

Cannon Beach artist Steve McLeod left strong legacy

Painter, sculptor contributed to study of ocean currents

By ERICK BENGEL
EO Media Group



ERICK BENGEL — EO Media Group
In honor of his life, one of McLeod's kelp sculptures, which he made many of in his later years, sits in the window sill of The Bistro in downtown Cannon Beach.

CANNON BEACH — Steve McLeod, 70, a versatile Cannon Beach artist and ardent beachcomber, died of pneumonia May 11 at Portland's Providence St. Vincent Medical Center three days after being transferred from Providence Seaside Hospital.

"He was by himself," said his friend Dave Butler. "He chose to be by himself."

An evolving artist known for seascapes, abstract paintings, and pieces composed of dried kelp, jetsam and other beach detritus, McLeod's work resides in homes, galleries and other establishments throughout town.

"His paintings are everywhere," former Cannon Beach Mayor Mike Morgan said. "He's very well thought of in the Pacific Northwest."

Robin Risley, a Cannon Beach resident, said McLeod "took life seriously." In his art, "you saw a technical discipline that he had, and I think he kind of approached life that way, too. He wanted to dig into the details ... to make sense of everything."

McLeod is also famous as the person who, in the early '90s, began collecting and selling hundreds of Nike sneakers that washed ashore along the West Coast — and especially the Oregon Coast — after the company's shipping containers en route to Seattle fell overboard and broke open. McLeod's notes on where the shoes ran aground proved valuable to the scientific study of ocean currents.

"He lived close to the rhythms of the tides and of the forests," said Watt Childress, co-owner of Jupiter's Rare and Used Books. "He really loved this place."

A memorial service will held 6 p.m. June 24 at the American Legion Post 168.

Beach scenes

Born Aug. 17, 1944, in Long Branch, N.J., under the name Steven McLeod Woodward, he was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, served in the U.S. Coast Guard and earned a bachelor of arts degree at Utah State University. He adopted "Steve McLeod" as his artistic signature, though he never legally changed his given name, his older brother, Wayne Woodward, said.

In the early 1970s, McLeod settled into Arch Cape and, later, Cannon Beach, where he and other local artists, including Frank Lackaff and Bill Steidel, helped shape the town's identity as an arts colony.

McLeod co-founded the White Bird Gallery with Evelyn Georges in 1971 and displayed his work there and in other regional galleries.

For years, McLeod mostly painted realistic beach scenes featuring things like dories, Haystack Rock, the Tillamook Rock Lighthouse and the Columbia River — work that Cannon Beach resident Marilyn Rooper called "absolutely gorgeous."

"His paintings were masterful," Cannon Beach resident Carolyn Adamson said. "What he could do with light on water was just magical."

Steidel said McLeod was "rather shy and bashful about his work."

"But, at the same time, he was very proud about what he did," Steidel said. "In my mind, he was one of the best artists that Cannon Beach has had."

A new direction

Then, Picasso-like, he entered a new period. His paintings grew less representational, more impressionistic. He began creating kelp-and-seaweed sculptures and collages and other artwork fashioned with the

spoils of his beachcombing, particularly plastic and Styrofoam litter.

"He was looking for things that were not useful to anybody else, stuff that had washed up," Wayne Woodward said. McLeod, a consummate environmentalist, didn't like to see trash on the beach. "He was trying to find useful ways to use that, so he would make sculptures out of it."

Some of McLeod's final work consisted of landscape imagery painted onto small cardboard wine boxes. "I believe (the wine boxes) allowed Steve to experiment with this style without having to commit with large expensive canvases or framing," White Bird Gallery owner Allyn Cantor said.

Though McLeod's later work didn't sell nearly as well as his more accessible seascapes, Sharon Amber, a Cannon Beach artist, told him his abstract work was top-notch. McLeod told her, "This is what's in my heart. This is what I really like to do," she said.

"A lot of people don't understand abstract art," she said. "If he could have taken it to New York, he would have been famous, I think."

Rooper said that true artists, like McLeod, "wants to go places where he hasn't been, moving on, trying new things."

Pierre Toutain-Dorbec, who was collaborating with McLeod on photo book of three-dimensional landscapes based on the artist's sculptures before he died, said Steve was a "true free spirit," which is very rare, he said.

Soles lost at sea

Had McLeod never produced a single work of art, he still would have achieved a kind of immortality thanks to the Great Sneaker Spill of 1990.

On May 27, 1990, a freighter sailing from Seoul, South Korea, lost 21 steel containers; five held tens of thousands of Nike sneakers, four of which broke open, spilling 61,280 shoes into the North Pacific Ocean. The floating footwear eventually turned up along the coastlines of British Columbia, Washington and Oregon, according to a column by flotsam expert Curtis Ebbesmeyer and journalist Eric Scigliano.

When Ebbesmeyer met McLeod, the scientist learned that the "classic starving artist" had gathered beached Nikes from Cannon Beach, Arch Cape,



PIERRE TOUTAIN-DORBEC photo

Steve McLeod, 1944-2015, works in his studio last year. Before he died last month, he had been collaborating with local writer, photographer and former photojournalist Pierre Toutain-Dorbec on a photo book of three-dimensional landscapes based on McLeod's sculptures and the objects McLeod collected on the beaches in the area.



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This oil painting by Steve McLeod currently hangs in The Bistro in downtown Cannon Beach. The painting is an example of McLeod's early landscape work, which was quite popular.

Tillamook and elsewhere, recorded the location where each was found, sold many of them and sometimes incorporated the shoes into his art, Ebbesmeyer wrote. What's more, McLeod had networked with other beachcombers, arranging swap meets and trade fairs where owners of oceanborne Nikes could acquire the missing mates.

Ebbesmeyer used McLeod's information to refine his models of ocean currents. The Smithsonian Institution put on an exhibition illustrating current flows that included some of McLeod's Nikes, Cannon Beach resident Peter Lindsey said.

'More caterpillar than butterfly'

By all accounts, McLeod was kind and intelligent, known for hiking and foraging in the North Coast wilderness and living softly on the land.

While surviving on his art, McLeod secured a few patrons and held down part-time jobs. He often ventured into the nearby forest reserves to hunt for chanterelle mushrooms and sell them to restaurants.

"Steve was an extremely wiry, agile person who could get across the landscape quite handily," Lindsey said.

McLeod lived an independent and intensely private life, which bordered on reclusive, Wayne Woodward said.

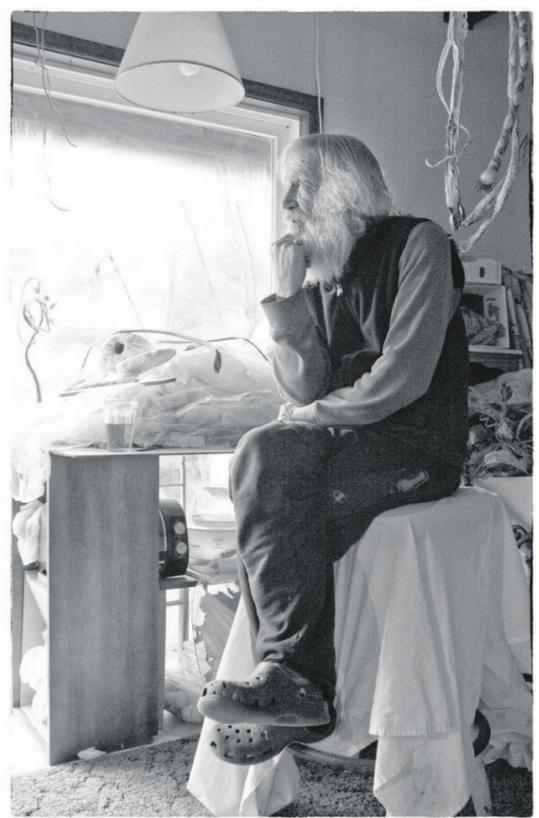
"He was more caterpillar than butterfly, socially speaking," Childress said.

McLeod told his fami-

ly that, upon his death, he wanted all of his artwork and belongings given away. So, late last month, his older brother, Wayne Woodward, and Woodward's wife, Marci Woodward, opened McLeod's loft apartment, just west of the Coaster Theatre, for the community to take what they wanted. His paintings were claimed in no time.

"The community was his family, too," Marci Woodward said.

Days before he died, McLeod told his brother that he was "pretty happy with his life," Wayne Woodward said.



PIERRE TOUTAIN-DORBEC photo

Steve McLeod relaxes in his studio last year. The artist, who lived behind the Coaster Theatre for about 40 years, passed away May 11 from pneumonia.

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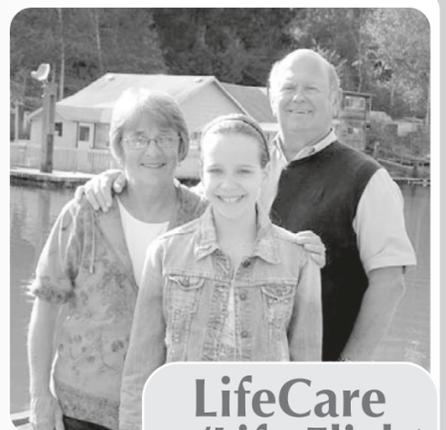
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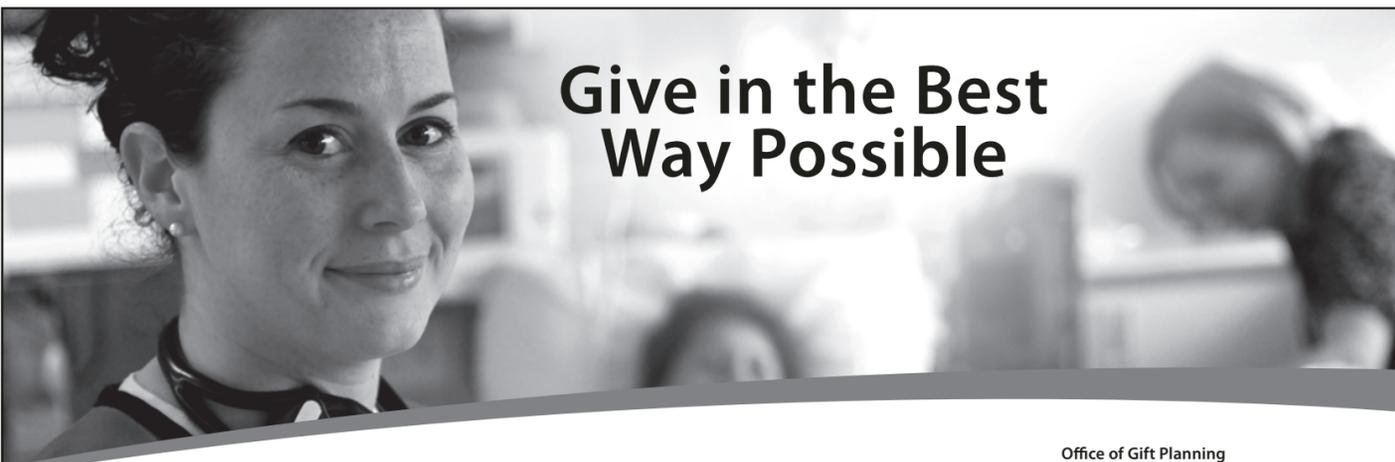


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