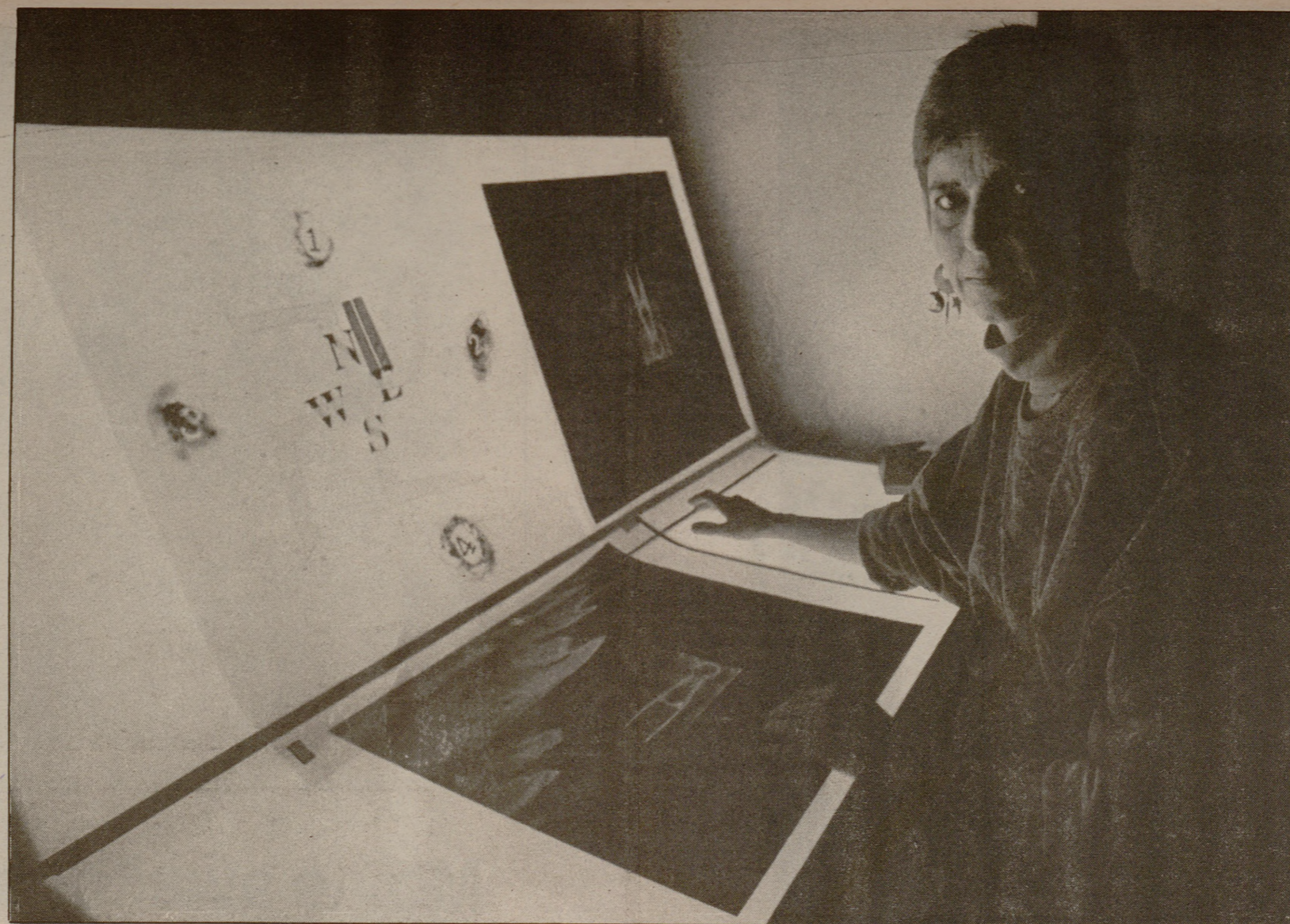


The Arts Council's Local Color Gallery, 310 University Dr. in College Station, will display Hillier's work on Friday from noon to 1 p.m. The exhibit will last through Feb. 28. For more information call 268-2787.



the BIRTH of her ART

By Yvonne Salce

Photos By Phelan M. Ebenhack



Top: Karen Hillier examines some of her artwork on a light table. Above: Karen's husband, Tom Woodfin, displays the sheep shears used in one of her pieces of art.

Karen Hillier's artwork is unique in its form and in its meaning. She's mastered the art of computer-generated artwork with much of her inspiration stemming from her personal experiences.

The 43-year-old artist and professor at Texas A&M had her first child two and a half years ago.

"Much of my artwork grew out of the experience of having a child, both the gestation period and the birthing experience," Hillier says.

"Pregnancy is a very emotional experience for a woman," she says. "It's much more intense than falling or being in love with someone."

Her son, Sam, was born on July 4, 1988. After several miscarriages, she and her husband agree that Sam was "very hard to come by."

Experiencing all the enthusiasm and excitement of having a child and her new fascination with computers, Hillier directed her energies to pursuing a different kind of artwork.

She plans to exhibit her art in a show titled "Cardinal Points" Jan. 18-Feb. 28 at the Arts Council's Local Color Gallery.

This exhibit isn't the traditional art show. You won't find any canvas paintings or sculptures, but you will find images she has created on the computer.

Hillier explains the process. It begins with taking any number of items, such as photographs from books or snapshots and everyday objects. These images, along with images created exclusively in the computer, are manipulated by the computer.

"The computer acts as a central point of collection for the digitized images," Hillier says.

"Once inside the computing environment, it is possible to work with the pictures in any number of ways."

The computing tools in a computer are equivalent to those traditionally found in an artist's studio: paint, scissors, glue, patterns and fonts for text.

"When an image file is completed it is output to 4 inch by 5 inch film via a camera located in the computing system," Hillier says. "Lastly, the negatives are printed as transparencies which closely resemble what the artist sees, or as conventional photographic prints."

"Cardinal Points" debut will be the first solo show for the local gallery. And, the first time for Hillier to utilize only black and white.

"In the past, I used a lot of color with my photography and paintings," says Hillier, who graduated from the University of Texas with a bachelor's degree in fine arts in painting and then pursued her master's degree at the University of Illinois.

But this time, the artist says she had a different motivation to work solely with black and white artwork.

She describes an unusual, eerie and mysterious place she often visited in her dreams, while pregnant with her son.

"In my dream, I would go to an underground place. It often reminded me of a place where the tree roots grow. It was a mysterious, dim-lighted and swampy atmosphere. Somehow, I knew that was where life was made."

Hillier felt this dream place was strongly connected with her pregnancy.

"When you're pregnant, your dreams are unlike anything you've ever experienced before," she says. "You go to bed knowing you're going to have these vivid and active dreams every night."

"I'd talk to other women, who were pregnant, and they'd ask me 'What about the dreams?' I knew exactly what they were talking about."

Sometimes frightening but more mysterious, these dreams strongly affected her work. As a result, Hillier says that tends to make her artwork kind of "spooky."

When you're pregnant, you're in between worlds - one world of life and the other of death, she says.

"There's a strong sense of being connected with the child prior to birth, and at the same time it's a weird experience carrying this creature inside of you that you can't see."

It isn't difficult to see the relationship of birth in Hillier's artwork. In fact, two of her pieces do just that.

One of Hillier's pieces uses a pair of scissors on a black background. Beneath the scissors reads the question, "Would you like to cut the cord?" One's first thought is that of a newborn's umbilical cord being cut from the mother; which makes perfect sense because that's exactly where Hillier was inspired.

"Would you like to cut the cord?" says Hillier, "were the exact words the doctor asked my husband in the delivery room."

Picking up the pair of rough and rusty scissors she used in her artwork, Hillier demonstrates how tough it was to actually cut the cord.

Somewhat amused and surprised she says her husband was amazed how much he had to work to cut the cord.

Karen met her husband, Thomas Woodfin, at Texas A&M, where he presently works as an assistant professor in landscape architecture. Hillier also works in the architecture department, where she teaches video and photography. Until recently, a masters of science in visualization science didn't exist at Texas A&M. Hillier worked in getting the degree approved by the state.

Married for six years, Hillier says her husband has always been very encouraging and supportive of her artwork.

"In fact," she says, "he is quite creative himself." Both Hillier and her husband share a common interest in the southwestern and Indian culture of New Mexico and Arizona.

In another piece of computer-drawn artwork, Hillier depicts the shadow of a human body. In the abdomen is the image of a rope tied in a knot.

"The image of the rope came from a book that was lent to me by a friend," Hillier says. "For me, any kind of object, including the computer is fairgame."

Hillier, first became interested in computers during her pregnancy.

She admits that her first attempts with the computer were awkward.

"As a painter, I could easily identify with the process of mixing the paint and manipulating the strokes with a brush," she says. "With the computer, your hand never touches the artwork. You don't even look at the mouse as it creates an image on the screen."

Once passed the initial awkwardness, Hillier became a master with the tools of computer art.

"I found that a computer, with all its advantages, is very much like a well-equipped artist's studio," she says.

With the computer, you can try an endless number of things, Hillier says.

"Unlike painting, you don't have to risk changing a color or shape, in fear that you'll have to start over. The computer allows you to save, re-do or throw away an image. It makes bringing in text much easier and allows you to make marks that can't be duplicated in the studio."

Hillier's open-mindedness and enthusiasm to use the computer, exhibits her willingness to try different things with artwork.

"I have a wide interest in all different types of media," she says. "Anything you pick up can be a tool."

Although, she realizes the skepticism some traditional artists may have with creating artwork on the computer.

"Some see it as a cold medium and others just aren't familiar with its methodology," she says.

She says with today's society becoming so dependent on computers, it's no surprise that computer generated images are all around us.

Hillier says her early pieces of art dealt with Sam, but also couldn't help being influenced by cultural values. Her interest in the people and cultures of New Mexico, Arizona and The Four Corners inspired her to create the work "Day Pieces."

"Day Pieces" deals with people and how they extend outward to others, but at the same time have to maintain their own identity," explains Hillier. "We all want to be strongly seen as individuals. And, we all want to stay in tune and identify with our culture. But, we also have to get along, knowing when to come together and when to stay away."

She sees this type of dependent relationship happening with the people in these states.

"I feel like I have close ties there (New Mex., Ariz.) and feel very much at home," says Hillier. "You have three separate entities, American Indians, Anglos and Hispanics all having to get along."

The image in 'Day Pieces' resembles a backwards swastika, the Nazi symbol, and originated from the Hopi Indians. When Hillier first saw the sign, she says she felt an enormous attraction to it.

"I kept wondering why I had this magnetism to that symbol," says Hillier. "Finally, I decided to use it and it means a great deal to me."

The image is used a lot in Hillier's 24-piece exhibit. 'Cardinal Points' will also include some of Hillier's photography.

When time and money permit, she does travel with her artwork. Through the 1989 SIEGGRAPH Traveling Art Show, her art has been shown in Australia, Spain, Western Europe, Boston and is presently in Moscow.

Hillier hopes her artwork will speak to other people and give them insight. She says "All I can do is put my own experiences out there, being very specific and honest, with the hopes that it'll tap into something into someone else."

"What richness they gain is up to them. I can't dictate or manipulate their experience. I just hope they have one."