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Beyond the Words: Author Portraits by Carl Köhler

Posted: January 26, 2010, 7:15 AM by Mark Medley
Art



In the early 1950s, a young painter and sculptor named Carl Köhler left the Swedish Royal Academy of Fine Art and headed to Paris, as many young artists are wont to do. There, he fell in love with French literature. When Köhler passed away in 2006 at the age of 86, he left behind an impressive collection of paintings, sculptures and drawings. Among his work was a group of about 100 portraits inspired by literature — what Köhler called his “authorportraits” — 27 of which are now on display at the University of Toronto in a new exhibit called Beyond the Words: Author Portraits by Carl Köhler.

Köhler painted such notable writers as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Joyce Carol Oates, Virginia Woolf, Henry Miller, Franz Kafka and Günter Grass. Each painting is as distinctive as the author it celebrates; they do not remain anchored to one particular style or technique. Henry Miller is reimagined as a “demon,” fitting for an author whose novel *Tropic of Cancer* was accused of breaking obscenity laws in the United States in the early 1960s. Sometimes Köhler seems to channel the author’s writing style in his paintings, such as his likeness of the avant-garde writer Samuel Beckett, or a portrait of the famously prolific Joyce Carol Oates, which, though accomplished, looks as though it may have been dashed off in 15 minutes.

“My father used different techniques for different characters; whatever suited the character he worked on,” explains Köhler’s son, Henry, the curator of the exhibit.

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Here ye!

The second title in The Afterword Reading Society is Colum McCann's *Let The Great World Spin*.

Our panel – Benjamin Errett, Kimberly Walsh, Julie Wilson, Brad Frenette, Mark Medley and Ron Nurwisah – will convene in this space to discuss the book each Wednesday starting on March 31.

Have a look around the book [here](#).



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In a series of emails to the Post, Henry said he thought his father's "lack of self-confidence when it comes to his own writing" explained why his father was particularly interested in painting "big, classic authors." Köhler had a huge library, and wrote himself, but never published anything.

"I think my father did these portraits because he was so interested in the characters," Henry says. "He looked up to the authors he did portraits of. They had to really inspire him."



Henry hopes the exhibit will inspire others to learn more about Köhler's life and work. While fairly well known in his native country, Köhler hardly exhibited outside Sweden during his lifetime. With the exhibit already having visited Washington and New York — where it earned a nod from the Times — and travelling to Vancouver next, that is slowly changing.

"I hope that people, after visiting the exhibit ... see behind the author's faces and see the personalities. And hopefully they feel that these portraits are something new and unique," says Henry.

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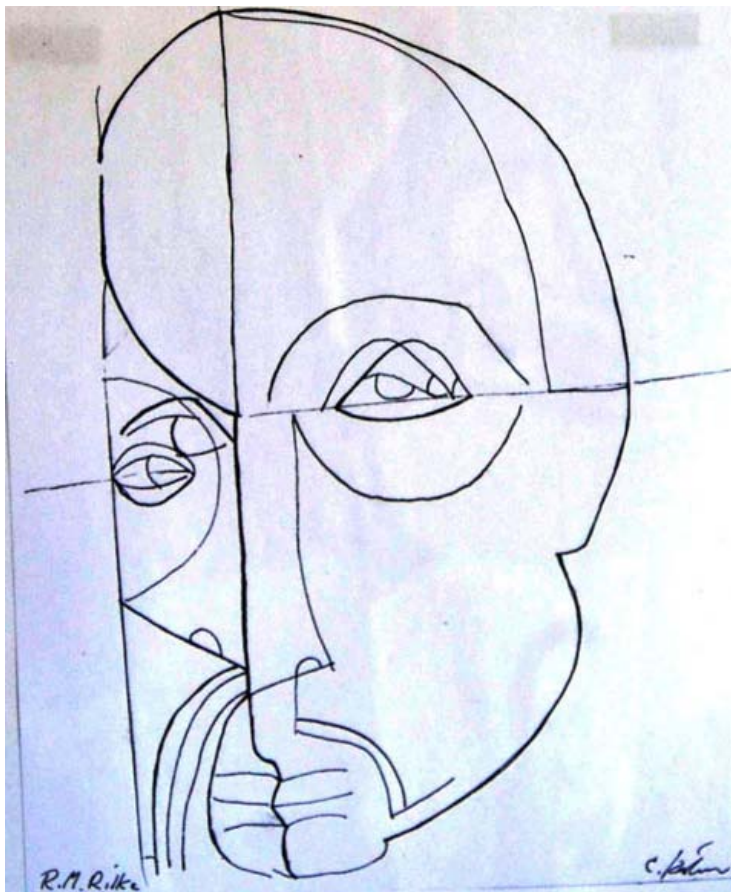
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And how do the subjects themselves feel about Köhler's work? No one really knows. Besides a few Swedish writers Köhler knew, most of the authors were probably unaware these paintings exist.

"The thing is, he didn't reach out to the writers so well," Henry says. "He needed someone to help him with that."

• **Beyond the Words: Author Portraits by Carl Köhler continues at University of Toronto's Robarts Library until March 14.**

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[From top: Samuel Beckett; Joyce Carol Oates; R.M. Rilke; Italo Calvino]

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