

Curator links Spencer Museum of Art, community in upcoming exhibitions

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Dave Loewenstein's print titled "Robinson Park 1929." Credit: Courtesy of the Spencer Museum of Art

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Rick Hellman

LAWRENCE — The work Sydney Pursel has been doing behind the scenes as curator for public practice at the University of Kansas' Spencer Museum of Art will come to fruition with exhibits opening this month and next.

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The Spencer Museum acquired ledger artist Chris Pappan's "The Sacred in Motion" in 2024.

In the first case, Pursel played a role in awarding \$10,000 each to three regional artists on behalf of the Kansas City, Missouri-based [Charlotte Street](#). Their works will be featured in a show titled ["My Mother's Tongue Ties Me Together,"](#) opening Aug. 26 and running through year's end in the museum's main-floor gallery.

In the second case, Pursel played several leadership roles in a project that resulted in the rematriation of the massive red rock that for nearly a century stood in a Lawrence city park and that now — [in large part through a \\$5 million grant from the Mellon Foundation](#) — resides in a Kaw Nation park in Council Grove.

["In'zhúje'waxóbe: Return of the Sacred Red Rock"](#) opens Sept. 9 and runs through Jan. 25, 2026, in the Spencer's Larry & Barbara Marshall Family Balcony. It features work inspired by the Red Rock project since it became a major regional interest a couple years ago.

These are just the sort of projects Pursel was tasked with pursuing when she was [named](#) curator for public practice in 2022.

Pursel served on the four-person jury that chose Merry Sun, Noelle Choy and Hùng Lê as winners of the 2025 Charlotte Street Visual Artist Awards. In addition to cash, their prize includes an exhibition at one of the participating museums, which this year is the Spencer.

Pursel said that, coincidentally, all three of the featured artists either immigrated themselves or were born to immigrants from Asia to the United States and that their work deals with the memory and ongoing impact of that experience.

Pursel and her fellow jurors chose the winners after reviewing about 75 applications and making 10 studio visits to the finalists. The exhibition in the Sam & Connie Perkins Central Court includes a sculpture with a motion-activated sound feature, videos and textile art.

"We're not supposed to be thinking about how the artists would work together in an exhibition," Pursel said. "It's purely based on the merit of their work. It just so happened that we picked three artists with Asian heritage for this show, which has never happened before ... and they all know each other and work really well together."

Sacred Red Rock

As for the Sacred Red Rock show, Pursel said it will be "laid out as a timeline," with artworks alluding to the boulder's glacier-borne arrival in what would become Kansas during the Ice Age, continuing through its 1920s move from Tecumseh via railway to Lawrence and concluding with its recent journey 75 miles southwest to Allegawaho Memorial Heritage Park near Council Grove.

Featured works include photographs, prints, sculpture and a typically American Indian form known as ledger art for the lined notebook paper on which it is drawn, painted or otherwise created. Ledger artist Chris Pappan led a workshop at the Spencer that was part of the [Indigenous Arts Initiative](#) sponsored by the Kansas Arts Commission and the [Sacred Red Rock](#) project.

Several videos will also be shown in the gallery. One documents the yearslong movement to return the rock to the control of the Kaw Nation. Another features audio of Kaw elder Curtis Kekahbahrecounting the rock's history, set to video of its relocation. Both were created by PictureStart Productions and Pursuit Films as part of the documentary "Return of the Sacred Red Rock."

"I'm on the documentary team and the community-engagement team," Pursel said. "All of the artwork that you'll see is either from Kaw Nation artists or local artists that we've engaged in different workshops here in the community, including right before the monument was disassembled and the plaque was taken off and the rock was removed from the base structure."

Pursel said the show documents and demonstrates the power of community.

"What I want to get across with this exhibition ... is the power of arts, community activism and collaboration," she said. "This whole project stemmed from local artist Dave Loewenstein doing research for one of these [Kansas People's History Projects](#). He noticed the rock in the park and wanted to know more about the monument, so he started researching. He discovered that this rock was sacred to Kaw Nation and he got connected to Kaw people, including Pauline Eads Sharp and James Pepper Henry. So, through an art project, it just spiraled."