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Opinion

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Our View

Consensus of the Press-Citizen Editorial Board

In Mauricio Lasansky's artistic vision, every human being was larger-than-life

In his one-paragraph short story, "On Exactitude in Science" (1946), Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1968) describes an empire in which "the Art of Cartography has attained such Perfection" that the mapmakers were no longer content with drawing smaller versions of reality. Instead, they create a "Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire" — a map that just as large as the area it was supposed to represent.

Nearly 20 years later, Borges' younger countryman, Mauricio Lasansky (1914-2012), unveiled a collection of drawings that attempted to map the horrors and degradation to the spirit that the Nazi regime had perpetrated on its victims. And as with Borges's Empire-size map, Lasansky's "Nazi Drawings" presented life-size images of torture, pain and psychological turmoil.

"Dignity is not a symbol bestowed on man, nor does the word itself possess force," Lasansky wrote in his 1966 introduction to the collection. "Man's dignity is a force and the only modus vivendi by which man and his history survive."

Lasansky's art demonstrates how fervently he believed human beings should never be reduced in size. He himself already was a larger-than-life figure in 1945 when UI president Virgil M. Hancher invited

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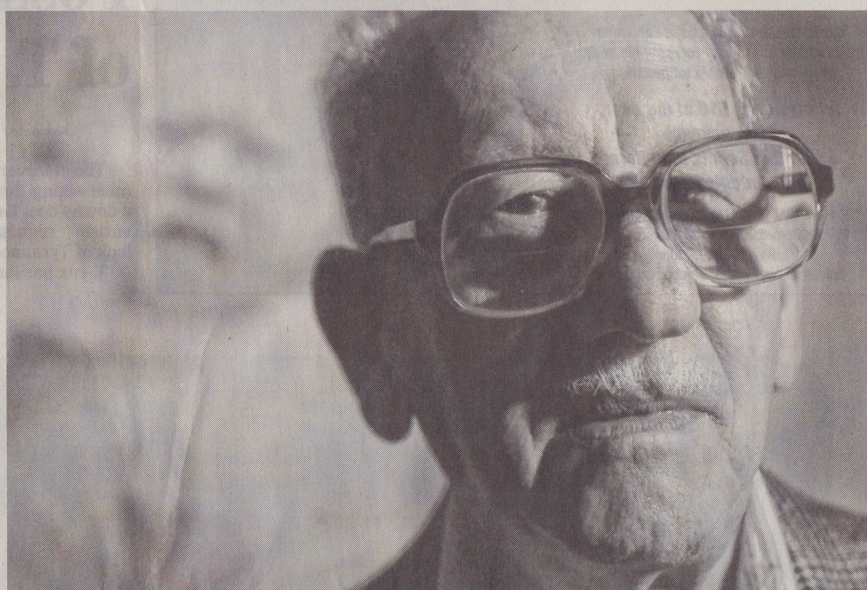
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him to Iowa City to establish the school's printmaking program. And his artistic vision was large enough to inspire his students to spread his vision at major universities throughout the globe.

So it's not surprising that Lasansky had more than 250 one-man shows in his lifetime. Nor that his work now can be seen in hundreds of museums. Nor that he ranks with clubfoot specialist Ignacio Ponseti and physics superstar James Van Allen when talking about Iowa City residents with an international reputation.

What is surprising is that Lasansky decided to stay rooted in Iowa City for more than six decades. Born in Argentina in 1914, Lasansky visited the United States on Guggenheim fellowships and eventually decided to relocate his family in an effort to get away from the dictatorial government of Juan Perón.

It was while living in the American heartland that Lasansky tried to come to terms with the newsreel and documentary images of the terrible crimes the Nazis had committed in



World renowned printmaker and University of Iowa professor emeritus Mauricio Lasansky (shown here in a file photo from 2000) died Monday at age 97. PRESS-CITIZEN FILE PHOTO

Europe.

It was here that Lasansky decided to represent that ultimate evil on common commercial paper using lead pencil, water and turpentine-based washes.

It was here that he crafted a series of images designed to be as overwhelming as they are disturbing.

And it is here — thanks to the Richard S. Levitt Foundation and the University of Iowa Museum of Art — that those images for the most part have remained together a group, even if they haven't been placed out often for display.

That's why — even though created by an Ar-

gentinean exile and depicting atrocities committed half-a-world away — "The Nazi Drawings" are an Iowan treasure.

"Mauricio enjoyed the artistic freedom he was given here," said Lane Wyrick, director of a 1999 documentary about the drawings. "He spent six years on 'The Nazi Drawings.' ... And I don't think he would have been able to finish them in any other situation."

In Borges's story, succeeding generations — who were "not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears" — eventually found that the "vast Map was Useless," and they

left it to rot in the "Inclemencies of Sun and Winters."

Given how Lasansky's children and grandchildren have remained so committed to the arts and to the Iowa City area, we don't think Lasansky's work and legacy will suffer such a fate.

The drawings, which do need a lot of restoration work, currently are in conservation in Chicago. But we hope the Levitt Foundation, the UI Art Museum and other state leaders continue to take steps to ensure that Lasansky's work is preserved, celebrated and displayed proudly in his adopted homeland.