



Partly sunny
and not as warm
70/56

BIG DONATION

In passing, a windfall for county arts



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Cabrillo Gallery Director Tobin Keller sizes up the job to move sculptor Levi Goldman's bronze figurative piece titled 'Ascendance' from the garden at Betty Heil's Corralitos home. The children of Heil, who died in March, left much of her extensive art collection to the county, Cabrillo, and the Museum of Art and History.

Gift from the estate of Betty Heil, who died in March, boosts local public collections

By JASON HOPPIN

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CORRALITOS — Betty Heil's life is being tagged and catalogued, the valuable things (and there are many) being moved off her Mediterranean-style estate, its terra cotta courtyards imprinted into the surrounding dusty apple orchards.

When she died in March at 83, Heil was known as an accomplished glass artist, but also a well-known patron of the arts. She focused her collection on local artists, and Heil's home, still in escrow, is now a half-disassem-

bled monument to the vibrancy of Santa Cruz County's arts scene.

But it wasn't until after Heil's passing, and through the generosity of her four children, that the breadth of Heil's collection became widely known. Heil's estate is giving away more than 150 works, some valued at several thousands of dollars each, to the county, Cabrillo College and the Museum of Art and History.

"We've never had a donation of art like this in the county, ever," said Kathy DeWild, a county recreation supervisor helping over-

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see the acquisition.

In all, the county is obtaining 80 pieces from local artists such as Hildy Bernstein, Mattie Leeds, Susana Arias, Takeshi Nakazawa, Barbara Bailey-Porter and more. Several are going to the Museum of Art and History, and a handful to Cabrillo, including a majestic bronze sculpture by up-and-coming artist Levi Goldman, "Ascendance."

The county is taking the lion's share, and plans to display the art, the bulk of it in the main county building at 701 Ocean St. It is exploring other locales as well.

"It's just an amazing collection of local artists," DeWild said.

The county does have a small permanent collection that for more than a decade has focused solely on county-centric works, acquiring one or two per year. Heil's donation represents a significant addition to that collection, easily doubling the number of pieces acquired during the past 15 years combined.

Collectively, Heil's children decided that their mother's ardent support of the local arts scene should be extended by donating her acquisitions for public benefit. That it helped resolve any sibling disputes over who gets what helped the decision along, though her children (three of whom are working artists) are keeping some pieces.

"It was really a family decision," daughter Wendy Aikin said.

Heil's home on Pleasant Val-



An art collector and patron of the arts, Betty Heil was also an accomplished glass artist.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

ley Road between Aptos and Corralitos is its own gallery. Art is displayed throughout, on walls and in cases. Even an oversized box of rigatoni found in the kitchen is a ceramic riff by artist Karen Shapiro. Outside, colorful ceramics balls and totems peek out from foliage. Beyond the pool is a carefully landscaped sculpture garden.

Heil's husband, Carson, died in 2005. Though there were lean times for the family, Carson Heil rode the tech boom by making "clean rooms" for manufacturing in Silicon Valley and across the globe.

The couple began collecting together, and their taste is evident in their paintings, sculpture, ceramics (and even a painted door or two), but also in the small writing desks, couches, chairs, end tables and bedspreads that decorate the family home. While the collection is seasoned with international works, it is focused on local artists.

"She had been poor enough to weigh the value of a thing,

and rich enough to know its true worth," reads Betty Heil's obituary, printed in the Register-Pajaronian.

A glass artist herself, Heil's family donated her glass studio to Cabrillo College, helping the school offer classes that it could not otherwise provide.

"With Betty's donation, it increases the scope of what we can teach," said Tobin W. Keller, co-chair of Cabrillo's art department. "It's a nice little windfall for our program."

Creativity was a constant in the home, one of the reasons three of her four children pursued a career in the arts.

"There was always a craft project going on when we were kids," said daughter Judy Stabile.

Heil was in her 70s when she started working with glass, taking local art classes and then installing her own studio. She twice hosted a stop on the Cultural Council's Open Studios tour, inviting the pub-

lic to explore her work.

"She just decided she wanted to try some things," said Stabile, a member of the county's arts commission.

But Heil's fondness for county artists was unchecked. She would try to meet them, purchasing pieces directly from them or from exhibitions, rarely at auctions. The pieces are now being documented with tape measures and insurance estimates, her family working off spreadsheets and color printouts spread across an inlaid dining room table.

"She had to like the piece, and she had to like the artist," Stabile said.

When she died, Heil requested there be no funeral or memorial. But last Saturday, her family and friends threw one last fete at her home, in her honor.

"She didn't say we couldn't have a party," Stabile laughed.

The gifts would come later. County residents, Cabrillo students and museum patrons will be the recipients.