

New exhibition at the Spencer Museum of Art examines the relationship between art and the sea | Arts & Culture

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Despite its massive size, the sea is an often overlooked space, regarded as the territory of shipments and fisheries, not people. At the Spencer Museum of Art, “Soundings: Making Culture At Sea” calls attention to cultural relevance found within the vast waters of the world’s oceans.

The exhibition opened to the public on Aug. 12, replete with a variety of works ranging from traditional canvas pieces, collage works and even works of cartography.

Curated jointly by Emily Casey, assistant professor of American art and culture and Celka Straughn, deputy director for public practice and curatorial, the exhibition aims to “inspire us to see the world and our relation to each other in different ways,” Casey said.

“These works of art help us understand how the ocean holds complex human histories - including the transatlantic slave trade and the rise of global capitalism - as well as their contemporary legacies, such as racial inequity and the effects of human-made climate change,” Casey said.

These complex histories can be seen in pieces like Willie Cole's "Calpurnia," where a relief print of a metal ironing board brings to mind floor plans for slave ships and the key role textiles played in capitalism's meteoric rise.

In some pieces, the world itself, alongside its oceans, is the subject of much complexity.

In the piece "Dymaxion airocean world; the Raleigh edition of the Fuller projection," cartographers Buckminster Fuller and Shoji Sadao visualize an interconnected world, defined not by borders but by ecology, with the ocean connecting each continent neatly. Created in 1954, this piece interrogates the divisions set by contemporary Cold War tensions, not putting Russia and America at opposite ends of the projection but rather as parts of one long chain.

Certain works call specific attention to the University of Kansas's relation to the sea. A twin series of photographs—one by early 20th century naturalist Lewis Lindsay Dyche, one by KU's Center for Remote Sensing of Ice Sheets—brings out a certain relevance of the theme to the university.

"These works not only highlight our connection to far-reaching maritime spaces, but also prompt us to think about our impact on the environment in the past and present," Casey said.

Over the course of the exhibition's stay, students will have much to look forward to, should they want to delve deeper.

"Students should definitely keep an eye out for the student led gallery talks, which will happen in November," Casey said. "Because that will be an opportunity to learn about the exhibit from peers."

In addition to the student-led portions of the exhibit, on Sept. 17, Dr. Bart Pushaw is slated to give a [special guest lecture](#). Dr. Pushaw is an art historian who specializes in the study of the Indigenous Arctic, an area brought out by some of the pieces on display in the exhibit.

All KU students can attend "Soundings: Making Culture At Sea" and its associated events for free at the Spencer Museum of Art.

Owen Perry is a sophomore majoring in English and Journalism. Outside the Kansan, he likes to write short stories, play video games and visit art museums.

This article was edited by Arts & Culture Editor Isabella Johnson. If the information in this article needs to be corrected, please contact isabella.johnson@ku.edu. We want to hear from you!