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Baltimore artist and Holocaust survivor Gigi McKendric uses her work to bring awareness to man's inhumanity and transcend world's darkness



## 'Glimmer of light'

By Dan Belson

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# Baltimore artist and Holocaust survivor Gigi McKendric sees world's darkness, fills it with 'glimmer of light'



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Baltimore artist Gigi McKendric laid a sample of her career — poems, art and grant paperwork — onto a table at Levindale Hebrew and Geriatric Center.

The work ranged from children's books to poetry paying homage to Ukraine in the wake of the country's invasion by Russia. McKendric thumbed through her plan for a living memorial dedicated to the seven girls killed during the Island of Peace massacre at Naharayim in Jordan in 1997 before discussing a whimsical poem she wrote about a "Balloon Man" who brings smiles to children around the world.

"I'm fairly poorly organized," McKendric said.

A survivor of both the Holocaust and an earthquake that destroyed her hometown in Romania, McKendric believes she was saved for a reason. Her works, often inspired by tragic world events, aim to emphasize inhumanity and suffering while communicating a “glimmer of light” coming from the horror.



McKendric, who does not know her age because her birth records were destroyed in the earthquake, was one of about a thousand Jewish orphans allowed to immigrate into Canada after World War II. There, English Canadian painter and educator Arthur Lismer took her under his wing.

“What he saw in me, I don’t know,” McKendric said.

Learning from Lismer, an originator of art education, McKendric eventually started teaching art classes for children, working on research for art education, and “only later,” she said, became an artist. She eventually settled in Northeast Baltimore’s Glenham-Belhar neighborhood when she was able to purchase and rehabilitate an old firehouse.

The nearly 2,800-square-foot firehouse provides room for McKendric’s large sculptures, serving as a studio, a living space and an art gallery.

McKendric has been staying at Levindale after being injured in a July 2022 fall. She is not a fan of her commitment to the geriatric institution, writing in a poem in December that she feels like one of many “forgotten souls” staying there.

Still, McKendric continues to work. She is applying for artist's grants, writing, advancing works and planning performances.

“One thing I really admire is the longevity of her work, bringing a continuous awareness to man’s inhumanity to man,” said David London, the director of innovation at the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance.

London, who met McKendric about 10 years ago at an alliance workshop, noted he was particularly impressed with McKendric’s Naharayim memorial project, which included plans for a park at the border of Jordan and Israel where children from both sides could play together.

“It was just a profound vision that even transcends artistry,” he said, highlighting McKendric’s goal of creating a tangible cultural shift with the project.

### **Creating her craft**

McKendric’s large-scale works often start with a poem. She draws inspiration from the work of Austrian poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote about the “several faces” people wear throughout their lives.

“Then I add dance, and music, and sculpture and people, and then it becomes performance art,” McKendric said.

McKendric’s performance art piece “Rilke, Gigi, And... Dear Kurt” is a 70-minute multimedia piece loosely based on her experience as a child during the Holocaust, depicting the horrors of the Nazi regime seen through the eyes of a Jewish child.

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The performance, told through dance and motions set to the first and third movements of Beethoven's 9th Symphony, is based on McKendric's poem, "Dear Kurt," which reinforces her agency and resilience as a child of the Holocaust and offers the hope that the re-creation can help to ensure such atrocities will not be repeated.

As McKendric continues to be inspired as time goes on, her works are evolving, ongoing projects. She began "Rilke, Gigi, And ... A Face In Time" more than 40 years ago when she started creating plaster masks to demonstrate the "metaphysical face each one of us wears," manifestations of Rilke's writing on faces.

"I don't know of any other artist who has the same kind of drive that's tied to her early life," said Vin Grabill, a video artist who collaborates with McKendric and is a professor emeritus of cinematic arts at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. "She's always been driven, not just to survive, but to express herself in a kind of urgent way."

The University of Rhode Island commissioned McKendric in 1983 for an installation of the plaster masks of students, faculty and staff, which were created with the help of the campus community and suspended throughout a 3,000-foot space. As the public viewed the installation, a recording played McKendric's whispered reading of Rilke's essay. A camera recorded those walking through the exhibit and played the footage back on a monitor, turning the crowd into participants.

She added more faces as she continued the project, sometimes stopping people on the street and asking to cast their face. Nobody said no, except one woman who came back weeks later, according to McKendric. After the mask-making process, she would ask participants to write what they felt and thought.

Then, she melded the masks with poetry, song and dance.

A 2016 performance of “A Face In Time” at the Baltimore War Memorial featured readings of McKendric’s poetry interspersed with other performances — such as McKendric’s daughter, Joanna, dancing to a jazz number, all while the plaster “Life Masks” hung above.

Grabill noted his admiration for McKendric’s attention to detail.

“It’s very fulfilling, but also challenging because she knows exactly what she wants,” he said, adding that McKendric likes to review every edit he makes on video productions for her works. “I totally admire her for that.”

### **Finding the ‘glimmer’**

McKendric started working on one of her largest projects, “J’Accuse: A Call to Conscience,” in 1952. The installation series, focused on humanity’s immorality, started out as a reflection on the Holocaust, but evolved into a documentation of several world events that happened since then. In 1970, she added a piece inspired by the Kent State shootings that year, later adding installations relating to the 1972 Munich massacre, the ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland and violence at the end of apartheid in South Africa, concluding the work in 1995.

Through “J’Accuse” and her other works, McKendric intends to commemorate individual lives lost from ongoing inhumanity.

“We have to look, we have to see, and talk about it,” McKendric said. “It’s an ongoing tragedy.”

As the 50th anniversary of the 1972 Munich massacre, where 11 members of the Israeli Olympic team were killed approached last year, McKendric brought the installation commemorating the massacre back out. Despite her current injury, she still hopes to breathe new life into the massive display, where the Olympic rings, represented by bright neon lights, are torn apart by a “grotesque” arm representing violence. She and her collaborators have reworked the piece to include an introductory video for public display to honor the athletes.

“They were husbands, brothers and sons,” said McKendric, adding that the

The face-lift of the Munich massacre piece is part of a project McKendric is planning, called “Dreams Destroyed, Dreamers Remembered.”

Adding onto the theme, she also has been working on aligning her poetry with music written by 14 composers who died in the Holocaust.

Collaborators have been in and out of McKendric’s room at Levindale in recent weeks, working together to add dance and bring the composers’ work to life through performance.

“Whatever we can take, or just start, it’s a glimmer of light,” McKendric said. “If we can show them what we lost, the music these people could have created, we encourage today’s generation of children or adults to continue to thrive.”

