

Ruth Kirchmeier, Master of Woodcuts, Marks 50 Years with Retrospective Show

By KATE BRANNEN

Up the stairs, on the second floor of Ruth Kirchmeier's house, is her art studio. It is cluttered with little tins full of colored pencils and cups holding different carving tools. There are posters and maps rolled up in the corner. Her woodcuts, which she has been doing for 50 years, are stored on shelves along the wall. Several desk lamps are scattered about, adding to the natural light that pours in from the skylight above. The room feels light and airy in July, but it's easy to imagine how cozy it must be in the winter.

The walls around her work space are covered with old photographs, postcards, poems clipped from the *New Yorker* magazine, newspaper articles and several of her own drawings. In this space, Ms. Kirchmeier has toiled away for years, perfecting the skills behind her intricate woodcut prints.

At times tedious, the technique required to make woodcut prints takes tremendous patience, attention to detail and stamina. The process can take

months to complete, from sketching the first drawing to transferring the image to wood and then carefully carving each line and applying the paint.

"It's an exercise in insanity," Ms. Kirchmeier said with a laugh. "But, I feel very privileged to be able to do it."

To celebrate 50 years of Ms. Kirchmeier's work, Hermine Hull, a friend and fellow Island artist, is hosting a retrospective exhibit at her gallery, the Hermine Merel Smith Fine Art Gallery in West Tisbury.

Ms. Kirchmeier now draws every day and devotes endless hours to her work, but looking back on her years as an artist, she said she hasn't always been able to pursue her art so diligently.

"It took me a long time to recover from art school," she said. At the young age of 19, Ms. Kirchmeier attended Cooper Union in New York city.

She still has the carving knife, the chipper and the wooden spoon that she used in school. She bought the knife

and the chipper at the school's art supply school, instructed by her professor that they were the only tools she'd ever need. The old spoon, which she believes was one of her mother's, is like an old friend who's been with her for years.

She described art school as heaven. She loved her time with her professors and colleagues and treasured their feedback and encouragement.

"Art is a very solitary endeavor," said Ms. Kirchmeier. Being without the company and support of fellow artists after leaving art school was, she said, "a stunning blow."

To counteract this, Ms. Kirchmeier has learned to seek out other artists to meet with throughout her career.

When she lived in New York city, she painted and sketched with a friend. They would take trips around Brooklyn, painting side by side.

During that time, she did an intricate drawing of the old conservatory at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, which she later turned into a woodcut. She said the delicate architectural details of the conservatory required her to use cherry wood. Back then, she just used her chipper, which she said gave her early work a raw, vital look.

These days, with arthritis in what she described as her "gnarly hands," she uses pine wood, which is softer and easier to carve. She's also traded in her chipper for gouges, giving her woodcuts a more fluid look. She said her work no longer has the vitality of youth, but has acquired a beauty that comes with more developed vision.

On the Island she meets with a group of artists once a month for a pot luck dinner. They critique each other's work, resolve problems together and generally talk shop. Ms. Kirchmeier said they've been meeting for about seven years.

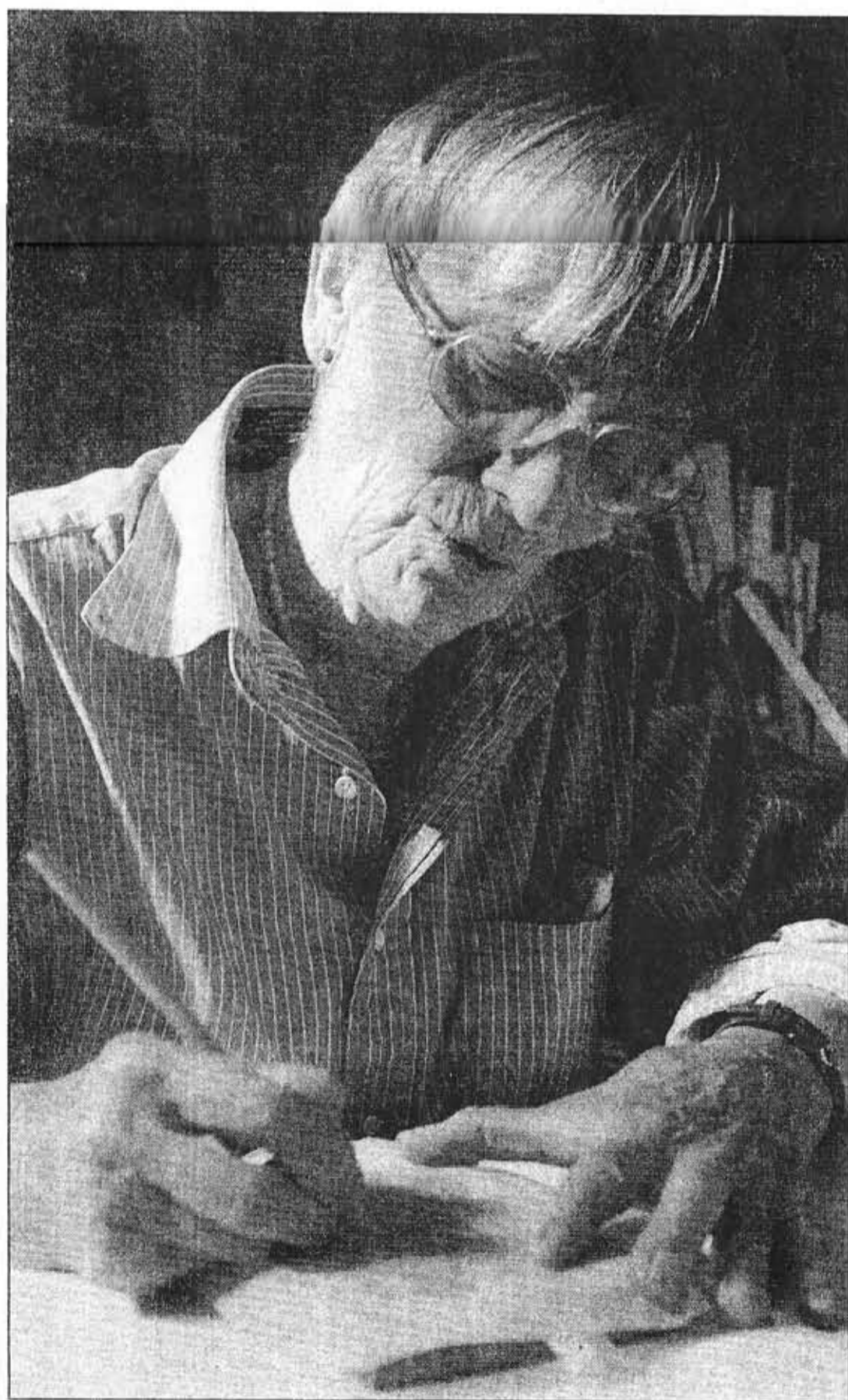
"You need somebody at the end of the day to talk things out with," said Ms. Kirchmeier. She advises young artists to do the same to avoid the feeling of being adrift.

In addition to drawing, Ms. Kirchmeier tries to hike or swim at least once a day, calling these outdoor activities natural anti-depressants. She also likes to accompany her partner of 18 years, Nelson Bryant, a former *New York Times* outdoors columnist, on his fishing trips. She sits on the shore or in the canoe with him, sketching black and white, pen and ink drawings, which she will take back to her studio to eventually turn into a woodcut print.

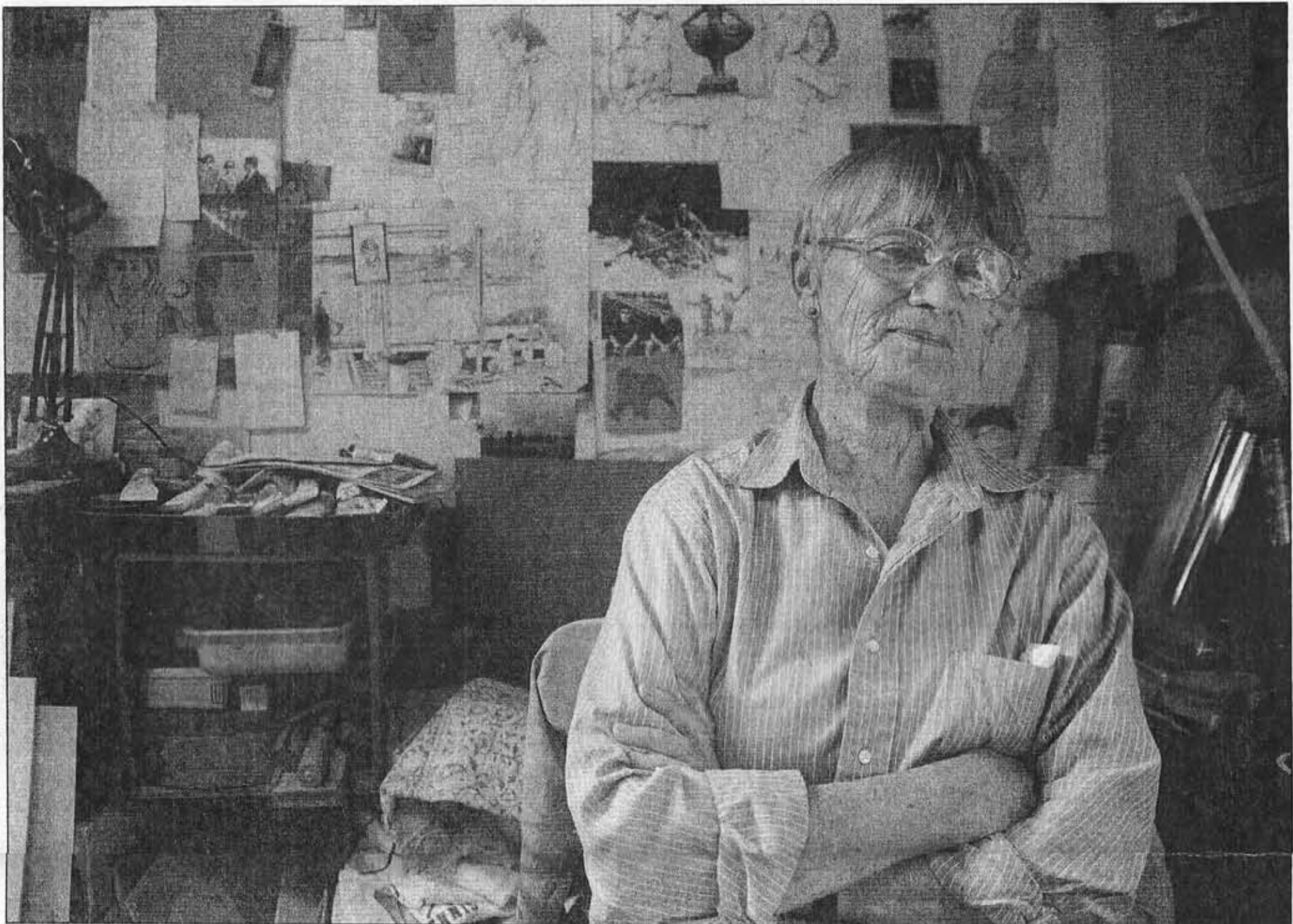
She made a series of prints of Mr. Bryant fishing on a small boat with the foothills of Maine's Mount Katahdin in the background. She sat on a boulder and watched as the bright colors of day faded into early evening, which she captured in her prints by changing the colors of paint ever so slightly.

In her studio, two postcards of Mount Katahdin, painted by Marsden Hartley, are pinned up on a bulletin board. He is one of several artists that Ms. Kirchmeier admires.

"When I was a young person I really loved (Pierre) Bonnard and (Edgar) Degas," said Ms. Kirchmeier. "The older I get, the more I appreciate the minor and major artists. I'm



DAILY DRAWINGS ARE PART OF HER ROUTINE.



IN HER WEST TISBURY STUDIO, ARTIST REFLECTS ON LONG YEARS OF WORK.

Pictures by Jaxon White

a big appreciator."

Albrecht Dürer, the renowned German painter and wood carver, also ranks high on her list of favorites. He was also loved by Ms. Kirchmeier's father, who was a cabinetmaker and carver.

"He was a great lover of art," said Ms. Kirchmeier of her father. "He really inspired me."

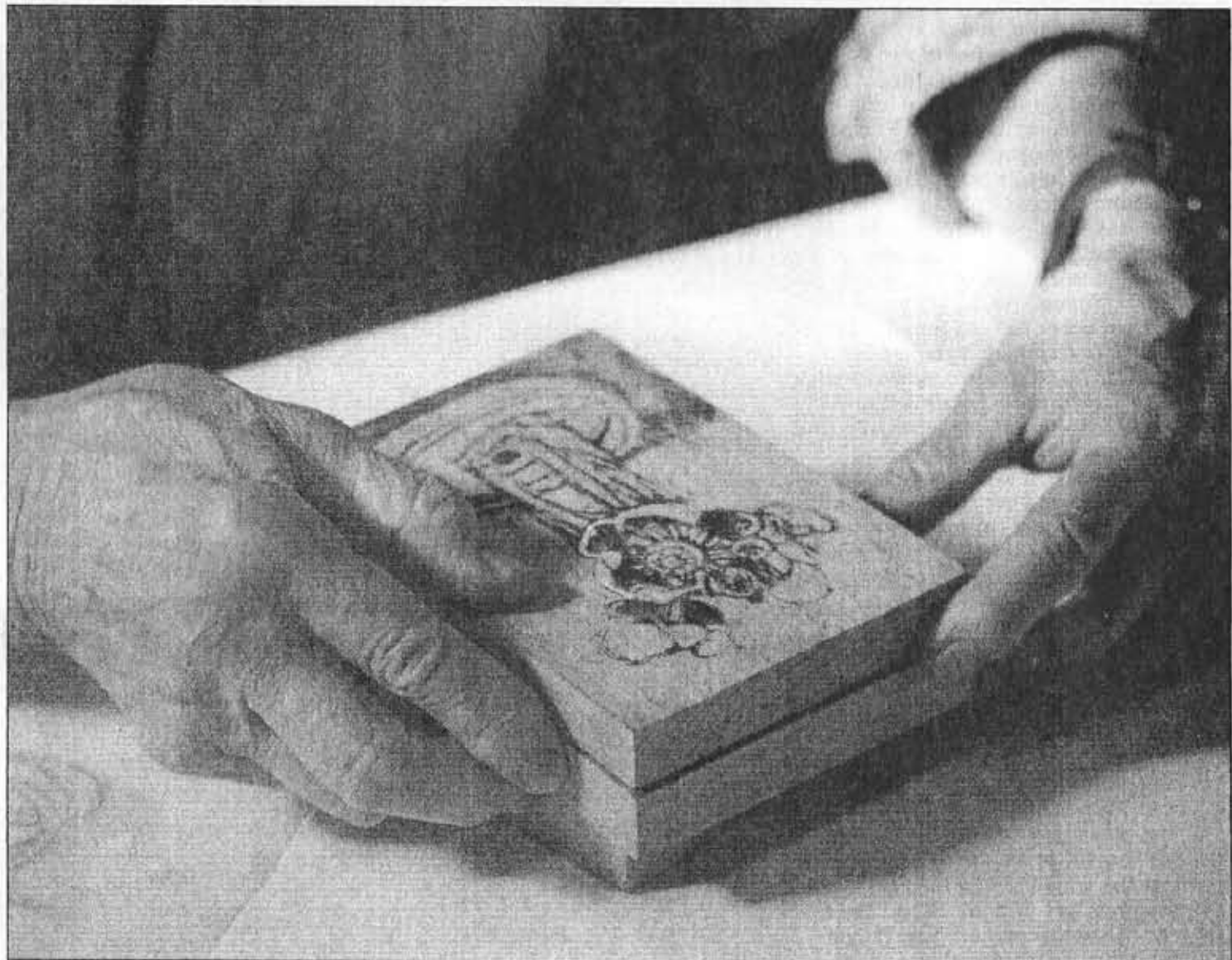
As for her other inspiration, the Island which she calls home, she said it's changed into a real resort destination.

She said she enjoys her secluded enclave in West Tisbury where she can hunker down and do her work. Outside her tucked-away house is a flower garden of brilliant colors. An arbor of light pink roses arches over it.

Ms. Kirchmeier doesn't plan on resting after 50 years of work. She has plans to tackle a project that she's been thinking about for years; making a woodcut print of Great Rock Bight, one of her favorite spots on the Island.

The stunning view she hopes to capture includes knotting and twisting oak trees, which she says are incredibly difficult to carve. After years of making prints, the master woodcut artist said she still needs to build up courage when starting a new project.

Ruth Kirchmeier: A Retrospective of 50 Years opens Sunday, July 8, with an open reception from 4 to 7 p.m. The exhibition runs through the summer at Hermine Merel Smith Fine Art, 548 Edgartown-West Tisbury Road in West Tisbury.



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