

The year in visual art: American Indian art took center stage in Kansas City's galleries and museums

BY ALICE THORSON - THE KANSAS CITY STAR

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Robert Morris' glass "Labyrinth" was installed in the Nelson's Donald J. Hall Sculpture Park in May. JOHN LAMBERTON / NELSON-ATKINS MUSEUM OF ART

2014 was a banner year for American Indian art in Kansas City, including high-profile showings of contemporary work.

Contemporary American Indian artists form an essential part of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art's blockbuster "Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky" exhibit, where their expressions are presented as part of a creative continuum dating to pre-contact.

Not only is their work making a big splash in Kansas City, it was seen at the exhibit's stop in Paris and will go with the show to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York after it closes at the Nelson on Jan. 11.

As of mid-December, the "Plains" show at the Nelson had attracted 45,000 visitors, helping put the museum on track for a record attendance of 502,000 people in 2014.

"That is up from 427,000 in 2013, a 17.7 percent increase," according to Mark Zimmerman, the museum's director of administration.

Before 2010, the museum's average annual attendance was 333,000, he said. The new annual average is 435,000.

The Nelson's "Plains" exhibit followed an important American Indian show at the Nerman Museum, where executive director Bruce Hartman has been assiduously showing and adding contemporary American Indian art to the museum's collection and attracting national attention for doing so.

Hartman said he was also getting feelers from organizers of big international shows.

Charlotte Street Foundation curator-in residence Danny Orendorff continued the trend, with his inclusion of Natalie Ball and Gina Adams, whose works explore their American Indian heritage, in the final exhibit of his tenure, "Loving After Lifetimes of All This." We'll see more of both artists at the Nerman next year.

Many native artists hark to the sins of the past: stolen land, broken treaties, forced assimilation. All of these issues are movingly invoked in curator Jane Aspinwall's unforgettable show of 19th-century photographs by Alexander Gardner, which continues to Jan. 11 in the photography galleries at the Nelson.

Over the year's course, Kansas City's curators outdid themselves in producing thought-provoking exhibits of objects from all over the globe.

They included Nelson curator Kim Masteller's "Echoes: Islamic Art and Contemporary Artists" in the museum's Bloch Building Project Space, and Colin Mackenzie's "Stone and Mist" show of Michael Cherney's haunting photographs of the contemporary Chinese landscape, presented in the format of traditional scrolls. It continues on view in the Chinese painting galleries through July 5.

The Nerman introduced Kansas City to Jamaican-born artist Ebony Patterson's visually dazzling tapestries, works inspired by her country's dance-hall culture. A show of photographic works by Chicago artist Jason Lazarus offered quiet commentary on a wide range of historical and recent events, including the Iraq war, Hurricane Katrina and the election of Barack Obama.

Over the summer, a show of four luminous, abstracted swimming pool paintings by Kansas City artist Robert Bingaman exerted a poetic resonance in the Nerman's Oppenheimer Gallery, eliciting a comparison with the Rothko Chapel from a pair of Texas visitors.

Women artists blazed their way through the season with memorable videos and films, from Los Angeles-based Stanya Kahn's "Don't Go Back to Sleep" at Grand Arts, to Jaimie Warren's campy "That's What Friends Are For" in the "Saints Stars and Selfies" exhibit at Block Artspace, which ended the year with funny, feminist videos by New York artist Kate Gilmore.

It has been a year of transition for the Kemper Museum, with the death of co-founder R. Crosby Kemper. Now that his daughter, Mary Kemper Wolf, has assumed the reins as board president, it will be fascinating to watch whether the museum that reflected her father's tastes and preferences will join its peers in presenting art that robustly challenges the status quo on issues of environment, race, wealth distribution, sexual freedom and U.S. global policies.

Next year's opening exhibition of contemporary art from the Bill and Christy Gautreaux collection would seem a step in the right direction.

Permanent collection exhibits marking the Kemper's 20th anniversary dominated the calendar in 2014. The celebrations culminated with a big Hung Liu overview, featuring the Chinese-born artist's large paintings based on historical photographs. Too bad Liu's source material is more compelling than what she does with it. The artist nonetheless has many fans and collectors in the Kansas City area.

Kemper curator Erin Dziejic turned in a winner with "The Center Is a Moving Target" at Kemper at the Crossroads, featuring a well-chosen spectrum of local talent.

New acquisitions

The past year also brought notable additions to Kansas City's collections, foremost among them the giant walk-in glass "Labyrinth" by Robert Morris installed in the Donald J. Hall Sculpture Park at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

The museum also acquired an important painting by African-American social realist Charles White (1918-79).

American Art curator Stephanie Fox Knappe spearheaded the acquisition of White's "Goodnight Irene" (1952), a portrait of guitarist Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter from the Harry Belafonte Collection. The purchase was funded by contributions from more than 50 individuals and groups.

The Spencer Museum, in the midst of phase one of an expansion plan that will endow the museum with more air, light and space, unveiled a recent gift from Pitney Bowes Inc. of "Wall

Drawing #519,” by eminent conceptual artist Sol LeWitt (1928-2007). The 80- by 11-foot piece, which features a red square on a yellow wall, a blue circle on a red wall, and a yellow triangle on a blue wall, was executed by a team of four using layers of ink wash, in accordance with the artist’s written instructions. It’s now on view in Gallery 316.

The LeWitt acquisition follows a major gift to the Spencer from Mark and Lauren Booth of light artist James Turrell’s “Gard Blue.”

They’re both on view now and “complement each other magnificently in their use of large, simple geometric forms and primary colors,” says David Cateforis, professor of American art, modern and contemporary art at the University of Kansas.

“From one sweet spot in the gallery you can look over your right shoulder to see Turrell’s upright equilateral triangle of blue light and then turn your head to the left to see LeWitt’s identically shaped yellow triangle against a blue ground,” he said. “ It’s thrilling.”

To reach Alice Thorson, call 816-234-4763 (tel:816-234-4763) or send email to athorson@kcstar.com (mailto:athorson@kcstar.com).