

A catalyzing force  
for more than  
60 years, artist  
Katie Ohe continues  
to shape the future  
of contemporary art  
in Alberta



written by **Jacquie Moore, BA'97**  
photographed by **Jason Stang**

**I**n the spring of 1975, **Bill Perks** — then dean of the university's fledgling Faculty of Environmental Design (now the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape) — visited Katie Ohe in her studio on the western outskirts of Calgary. At the time, Ohe, who grew up in Peers, Alta., was one of the only artists in western Canada experimenting with abstract sculpture.

"When Bill arrived, I was working on a difficult piece, trying to resolve the whole concept of it," says Ohe, Hon. LLD'01, who, at 83, is as lithe and nimble as she must have been as a teen, but whose startlingly muscular hands show the effects of decades spent spinning metal into poetry.

contributions to how artists and art-lovers make and respond to art — from the diversity of the materials she uses to the idiosyncratic way she experiments with movement — Ohe's courage of creativity cannot be overstated. Trained in Edmonton, Montreal, New York and Verona, Ohe's recent solo retrospective at the Esker Foundation (for which the *Zipper* was removed from its campus home for nearly a year) traced her masterful journey from figures and abstraction to the large-scale forms she's best-known for.

One of Ohe's most pressing preoccupations these days is the creation of a legacy that captures her and Kiyooka's shared heart of generosity to elevate other artists and make contemporary visual culture accessible. The newly opened, 20-acre Kiyooka Ohe Arts Centre on the couple's Springbank property west of Calgary is a sustainable, art-in-nature destination. In addition to a planned interpretive gallery, the centre includes a Sculpture Park that includes large Canadian and European welded-steel works from the 1960s to present — a kind of sanctuary for monumental art retired from public urban life or donated by collectors' estates.

# Ohe to Watch

Perks was mesmerized. "He came back for a second look, and then convinced the university to buy the piece," Ohe says.

Ohe was delighted by Perks' visionary decision to place her chrome-plated steel loop in the middle of the Science Theatres foyer. "At that point in time, the idea was that people shouldn't stumble over art," she says.

Indeed, the now-iconic *Zipper*, which has had a home on campus for nearly 50 years, was intended to entice passers-by to touch, spin and otherwise engage with its kinetic energy; students have been known to extract good luck from its shiny, optical-illusory surface.

In 2001, Ohe, who is married to professor emeritus of art Harry Kiyooka, received an honorary doctorate from the University of Calgary for her influence over the development of the arts in Alberta. Through her

Despite having pieces in galleries, museums and private collections around the world, Ohe doesn't like to be made a fuss about; she refers to herself simply as a "worker." She still spends several hours a day in her studio, designing and building new pieces and, equally important to her, supporting other artists. (In a corner of her studio are pieces of a prototype worked on by artist Charles Boyce for his *Spire*, a.k.a. "the paper clip" that stands outside the Olympic Oval.)

Bold, playful and unrelentingly experimental, Ohe is a catalyst for artistic innovation and a rare treasure we're proud to be connected to. We can't wait to see what she'll do next. •