Courtesy of Greg Kucera Gallery)

Kucera is known as a fierce advocate for his artists — and can be calmly withering when he feels like critics and other curators aren't giving them their due — and the artists know it.

“I’ve always felt, whether he was praising me or offering advice or criticism, that he believed in my art and that part of what drove him was the desire to advance it, and to protect it from obstacles,” said photographer [Chris Engman](#), who makes confounding, disorienting illusions. “This is what a collaboration between an artist and a gallerist should look like.”

Advocating for artists

Kucera has trusted his eyes and his gut enough to represent artists few people (or no people) had seen or heard of before. He first visited Engman in a one-car garage that was the photographer's studio and bedroom. Shortly after Engman joined the Kucera fold, Elton John swooped into town and bought several of his photographs.



A print by photographer Chris Engman, whom Greg Kucera first visited in a one-car garage — which was the artist's studio and bedroom — in 2006. (Courtesy of Greg Kucera Gallery)

But one of the more dramatic stories, one that still makes Kucera choke up, began in 2012. Jody Isaacson, an artist and friend living in the small town of Sidney Center, New York, called one day to say she'd stumbled onto an incredible talent — [David Byrd](#), an 87-year-old neighbor who'd invited her into his home to look at hundreds and hundreds of paintings, many hung right on top of each other. Byrd had worked for 30 years as an orderly in the psychiatric ward of a Veterans Administration hospital and [painted his memories of the place and its people](#). At Isaacson's urging, Kucera flew out to look.

"I just started tearing up," Kucera said. "I couldn't control that feeling of 'oh my god, I see what this is.' To recognize the talent and the incredible gravity of this work by a guy who'd worked in a veterans' mental hospital — the things he'd seen after World War II and Vietnam, the lack of hope from these people, before good depression drugs and antipsychotics. He saw the wreckage of human life and he recorded it."

Isaacson and Kucera tried to get Byrd an exhibition in New York City — but nobody would touch this unknown, so Kucera mounted one in Seattle (110 pieces, filling the gallery) and flew Byrd, who had never been on an airplane, out for the opening, where an entranced public bought dozens of his never-before-seen paintings. The tragedy: A few days before the exhibition opened, Byrd was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. Twelve days after the show closed, the artist died.



Artist David Byrd, who had his first exhibition at the age of 87, stands by a painting at Greg Kucera Gallery from his series based on his 30-year experience as an orderly at a Veterans Administration mental hospital. (Courtesy of Arthur Bacon)

Advocating for artists known and unknown — helping them make a living — has been Kucera’s main mission. “To own their homes and studios,” he said. “To live the lives they want, whether it’s traveling, making a nest, having the freedom to make art without a second job. I’m feeling lucky to have represented some of these artists for so many years.”

Homework, gumption and luck

None of this was necessarily in the cards for Kucera growing up in Gold Bar, Federal Way and Everett, where he developed his own early interest in art, entering contests in state fairs.

“There was nothing extra in our lives,” he said. “We didn’t see art, didn’t see cultural events, didn’t do anything like that. We didn’t even have a TV until I was in fifth or sixth grade.” Instead, he spent those early years outdoors, and on nearby farms: climbing trees, fishing, watching the slaughter of chickens and cows. “Those memories of seeing the guts of a cow slung over somebody’s shoulder,” he said. “They’re so present in my mind.”

Kucera credits arts education in the public schools, and an influential run of art teachers, for what followed. “I had terrific facility at making art,” he said. “I later learned that facility is not the same thing as talent — but at the moment, it was enough.”



Greg Kucera says on his gallery website: "I opened the gallery in 1983 and have enjoyed every minute of it for the last 37 years. Now, Jim Wilcox, my trusted employee for 21 years, is buying the gallery with his wife, Carol Clifford." The gallery will keep its name and current location at 212 Third Ave. S., Seattle. (Alan Berner / The Seattle Times)

The opening of his gallery in 1983, for example, was accidentally excellent timing. "The economy was turning around, Reagan economics was coming into full swing and the rich were going to get richer than they ever were," Kucera said. "It was a fantastic time to get into the business."

He had also been working as a studio assistant for well-respected painter Alden Mason, another of his art teachers at the UW, who agreed to show in his former student's new gallery — giving Kucera access to other artists who otherwise would've been out of his league.



A painting by Roger Shimomura, a longtime artist with Greg Kucera Gallery, who often draws on pop art and ukiyo-e to wrestle with American mass culture and racism, including the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. (Courtesy of Greg Kucera Gallery)

And he took risks: In 1985, Kucera gambled on going to Art Chicago (the city's art fair), partly with money from Robert Motherwell prints he'd sought out in New York and sold in Seattle. Kucera was confident he could sell artwork to Seattle patrons, but hoped Art Chicago would be a platform to broadcast the artists on his roster to a much larger audience.

Entering the fair — where curators from around the country would show art to huge crowds of potential buyers — cost a full year's worth of rent. "It was terrifying," Kucera said. "But I had the money and I did it and we did amazingly well. It was like shooting goldfish in a goldfish pond. We just cleaned up." In all, Greg Kucera Gallery has been to 65 art fairs in 38 years.



*"Garden #2" by Sherry Markovitz, a much-sought-after Pacific Northwest contemporary artist represented by Greg Kucera Gallery.
(Courtesy of Greg Kucera Gallery)*

He also began mounting political shows, starting with "Taboo" in 1989, when the culture wars around photographers Andres Serrano ("Piss Christ") and Robert Mapplethorpe (excoriated for "depicting homoerotic acts") were raging, with spectacles like a Republican senator dramatically tearing up an art catalog on the Senate floor. Kucera showed the infamous "Piss Christ" and other much-debated works, arguing that if people were going to take strident rhetorical positions about art, they should at least see the stuff first.

“I have learned that if an artist is repellent to me, or shocking to me, that’s a good reason to pay attention,” Kucera said. “That’s a lesson I’ve learned 100 times — to not let the prude in me, the part that doesn’t want to be troubled, tell me something is not worth considering. You might still hate it, but you walk out with a little more understanding about why the artist is doing what they’re doing.” It’s a lesson we should all take to heart.

A new chapter

After 38 years, Kucera says it’s time to step away, quoting George Suyama, who closed the site-specific gallery Suyama Space in 2017, while Kucera was on its board: “The world is changing and I just don’t feel like changing with it.”

What’s changed? Largely, the requirement to stay abreast of Twitter and Instagram and tending to the twitches of online culture.

“It’s this whole notion of performing in public for the scrutiny of other people, the pretending to be more important than you actually are, the false promise that a lot of these apps offer,” he said. “To be really successful, you have to be paying attention all the time, with people posting their lunches, baby pictures, what cute thing their dog just did. I find it incredibly superficial and tedious, so I pull back. I don’t want to participate.”

Plus, you know, he now owns a castle. In southern France.



Greg Kucera, in his Pioneer Square gallery, faces paintings by David Byrd on exhibit now. Over the years, Kucera has exhibited artists including Robert Motherwell, Morris Graves, Helen Frankenthaler, Jacob Lawrence, Deborah Butterfield, Anthony White, Roger Shimomura, Sherry Markovitz and many more. (Alan Berner / The Seattle Times)

On a personal note, I confess to sometimes finding Greg Kucera a little intimidating. (I'm not alone.) He always maintained a certain graciousness and poise I associate with some Southerners (his mother was from the South), but I know that kind of poise can hide the sharpest of thorns. (My mother was also from the South.) And a man who has known and represented some of the most important, insightful and perceptive artists around? How could that kind of instinct and erudition not be intimidating?

Though notoriously pointed about his frustrations with institutions (in my case, with the press and the waning of dedicated and informed arts journalism), he is even more renowned for being generous with his time, insight and support. When his gallery assistant Scott Lawrimore left to open his own shop down the street in 2006, for example, Kucera could've treated it like a betrayal — instead, he helpfully bought work from the new Lawrimore Project. Just a few months ago, when an art critic in town said they didn't have a car to go see a show at Bellevue Arts Museum, Kucera drove them himself.



A work in carved pine by Humaira Abid, a local artist represented by Greg Kucera Gallery who grew up in Lahore, Pakistan, and whose work deals with themes of gender, violence and searching for home. (Adeel Ahmed)

“There have been so many times when Greg touched my heart,” said [Humaira Abid](#), whom Kucera began representing in 2019. Abid grew up in Lahore, Pakistan, and makes exquisite and haunting paintings and works in carved wood (shoes, suitcases, barbed wire) dealing with gender, violence and searching for home, among other themes. Her decision to attend art school in Lahore was not

universally celebrated, she said, and Kucera's assurance that she could make whatever she wanted — no matter how difficult or controversial — was immeasurably important.

But the little, everyday details of his caring had an even deeper impact: sharing his snack with her during a gallery opening, replying to middle-of-the-night texts when she was on a deadline, coming to pick up work at her studio so he could check on her before a major surgery.

“He inspires me not just to be a better artist but also a better human,” Abid said. “I wish him the very best for this new chapter.”

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