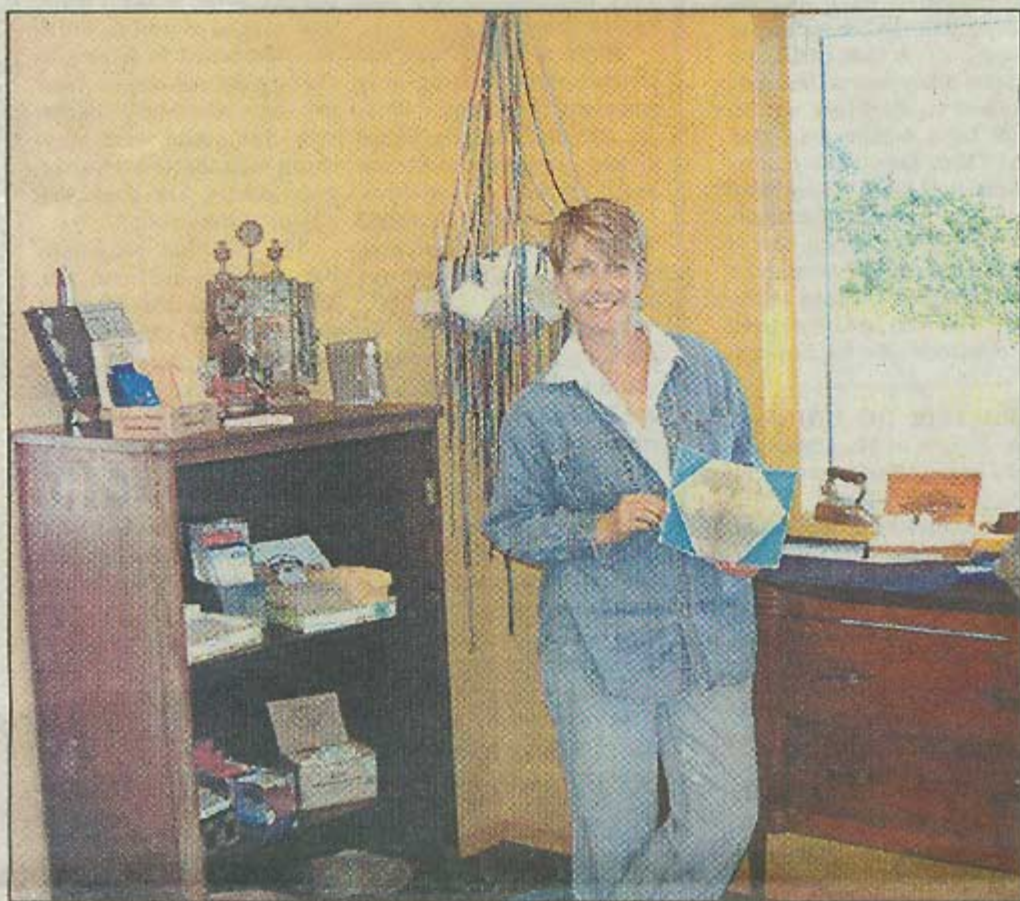


Valley Ridge Art Studio offers artists unique, rural experience



KATHY MALKASIAN, artist and owner of Valley Ridge Studio, shares the beauty of her Muscoda area home with teachers and students who attend workshops at the studio. Kathy creates unique books that express her responses to the written word. Valley Ridge workshops focus on writing and creative book covers.

By LAUREN JACKSON

"Art as a therapeutic process is undeniable," says artist Kathy Engen Malkasian as she sits in her Muscoda area studio next to a table with her artwork — her books.

Kathy creates most of her work here in this studio that looks out over a valley and the rolling hills beyond. Inside, the room is decorated with a bear rug, Kathy's own pastel drawings, cards and photography. In one large section of the studio, three tables are covered with materials such as paper, cloth scraps, wooden miniatures, photos, paint, and anything that Kathy can use to create a book to express herself both verbally and visibly.

"People traditionally view a book as something you read and discard,"

Kathy says. But her books are art in 3-D form. Books can have a double meaning, she says. "The book becomes sculpture."

Kathy is a member of the Bone Folders Guild, a group of non-conventional artists that create or alter books in order to express how they feel about the words in a book. A bone folder is a long, polished piece of bone or wood that is used as an aid in book binding. For book binders, the bone folder is "their right hand," according to Kathy.

It was while taking a class on book- and box-making that Kathy began seriously creating book art.

"I realized how kinesiologically (physically) connected I am to books," she says. "They just feel good."

Born in Madison, Kathy

attended East High School and earned her masters degree in marriage and family therapy at Edgewood College. About 10 or 12 years ago she was running an art therapy studio in Madison, but the property values were very high, so she and her husband began looking elsewhere for space. They looked in the Spring Green area and in Highland, and

then came out to the Muscoda area. The Malkasians fell in love with the land and they bought a home and 120 acres on Witek Road. They now split their time between their home here and a condo in Madison.

About four years ago, the Malkasians built a classroom next to Kathy's studio. It is there that she shares her love of books inside and out with others.

It is called Valley Ridge Art Studio.

In her brochure for the studio, Kathy writes that it "is a communal art space in southwestern Wisconsin for people to actively explore, learn and create the arts and crafts of life."

Kathy invites artists and writers to teach classes for small groups. One of those people is Wisconsin's Poet Laureate Ellen Kort, who stays in Kathy's home on the property when she is there.

"It rejuvenates her," Kathy says Kort has told her of her time at Valley Ridge.

Kathy knows many of the artists that teach at her studio personally. One of those people is Karen Timm, a book artist and business owner based in Madison.

The classes offered at Valley Ridge this year have varied themes, but are all centered on books and expressions and responses to books. The titles of some of the workshops include: "Writing Our Place in the World," "Tunnel Books," "The Magic of Pop-ups," and "Stringing Words, Stringing Beads."

While she had a wide array of subjects when she first began the studio, Kathy has narrowed the focus to book arts and writing. She ran photography classes at one time, but stopped because of a small response.

This year is the first time Valley Ridge has offered two-day workshops, and they are already filled up. Next year she plans some three-day workshops and also plans to expand the writing workshops.

The natural environment surrounding the studio is just as integral to the art process as the studio space itself. Kathy says book artist and workshop leader Caren Heft has told her "This is an incredible space for me to work in." Heft also likes to watch the bats fly, Kathy says.

"Many of them (workshop leaders) don't come to an environment like this," Kathy says.

That is probably also why she has so many return clients. They come from all over the Midwest: Chicago, Iowa, Milwaukee, Superior.

"People comment that they are just taken away by the view and the quiet," Kathy says as she looks out onto the valley which is now green with the summer foliage. "People find it incredibly relaxing."

She also says that her clients and workshop leaders all have their "spots" on the property, a place where they can work and view the landscape away from the classroom.

Kathy keeps the classes small, with a limit of about 12 people. She doesn't want people stuck in the classroom like sardines.

"I think they appreciate that," she says.

No one has ever shared a negative experience at Valley Ridge with her, Kathy says.

Most of the one-day classes at Valley Ridge Studio are \$65, while the two-day classes are \$235. Participants this year have already had the chance to create personalized book covers, gift-wrap, memory books, wearable bead art, and altered books.

Valley Ridge Art Studio asks its teachers and students "What constitutes a book?"

"It asks you to participate in it," Kathy says of her own books that she has created, altered, or responded to.

Even Kathy's personal journals are visual feasts for the eye. A journal that she kept on a trip to Florence, Italy contains not only words but objects that she

picked up on the trip. Folds and envelopes in the pages hold her train tickets and postcards, and brightly colored paper is used.

Another of her books is a response to an Ellen Kort poem that begins "If death were a woman, would she let me replay my life?" The book is made from a small

microfilm reel, a roll of negatives that unwinds to reveal the words of the poem, and is illustrated with black and white photos. Both the book and the poem are there to be discovered by the reader.

Kathy's work and her studio seem to be saying

that art does more than imitate life, sometimes, art is life.

For more information about Valley Ridge, call 608-250-5028 or see the website, www.valleyridgestudio.com.