

Spencer Museum announces KU Common Work of Art for 2021-2022

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LAWRENCE — The Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas announces “Native Host,” a series of five signs by artist Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne, Arapaho), as the KU Common Work of Art for the 2021-2022 academic year. The series will complement the 2021-2022 KU Common Book “Braiding Sweetgrass” by Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi).

Themes in this year’s KU Common Book and Common Work of Art selections explore relationships among art, history, scientific thought and Indigenous ways of generating knowledge. This year also marks the first Common Book partnership between KU and Haskell Indian Nations University.

“Native Host” consists of five aluminum signs and is currently on display in front of the Spencer Museum on Mississippi Street. The signs name Native tribes who historically or currently inhabit the region that is now called Kansas. On each sign, the colonial name is

printed backward while the name of the land's original occupants is printed forward. The visual tension that Heap of Birds creates between these names aims to remind viewers of the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their homelands as well as their continued and active presence in the Americas.

Spencer Museum Curator Kate Meyer said that the selection of "Native Host" was prompted by a line in Kimmerer's book: "Our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories."

"'Native Host' acknowledges that the land the Spencer Museum and KU reside on holds history and stories beyond or outside colonial expectations," Meyer said.

Because the signs are installed outdoors, students and other visitors can experience the KU Common Work of Art at any time. A forthcoming virtual exhibition will draw further connections between "Braiding Sweetgrass" and objects in the Spencer's collection, and a sampling of art included in the virtual exhibition will be on display in the Spencer's Learning Center when the museum reopens in fall 2021.

A Hawk Week event on August 25 invites students to engage with "Native Hosts" and create their own artwork that explores place, heritage, culture and memory. Resources for expanding conversation about the KU Common Work of Art are available online and will continue to be updated throughout the year. Instructors interested in incorporating the KU Common Work of Art and other Spencer Museum resources into their fall courses should contact Celka Straughn, the Spencer Museum's deputy director for public practice, curatorial and research.

Photo: Installation view of "Native Host" series by Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds in front of the Spencer Museum. Credit: Ryan Waggoner.

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