

Creative life-style keeps Cole Valley artist young

BY CHRIS SMITH

Helen Ludwig rummages through a lifetime of artwork — oil paintings, collages, watercolors — stacked in rows in the sunny and slightly cluttered upstairs studio in her brightly-painted Cole Valley home.

She's looking for an Asian-style landscape she painted with sumi ink in the 1960s, but it's no easy task. "After almost 80 years of art, you accumulate a lot of stuff," she says, adding that she recently counted 97 sketchbooks lying around the house.

A square in St. Petersburg, a laughing woman in a Parisian café, a bridge over the Danube in Vienna — these paintings sit next to etchings of Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park and shelves full of ceramic sculptures. Each sparks a memory for Ludwig, 88, an artist and advocate for the disabled and elderly.

Americans are living longer and fuller lives, and Ludwig exemplifies this trend. Nearly one in every eight Americans is over the age of 65, according to the Administration on Aging, and a 1999 report by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHC) shows that those over 85 are the fastest growing segment of the elderly population.

Ludwig is at the forefront of another trend, too: she is one of a growing number of seniors (almost 75 percent, according to the NCHC) staying active well past retirement age.

Born the middle child of 11 in rural Tolland, Conn., in 1911, Helen E. Ludwig says her parents, especially her mother, a Swiss immigrant named Bertha Trittenbach, inspired her interest in the arts and her subsequent career. "Nobody's born with talent," Ludwig says. "Who is born playing the piano? That's nonsense. If you're encouraged at an early age,



CHRISTINE JEGAN / OBSERVER

Cole Valley artist Helen Ludwig, 88, explains one of her ceramics art pieces that decorates a wooden fence in her garden with numerous other ceramic sculptures she created over the years.

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you'll develop skills."

Her abilities were soon evident. A meticulously rendered line drawing of a rose, signed "Helen Ludwig, Age 9," sits at the front of one stack of paintings.

After attending the Hartford Art School, Ludwig worked for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in New York City, where she participated in its Mural project in the 1930s. She also had her first showing at this time, at a gallery on 57th Street. Later, Ludwig illustrated children's books and worked as a window dresser on Fifth Avenue, painting the backgrounds for the window displays of Saks Fifth Avenue, among others.

Ludwig met her late husband, V.J. "Jerry" McGill, in New York, and they moved to San Francisco in 1957 when he accepted a philosophy professorship at San Francisco State University. The two had a daughter, Maisie, who now lives in northern California.

Ludwig fell in love with the city, and began painting what she saw. Her art was often a team effort, as her husband accompanied her on painting trips: "[Jerry] always sat in the car reading while I painted, and it was wonderful," she remembers.

Numerous showings, and critical acclaim, followed. The Smithsonian holds 41 of her sketchbooks in its archives, and she was recognized last year by San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown's office, where a few of her paintings hang.

Her next show will be at City Hall in June, a retrospective of mostly San Francisco-themed watercolors and collages.

Ludwig's involvement with the disabled dates back almost as far as her artistic career. When she was a teen-ager, her brother Marty was paralyzed in a construction accident, and the prognosis was grim. "In those days, they [doctors] did nothing for people," she remembers. "They just expected them to die."

The family brought Marty home and, installing pulleys on the ceiling so he could move around more easily, helped him live years longer than the doctors had predicted. She still has a circular chair cover — its yellow and

orange geometric designs faded by time — he stitched during those last years. "I still treasure it," she says.

Her life changed in 1977, when her husband died of a brain tumor. "I was a wreck," Ludwig says, "but I made the decision that I was going to use the rest of my life. If you keep your mind going in a creative way, there's something to live for."

Throwing herself into volunteer work, Ludwig became involved with the Recreation Center for the Handicapped, where she worked until recently, and the Richmond Senior Center, where she still teaches ceramics classes three days a week to elderly students. Jim Patten, the Center's Director, marvels at both her energy and her teaching skills.

"She's able not only to plug into people of different capabilities physically, but to people of

different artistic abilities. She really encourages people to stretch their boundaries," he says.

In addition to teaching, Ludwig swims twice a week and continues to paint regularly. She credits an active mind and body, along with good nutrition, for her health. "I'd be a mess otherwise," she says.

Ludwig has big plans for the future: she's looking for a publisher for her new book, "Drawings and Doodles from Decades of the Past," compiled from her overflowing sketchbooks, and she is helping the Richmond Senior Center sell some of its students' work.

Recounting her life story, Ludwig says, "makes me feel like an antique." She laughs, then adds, "But I'm not going to die soon. I'm going to live to be 100. I've still got too much to do."