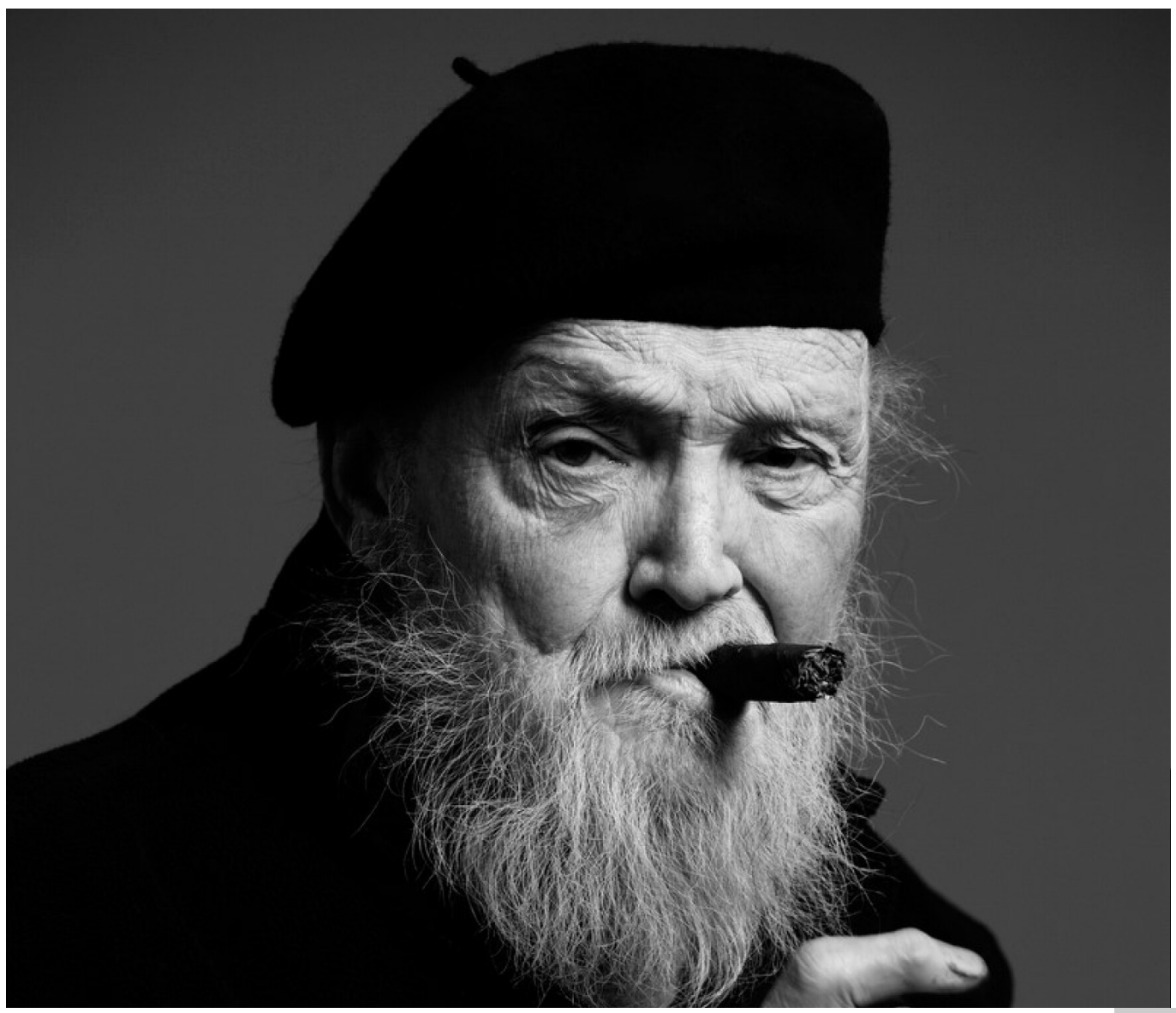


Jim Leedy, Crossroads Arts District visionary and longtime Kansas City Art Institute professor, dies at 91

KCUR | By [Laura Spencer](#)



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Artist and retired Kansas City Art Institute professor Jim Leedy has died at the age of 91.

Leedy served as a professor in the sculpture department at the Kansas City Art Institute for more than 40 years, from 1966 until he retired in 2008.

Jim Leedy was a painter, printmaker, sculptor, performance and mixed media artist — but he considered clay his favorite medium.

"Clay was always a part of my life," he [told writer Kara Rooney](#). "I grew up playing with it."

He added, "But from the very beginning of my life I did know that I was an artist. And that's strange because there was very little art around."

An artist and retired professor at the Kansas City Art Institute, Leedy helped spearhead the Crossroads Arts District. He died early Sunday morning at the age of 91 in Lake Lotawana, Missouri.

Leedy served as a professor in the sculpture department at the Kansas City Art Institute for more than 40 years, from 1966 until he retired in 2008.

Artist Hugh Merrill started teaching at KCAI in 1976.

"And I don't really remember the first time I met him," Merrill told KCUR, "but I do remember a general sensation of here's this guy who's bigger than life, with this jean jacket on and across the jean jacket it's probably 2000 different kinds of buttons."

"And, it was like, this guy's really cool," Merrill said. "You know, a theatrical character and larger-than-life kind of character."





Jim Leedy/Weinberger Fine Art /

Jim Leedy's mixed media on canvas work called "Orb I."

Priced out of renting a space in Westport for a studio and gallery, Leedy started looking for a new location. In the 1980s, he purchased rundown buildings along Baltimore and Wyandotte in downtown Kansas City and co-founded the Leedy-Voukos Art Center in 1985 at 1919 Wyandotte. He encouraged others to move into the neighborhood.

The area, now known as the Crossroads Arts District, is filled with restaurants, shops and galleries.

"A lot of people would agree if I said he was a visionary," his daughter, Stephanie

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something, he could see that there was a future down here.”

Related: [Jim Leedy and Stephanie Leedy at the StoryCorps Mobilebooth in Kansas City](#)

Leedy was born on Nov. 6, 1930, in McRoberts, Kentucky, and grew up in rural parts of Montana, Ohio and Virginia. His artistic talents led to stints cartooning for a local paper and to photography – a skill he honed while serving in the U.S. Army from 1951 to 1952 during the Korean War.

After the war, he moved to New York where he moved in the same circles as Abstract Expressionist artists such as Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock.

He went on to earn a BFA from Richmond Professional Institute (now known as Virginia Commonwealth University), an MFA from Southern Illinois University and an MA in art history from Michigan State University.

Leedy started teaching at Northern State College in Aberdeen, South Dakota, and from 1960 to 1964 taught at the University of Montana in Missoula, where he forged influential friendships with ceramic artists Rudy Autio and Peter Voulkos.

In 1966, he moved to Kansas City, Missouri, to assume a professorship at the Kansas City Art Institute, where he taught for 42 years – and continued making art.

“While inspired by the history of art, including early cave paintings, non-Western sculpture, ancient Chinese pottery, Méret Oppenheim, and Abstract Expressionism – Leedy asserts that his best teacher is nature,” wrote curator Heather Lustfeldt when Leedy was awarded a 2003 Charlotte Street Foundation Visual Artist Award. “His totemic, visceral clay works and assemblages reveal his reverence for nature and the creative spirit within.”



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Jim Leedy/Leedy-Voukos Art Center /

The Jim Leedy Room at the Leedy-Voukos Art Center features a range of works, such as this ceramic piece, by the artist.

Leedy's service during the Korean War and the horrors he witnessed were reflected in his work, including [War](#), which was exhibited in 2000 at Grand Arts gallery in Kansas City. It featured, as Leedy described it, "a massive wall of skull and bones titled 'The Earth Lies Screaming.'"

"With their brilliant colors and lunar surfaces, some call them (Leedy's paintings) cosmic," [wrote former Kansas City Star art critic Alice Thorson](#). "His ceramics – made of thrown, torn and twisted clay – broke new ground."

Leedy's work is included in the collections of numerous museums, including the American Craft Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri.

The Leedy family posted a statement Sunday on Facebook: "We are comforted in knowing that Jim will continue to live on through his extravagant stories, genuine friendships and influential artwork he has created around the world. Thank you to all who have shared, and continue to share, your memories of Jim. It keeps our hearts full during this difficult time."

Services will be announced.



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Laura Spencer

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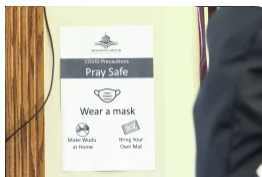
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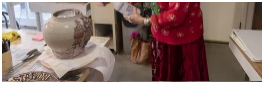
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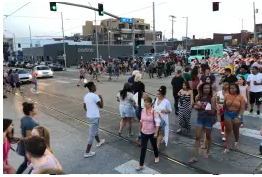


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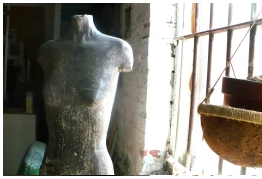
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