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2 Museums Wanted to Spark Dialogue With Provocative Art. They're Handling That Very Carefully.

By Claire Hansen | JULY 26, 2018



A collage by the artist Josephine Meckseper is one of a 16-piece series. It was originally displayed on a flagpole crafted for the works at the U. of Kansas' Spencer Museum of Art.

flagpole outside the Commons, a collaborative at the university that co-sponsored the exhibition.

The latest installation in the collection is a collage of an American-flag likeness, a black drip painting, and other markings, created by the artist Josephine Meckseper. A week after its installation in early July, the piece sparked statewide outrage from critics who say the work is a defiled flag. Jeffrey W. Colyer, Kansas' Republican governor, called for its removal on Twitter, as did Kris W. Kobach, the secretary of state.

When the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas at Lawrence brought the public-art project *Pledges of Allegiance* to campus, curators wanted to spark a conversation.

But not everybody liked the discussion.

The artwork is a collection of 16 flags created by different artists in response to the current political climate. Since November 2017, one flag from the series has been flown each month on a specially installed

The same day, Douglas A. Girod, chancellor of the University of Kansas, announced the removal of the piece, citing "public-safety concerns." By late afternoon, the flag was hanging in a gallery inside the Spencer museum, and the flagpole outside the Commons stood empty.

Today, the flag in the gallery is surrounded by information that lends context: an educational binder, an always-present staff member to answer questions, and a comment book where visitors can note their thoughts. Lately, visitors have used the comment book "very vigorously," said Saralyn Reece Hardy, the museum's director.

About 700 miles south, at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin, curators have taken similar care with "The City," a four-panel painting of a modern-day Ku Klux Klan meeting, by the Mexican-American artist Vincent Valdez.

It's dark and visceral, and the museum spent more than a year planning programming and context for the work, and consulting with community members.

Unlike some colleges that have shunned provocative art, the Blanton and the Spencer brought the pieces to campus to push visitors to think about topics like racism and political divides. Balancing the desire to foster difficult dialogue with the threat of controversy is delicate for campus museums, particularly when, as Kansas has learned, the art offends those in power.

Get People Talking

It wasn't that the Spencer didn't consider details of the installation before its display — far from it, Hardy said.

She would not say whether she anticipated how controversial the exhibition would be but repeated that the flag series is intended to get people talking about contemporary issues. Before the work was installed, the museum staff spent a lot of time debating where to put the series, and ultimately erected the flagpole outside the Commons, Hardy said.

The art project was commissioned by the New York-based arts nonprofit Creative Time, and various institutions nationwide are participating by flying each flag in scheduled succession for about a month each. Meckseper's piece isn't the only one in the collection that features a likeness of the American flag, but it was the first to be flown since Kansas joined the project. Other flags depict more abstract scenes, or have text like "Resist" and "Dignity has no nationality."

"Everything about the project was intentional, in terms of how we presented it, what we thought about," Hardy said. "We also have a history of having programs at the Commons and at the Spencer museum of exploring issues from a variety of viewpoints." They want the work to inspire dialogue, she says. "We knew that it would, and we have done things all along to try to stimulate more of that."

When the flags were hung outside, a pair of placards at the base of the flagpole gave information about the series and the piece on display. When a flag was taken down and a new one raised, the museum invited community members to share their thoughts. Participants often grabbed coffee afterward, and there was "a sense of community," Hardy said. The flag-raising were broadcast on Facebook Live, though none of the videos elicited much attention until Meckseper's piece went up.

Despite the museum's best efforts, resistance came with a political bent. The University of Kansas College Republicans first posted their objections on Facebook on July 10, writing, "We would like to know who approved and authorized this display of the flag The University of Kansas. Simply put, this is disgusting."

The next day, an opinion piece on Fox News denounced the work, and right-wing media sites like the Daily Caller and Media Research Center quickly criticized the flag. Governor Colyer called the piece "absolutely unacceptable." He said he contacted KU's chancellor and president of its Board of Regents to demand its removal. Steve Watkins, a Republican candidate for the U.S. Congress and a veteran, said it hurt him to see the "defaced" flag; and State Sen. Caryn Tyson, another Republican candidate for the U.S. House, has started a petition for its removal.

Girod, the chancellor, announced relocation of the piece that day. Although he cited public safety, he did not give any information on specific threats. After the flag was moved, the American Civil Liberties Union of Kansas, the National Coalition Against Censorship and the group Foundation for Individual Rights in Education wrote a letter to Girod asking its reinstatement outside. There has so far been no response to the letter, according to Will Creeley, senior vice president of legal and public advocacy at FIRE.

"The fact that there has been a hue and cry about 'political correctness' on college campuses but less hue and cry about a different kind of political correctness from the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, demanding that a flag be taken down is telling," Creeley said.

After the flag was moved inside, Secretary of State Kobach, who is running against Governor Coyler in the GOP primary, said the piece should be removed from campus entirely. Coyler suggested that the American Legion dispose of the flag.

Affirming Free Speech

The museum didn't comment directly on the flag's relocation or the politicians' comments, but with the Commons it released a statement affirming free speech and welcoming a continued dialogue.

Hardy said the Spencer tried to be "nimble, but thoughtful," in response to the public criticism and the resulting gallery display, something she admitted the museum hadn't foreseen as they planned the exhibition months before.

She said the extra context around the flag in the gallery now was about continuing the "educational moment."

Hardy didn't directly respond to the statements of the governor and other politicians, but she did say that the museum remained committed to keeping the art up through July 31, when the exhibition was originally scheduled to end.

Keeping the piece on display "is also our way of responding to whatever you're referring to," Hardy said, when asked about the statements.

The motivations behind the curated presentation of Meckseper's flag and Valdez's "The City" may be as different as their subject matter and the public's reaction to the respective pieces. Yet both cases illustrate the care campus museums are taking with controversial or provocative art.

The Blanton museum, in Austin, spent more than a year crafting the experience around "The City." The museum saw it as a curatorial responsibility, not as a way to head off controversy, said Ray Williams, director of education and academic affairs.

"The City," comprising two black and gray paintings named "The City I" and "The City II," is a pointed critique of modern racism. In the massive, four-panel "City I," Ku Klux Klan members peer out from under their hoods, light emanating from a cellphone and from truck headlights in the background. "The City II" features a pile of mattresses and trash, and a grid of city lights is visible in the distance. Valdez meant the painting to "impede social amnesia" about the Klan's presence, according to the museum's website about the work.



Blanton Museum of Art

"The City I" (right) and "The City II," by Vincent Valdez, at the Blanton Museum of Art

"When you're looking at a life-sized group of the Ku Klux Klan, you sort of have to know that that imagery is full of historical and current violence, and people who are looking at it have very different experiences of that," Williams said.

The piece, which Williams said fits perfectly into a collection Blanton is building around social issues, was acquired by the museum in 2017, according to a museum spokeswoman.

The museum originally planned to unveil the work in 2017, but it was pushed back. The piece went on display last week.

The Blanton conducted conversations with local community groups and faculty members from many disciplines; in the gallery, a 12-page booklet describes the paintings, the artist, and the artist's intention. Gallery hosts will be present to answer questions. There's also a video in the gallery of an interview with Valdez, and a place for visitors to write feedback cards at the end of the exhibition.

The museum was even intentional about the entry and exit points of the gallery that holds the painting. Curators switched the entryway from a prominent entrance at the top of a staircase to one around the corner, where visitors are greeted by a "buffer wall" with an advisory message, an unusual step for the museum.

The message is largely descriptive, and Williams described it as a "heads up" to gallerygoers that they're about to see charged imagery.

"We aren't doing trigger warnings," Williams said. "Our principle is just to describe so people can choose or not choose" to see the work."

But even with those precautions, the works still met a shade of controversy. The museum failed to contact the Austin chapter of the NAACP until July 9, a result of staff miscommunication, it told *The New York Times*.

Nelson Linder, president of the chapter, has since seen the piece, and will participate in future programming, including more informal conversations the museum is organizing around the work, Williams said.

And the reception to the piece has been largely positive. An opening-night conversation between Valdez and the journalist Maria Hinojosa filled the museum's 300-seat auditorium; another 80 people were turned away.

Both Meckseper's flag and "The City" had the potential to upset people, but the Blanton and the Spencer leaned into that friction and, using contextual padding, tried to turn it into an educational moment, something that university museums are in a unique position to do.

"We thought, and we still think, that the national conversation among colleges and universities in our country is supremely important right now," Hardy, the Spencer's director said, adding that a museum on a large research campus has a special role in that conversation.

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