Stephen Poleskie

June 3, 1938 – December 21, 2019

Stephen Poleskie, professor emeritus of Art, died December 21, 2019, at the Nina K. Miller Hospicare Center Residence in Ithaca. He was 81.

Professor Poleskie was an internationally known artist and writer who taught screen printing and studio art classes at Cornell for 32 years.

Stephen Francis Poleskie Jr. (Steve) was born June 3, 1938, in Pringle, Pennsylvania, and graduated from Wilkes University in 1959 with a degree in economics. A largely self-taught artist, he had his first solo show of abstract expressionist work in 1958 at the Everhart Museum in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

After college he worked as a commercial artist and as a designer in a print shop and was an art teacher at Gettysburg High School. He traveled and exhibited his work before establishing a studio on New York City’s Lower East Side in 1962 and enrolling in art classes with figurative painter Raphael Soyer at The New School.

In 1963, Steve opened the city’s first fine art screen-printing studio
on East 11th Street. The shop became Chiron Press, whose clients included pop artists Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg and Robert Motherwell.

“Where did I learn how to screen print?” he said in a 2014 interview. “Certainly not in a classroom, but from reading a book, a technical reference manual I got free at my local Sherwin-Williams paint store.”

Steve sold Chiron Press in 1968 to devote more time to his art, took a teaching job at Cornell that year and learned to fly after he moved to Ithaca. He had an Air Transport Pilot rating and was active in stunt flying as an aerobatic pilot. He appeared at the Pittsburgh Air Show and won many competitions, including the 1977 Canadian Open Aerobatic Championship.

A skilled pilot, he developed his own art form, Aerial Theater, making designs in the sky in performances often accompanied by musicians, dancers and parachutists. An exhibition at the Louis K. Meisel Gallery in New York in 1978-79 featured his biplane and drawings for various aerial performances. He stopped flying in 1998.

Over an artistic career spanning more than a half-century, Steve exhibited around the world. His diverse output included landscapes, figurative and abstract painting, printmaking, and photography.

His artwork is in the collections of several museums, including the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the Morgan Library in New York City; The National Collection in Washington, D.C.; The Walker Art Gallery in Minneapolis; the Milwaukee Art Museum; the Detroit Institute of Art; The Victoria and Albert Museum and the Tate Gallery in London; Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City; and museums in Italy and in Lodz, Poland. The State Museum in Lodz has 55 of Steve’s prints in its collection; the Hobart College Art Gallery in Geneva, New York, has 33.
His fiction, nonfiction, art criticism and poetry appeared in more than 50 literary journals in the United States, Mexico, Australia, Germany, Italy, India, the Czech Republic and Luxembourg. Most recently, he wrote a column, “Then & Now,” for Ragazine.

Steve was nominated three times for the Pushcart Prize, and his short fiction is included in the anthologies “Dove Tales,” “Being Human: Call of the Wild,” “From the Finger Lakes”, and “The Book of Love.” A handmade book of his poetry, “Sky,” is included in the Rare Book Collection at MoMA.

Steve taught courses in printmaking and drawing at both the undergraduate and graduate level, along with a popular seminar for third year undergraduates on contemporary art. His penchant for writing and performance came through in his teaching. Marnie (Dreifuss) Gelfman, B.F.A. ’87 recalls “He was very funny and engaging, often regaling us with wonderful stories! Julie Sherman, B.F.A. ’98 recounts: “I had two classes with Steve Poleskie and have fond memories of both. He told great stories, he was sharp witted, and he had unapologetically high expectations for his students—all of which I enjoyed. I remember loving how his classes focused both on technical skill but also with so much room to explore. I also remember that he always seemed amused by us undergrads and the endless drama—even though he tolerated no excuses. I loved hearing his stories about his skywriting and his press…his casual mentions of working with many famous artists.”

Several colleagues recall Steve’s wit, flamboyance, and generosity. Gregory Page, professor emeritus of art, recalls: “Steve was the ultimate performer not only through his artistic performances, aviation, and aerial stunts but also how he conducted his classes in printmaking. He very often gave the students assignments and leading in with a story of some type that related somehow in the context for the assignment. Most of these stories were accompanied by his flamboyant descriptions and active characterizations of an event. It made for a very entertaining and popular classes that Steve enjoyed for many years.” Professor emeritus Stan Bowman, who chaired the art department from 1980 to 1985 writes: “Steve Poleskie was my colleague and friend for the 30 years I taught in the
Cornell Art Department. To me he was one of my most unusual art department faculty colleagues, outspoken, opinionated, always with unusual points of view about everything. And he could tell the most interesting and fascinating stories about art and the life of artists. Moreover, students just loved him.” Stan also recalls Steve’s generosity, flying him to New York City for several days of gallery visits and introductions to gallerists and artists Steve knew from his years in the city. On their return trip, they encountered dense fog during their landing approach in Ithaca. According to Stan “he decided to do a visual approach which meant getting close enough to the ground to see the landing field, somewhere about 200 feet off the ground. He gave me the job as passenger to look out the window and search for the ground for the runway below. As he got lower and lower he kept asking ‘Can you see the ground yet’? I answered, ‘Not yet’ and he went lower. After several unsuccessful tries suddenly, I did see the ground and yelled ‘I see it...I see it!’ And down he went to gently land on the runway. For someone like myself who had never flown in a small plane this was both exciting and harrowing. To my great relief we touched down on the tarmac and coasted along to find his assigned parking place for the plane.”

Another colleague, Barry Perlus, associate professor emeritus of art, recalls the first time he met Steve at a faculty meeting: “It was my first faculty meeting as a new assistant professor. Faculty meetings were held at lunchtime around a massive circular oak table in the conference room. These were relatively informal affairs - we brought our own sandwiches and so forth. When I came in Steve was already seated on the opposite side of the table. He wore a tie underneath his ubiquitous dark blue lab coat, and in front of him was an elegant table setting he had created with placemat, plate, silverware, cloth napkin, water glass and wine glass. I don’t recall what food he had, but his arrangement was a vivid counterpoint to the usual brown bags and paper napkins scattered around the table, and he performed his character as nonconformist impeccably.”

and fiction collections were “The Third Candidate,” “Grater Life,” “Vigilia’s Tempest,” “Acorn’s Card,” “Sconto Walaa”, and “Foozler Runs.”

He also was a visiting artist and visiting professor at colleges, universities and art schools around the world. He did an artist residency at the American Academy in Rome, and as a guest artist he toured the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia, as well as Honduras for the United States Information Agency.

He is survived by his wife, the novelist Jeanne Mackin.

Biographical material adapted from the January 15th Cornell Chronicle article by Dan Aloi

Reflections on Professor Poleskie’s teaching and departmental service collected and edited by Barry Perlus