

KU's Common Work of Art: Blank screens 'waiting for the story that's going to fill them'



photo by: Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Museum purchase: Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund

Jeff Brouws' "Twelve Drive-Ins I," is the fall 2019 Common Work of Art for KU.

From afar, it's an abstract grid, a colorful collection of squares and rectangles. But up close, those rectangles turn out to be the screens of drive-in movie theaters, pictured in their lots in square frames.

Some of the theaters are abandoned, tall grass overrunning the grounds and climbing up to the base of the screen. Others still look functioning and well-kept. But something's not quite right, Spencer Museum of Art curator Kate Meyer remarks. There are no cars at these drive-ins.

At the University of Kansas, this year's Common Work of Art is "Twelve Drive-Ins I," a compilation of 12 photographs by artist Jeff Brouws. The abandoned drive-ins are in different settings across America: arid desert, prairie grassland, concrete parking lot.

"Twelve Drive-Ins I" is part of an exhibition called "Visible and Divisible America: In Conversation with the 2019-2020 KU Common Book" and will open to the public on Saturday, Sept. 7. This year's Common Book — the text every first-year student is tasked with reading — is "Tales of Two Americas: Stories of Inequality in a Divided Nation," an anthology compiled by editor John Freeman.

Meyer, who has worked for the Spencer Museum of Art for 15 years, called Brouws' work "open-ended." But she also outlined some possible interpretations and findings.

First, the overall emptiness of the images, that they lack cars and people, make her think about de-industrialization and urban flight. Second, the drive-in was a place people would go to escape, and now many are empty. Lastly, drive-ins are associated with the economic boom of the post-war 1950s and '60s, she said, a time when the American Dream was believed in and relied upon. Now, the

Common Book and Common Work of Art call into question whether the American Dream has “always just been a dream.”

The exhibit as a whole is meant to extend the Common Book’s conversation about inequality in America, and it offers a different medium for doing so.

“People learn differently. So it’s helpful for people who are more visual learners to have another way to enter that conversation,” said Elizabeth Kanost, communications manager for the Spencer.

One of Kanost’s favorite pieces in the exhibit is an untitled work from Jim Goldberg in which a skinny boy stands on a dirty mattress staring at the camera. A man and woman hold each other on a bed nearby. Below the image, a handwritten message is scrawled. “This picture says that we are a very emotional & tight family, like the three musketeers,” it reads. “Poverty sucks, but it brings us closer together.”

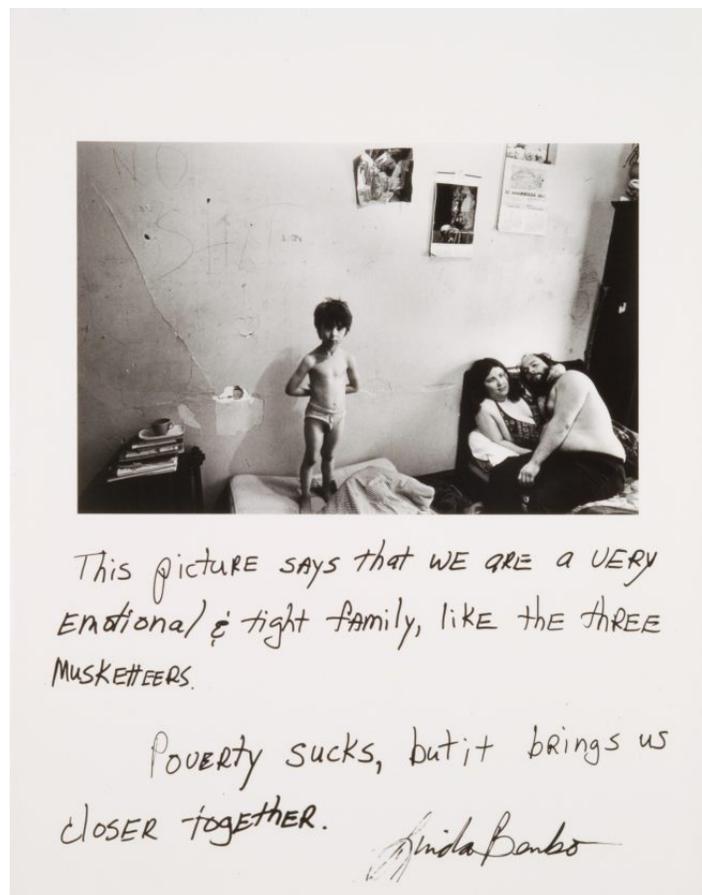


photo by: Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Museum purchase: Peter T. Bohan Art Acquisition Fund, 1985.

Jim Goldberg’s untitled work is part of the fall 2019 exhibition “Visible and Divisible America: In Conversation with the 2019-2020 KU Common Book” at KU’s Spencer Museum.

This annotation brings a hopeful light to a mostly difficult exhibit, Kanost noted. “It’s nice that not every work in the show is definitely a downer.”

Meyer added, “The subjects of the photograph are sharing their voice as well. That’s a great one.”

At the exhibit, Meyer hopes visitors will voice their own experiences. In an interactive activity, visitors are asked to choose a piece that relates in some way to their own tale of America and to fill out a tag card completing the prompt “My tale of America is...” Every piece in the exhibit has a peg next to it, on which participants can hang their cards.



photo by: Image by Ryan Waggoner

As part of the exhibit, visitors can fill out cards that prompt, “My tale of America is...”

With themes such as homelessness, poverty, violence and racism, Meyer’s not sure what visitors will make of the exhibit.

“I’m very curious how students are going to react to it,” she said. “Because I think the book is pretty tough. And therefore a lot of the art is tough. Inequality is not an easy conversation.

“When we get a sense that an experience here is furthering their understanding of the book, that’s great. That’s all I need.”

As Meyer regarded “Twelve Drive-Ins I,” she said one thing about the piece that seemed to map on all too-well to the audience likely to engage with the work the most: first-year students beginning their time at KU.

“The other thing about it is that they are these blank screens, and they are waiting for the story that’s going to fill them.”

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