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Museum Looks at Prospective Ecological Disasters Through Lens of Dust Bowl

Lawrence, KS, August 1, 2013 — In a pair of interrelated exhibitions, [Conversation XV: Dust](#) and [1 Kansas Farmer](#), the Spencer Museum explores both the Dust Bowl of the 1930s and the relevance of its lessons for farmers, environmentalists, artists, and scientists today.

The Dust Bowl represents a remarkable moment in human history. Tremendous artistic documentation of the Dust Bowl, much of it federally-sponsored, is etched into the collective American memory. Images created by such artists as Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Herschel Logan, and others have become iconic symbols representing both the hardship suffered by rural Americans in the 1930s and the humanity that triumphed in its wake. These images endure not only as expressions of the spirit of an era, but also as historic documents containing significant information that allows researchers to comprehend the ecological disaster that sparked the Dust Bowl and the transformation of the land following the storm.

***Conversation XV: Dust* was inspired by the selection of *The Worst Hard Time* by Timothy Egan as the University of Kansas Common Book for 2013-14.** In *The Worst Hard Time*, Egan, a reporter for the *New York Times*, chronicles the tumultuous journeys of twelve families weathering the Dust Bowl in rural America. The objects on display in the *Dust* exhibition tell similar stories using artists' tools, primarily the camera. In an Arthur Rothstein photograph taken in 1936, an unsmiling man leans against his car with a bundle tied to it; the words "Oregon or Bust" have been scrawled beneath the

car window. The man, Vernon Evans, is fleeing a grasshopper-ridden, drought-stricken area with his family in tow, hoping for a new start out west. Closer to home, a photograph of a desolate Kansas farmhouse and plot of land foregrounded by a sign proclaiming "THIS PLACE FOR SALE" was taken in 1938, capturing the widespread dispossession that sent so many Americans searching for new homes and new lives. Thomas Hart Benton's expressive lithograph depicting the fictional Joad family, central to the plot of *The Grapes Wrath*, tells perhaps the most famous Dust Bowl narrative of all, and is included in this exhibition.

Simultaneously on view in the Museum lobby, posters created by KU advanced graphic design students are inspired by the prolific work of Dust Bowl artists and scientists. The series, ***1 Kansas Farmer***, makes sly reference to the billboards spotted along Kansas highways declaring that "***1 Kansas Farmer feeds 155 people and you.***" Each poster addresses a specific environmental issue facing Kansas farmers today, turning frequently to the lessons of the Dust Bowl for context while visually representing cutting-edge research collected by the Biofuels and Climate Change: Farmers Land Use Decisions (BACC:FLUD) project. This project, currently being conducted by scholars at the University of Kansas and Kansas State University, examines how Kansas farmers make decisions about land use with a focus on how information about biofuels and climate change factors into the equation. Extensive interviews with Kansas farmers are included in both the research and the resulting posters, alongside photographs by Kansas artist Larry Schwarm, who compellingly documents the conditions on Kansas farms as part of the BACC:FLUD initiative.

Conversation XV: Dust and 1 Kansas Farmer open at the Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence, Kansas on Saturday, August 3. *1 Kansas Farmer* has been generously supported by the Biofuels and Climate Change: Farmer's Land Use Decisions (BACC:FLUD) project embedded within the Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) Research Infrastructural Improvement Award (EPS-0903806), a National Science Foundation program.

Media Contacts

Elizabeth Kanost
Communications
Manager

[785.840.0142](tel:785.840.0142)

elizacat@ku.edu

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