

Entertainment Spotlight

Nerman Museum exhibit ‘Abstract Kansas City’ showcases local artists

January 27

By DANA SELF

Special to The Star

Nobody believes in you like your mama. And sometimes success comes with talent and a little nudge from someone who loves you.

On exhibit

“Abstract Kansas City” continues at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park, through Feb. 19. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Monday. Admission is free. For more information: 913-469-3000 or nermanmuseum.org.

At least that’s what Jered Sprecher, assistant professor at the University of Tennessee and former Overland Park resident, might say. He is one of the 32 artists in the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art’s “Abstract Kansas City” exhibition.

Sprecher’s mother suggested to museum director Bruce Hartman that the work was worth a peek, and Hartman took notice.

Turns out Sprecher’s mother was right.

And while this isn’t a story about a mother’s pride, it is a story about love — for art, for students and for establishing a cultural legacy.

“Abstract Kansas City” is a love letter in the form of a museum exhibition honoring an unlikely contemporary art collection in an unlikely place: the middle of a former farm in Kansas.

It all started in 1981. What is now the dazzling collection of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art at Johnson County Community College was at one time the dream of a collection for a small community college made up of a few buildings in a field.

Landon Kirchner, who was the assistant dean of humanities and social sciences at the college, decided his students needed and deserved exposure to actual works of art. He established an art acquisition committee, and the members wisely resolved that the collection focus on contemporary art.

One of the visionary and guiding principles of the collection was that it be accessibly installed throughout the campus so that students could have a daily encounter with vital and authentic works of art.

The committee consulted, commissioned and purchased, looking to the artists in the community and beyond.

Fast forward to 1990, when Hartman became the director of the JCCC Gallery of Art, where he found a collection of 100 very strong works.

“I inherited a good collection and came into a situation where the school was looking at art with a critical eye and a seriousness of intent, which set the tone for future collecting. With the mandate that the collection be visible to students and visitors, the museum was a natural progression,” Hartman says.

All along, the acquisition committee realized the importance of collecting the work of Kansas City artists and artists associated with Kansas City. One of the first works was “Galileo’s Garden,” a commission from Dale Eldred.

Through the years, Hartman has remained devoted to the art of his hometown. He adds, “With a sense of continuity, the members of that committee collected art that reflected the strength of the college’s studio practice: ceramics, sculpture, photography and painting.”

In 2011, when the collection exceeded 1,000 works of art, Hartman concluded it was the right time to further recognize the collecting efforts of the institution, and “Abstract Kansas City” was conceived.

It’s fair to say that no other local collecting institution has devoted the same energy and attention to Kansas City artists. The exhibition — and the collection itself, of which a full 30 percent is devoted to Kansas City artists and/or artists with a Kansas City connection — is a phenomenon.

And as at any collecting institution, the exhibition also reflects the passion and interests of Hartman and patrons Marti and Tony Oppenheimer, who have been essential in the collecting process and who always recognized the importance of including Kansas City artists.

Some of the most commanding works in the exhibition suggest that the acquisition committee and these artists love color. James Brinsfield, Eric Sall, Lester Goldman, Nate Fors, Andrzej Zielinski, Kent Michael Smith, Larry Thomas, Stanley Whitney and Mary Wessel all rely on vivid, saturated color.

It’s a heady visual experience, and Hartman’s sensitive installation nurtures relationships between these artists who embrace abstraction as a vehicle with which to process the multiple ideas of modernity.

Many of the paintings are often wildly gestural, and yet there are delicate, ephemeral works here, some of which are narrative. Corrie Baldauf, Ke-Sook Lee and Anne Lindberg trend toward the intimate.

Baldauf's refined drawings are the most plainly autobiographical. Narrating personal anecdotes from her life, she pencils in diminutive stories along the sides of a large image of concentric circles. Vanishing into her short stories — "Mom called" — is the central experience of the work, validating the minutiae of our daily living.

Lindberg's work is as intimate as Baldauf's, yet through a wordless graphite language.

Lee's delicate needlework emerges from the history of women's work, domesticity and childhood memories of her grandmothers sewing. Rachel Hayes' "Return to the Easy System" trades on fiber and stitching, but she manipulates copper wire and acetate rather than thread and fabric.

Artists committed to drawing include the irrepressible Amy Myers, whose monumental and psychedelic abstract bubble drawings draw us in as much as they send us out to some unknowable place.

Garry Noland's tape panels, "Cripples," comprising 88 units, feel almost as linear and hand-drawn as Lindberg's graphite work. The staccato effect that emerges from his repeated yet slightly different panels suggests a hieroglyphic, indiscernible language.

Drawing with light in her "Worldscape" series, Mary Wessel works on light-sensitive photographic paper. A liquidy pink shape snakes across the work's surface radiating an energy field that seems confusing and disordered, yet soothing.

The exhibition's works span 50 years, starting in 1961 with an abstract Wilbur Niewald watercolor.

At 87, Niewald is the elder and elegant statesman of this wide-ranging exhibition. "Mountains II" is a field of crystalline blue paint strokes that still shimmer with clarity. This abstract landscape is a surprising precursor to the steady, realistic paintings that distinguish Niewald's oeuvre.

Hartman's thoughtful installation capitalizes on relationships between artists and styles. The triumvirate of Dan Christensen, Warren Rosser and Ron Slowinski vibrates with a subtle dynamism that characterizes their three paintings.

Christensen's painting, "Cape Crozier," is one of his finest and most haunting. A ghostlike white form hovers in a calm peach-colored background. This delicate apparition pulsates with movement, revealing the artist's tender yet graceful hand.

Hartman juxtaposes Christensen with one of the most quiet and least colorful of Rosser's paintings, "Play Continued." Articulated in shades of gray, the graceful ovals that are typical of his work include a white one that seems to be exiting the dreary painting to join the more sparkling Christensen.

Slowinski's equally restrained and ambiguously metaphysical "Untitled (Pollen Painting)" completes the triangle.

The giant abstractionists with sweeping gestures dominate the first gallery. Eric Sall, Andrzej Zielinski, James Brinsfield, Sharon Patten and Lester Goldman telegraph their passion for painting's formal processes, the act of putting paint to canvas to study

spatial relationships, and they excavate the modern world's vast choices and ultimate ambiguities.

Amy Myers' and Sandy Winters' work straddles the visual distance between these artists and the more delicate and restrained work of Baldauf, Lee and Niewald, all of whom share that first gallery.

JCCC professor Larry Thomas' mixed media on canvas work, "The Problem With Curiosity," is one of the few recognizable images. A swirling vortex containing snakes, feathers and other things destabilizes the painting's elements, suggesting chaos.

Side by side with Lauren Mabry's earthenware cylinder, whose surface is beautifully articulated with glazes, and Nate Fors' carnivalesque and vividly green sculptural painting, Thomas' work seems to tether the three together.

Hartman's juxtaposition of Kansas City Art Institute alumni Stanley Whitney with younger artists Sprecher, Grant Miller, Kent Michael Smith and Matt Wycoff resonates with stylistic linkages that collapse time and distance.

Despite their varied media, generational differences and range of material application, the exhibition artists are linked through their devotion to systems of discovery and, of course, their Kansas City connections. Personal narrative, chaos, metaphysical ideas of the sublime and pure formal processes are the schema through which each artist deploys his or her own sense of self and place.

The exhibition is a vital tribute to 30 years of collecting and identifies the museum as Kansas City's most essential institution devoted to Kansas City artists' significant accomplishments.

Hartman concludes, "I walk through the galleries, look at the individual works of art, can see how each work fits into each artist's body of work, and think, this is what it's all about."

As love letters go, it's one of the best.