

Photos by Accra Shepp at Spencer Museum of Art document Occupy Wall Street, COVID-19

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LAWRENCE — A new exhibition, “Dissent, Discontent, and Action: Pictures of US by Accra Shepp,” opens Feb. 18 at the Spencer Museum of Art. Through two portrait series, “Occupying Wall Street” and “The Covid Journals,” New York-based contemporary photographer Accra Shepp reveals a sense of community, hope and resilience during an era of tremendous social, political and environmental change.

Shepp began photographing the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in New York’s Zuccotti Park on Oct. 1, 2011. He was drawn to the sea of individuals as a photographic subject, based in part on his observation of the crowd’s diversity. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Shepp again captured portraits of the people in his city. The series began at Elmhurst Hospital, just a few blocks from Shepp’s home in Queens, during a moment when the hospital was filling with COVID-19 patients. Later that year, Shepp’s attention shifted to demonstrations and the outcry for justice that occurred after the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

Shepp said his work speaks to the responsibility of artists to “make present important historical moments and conditions.”

All 39 photos in the show are printed at a large scale in black and white, providing a sense of continuity although the series were made nearly a decade apart. Kate Meyer, Spencer Museum curator, said that uniting these two groups of photos for the first time in a gallery provides a unique viewing opportunity.

“Together these images prompt us to think about how the same issues of equity and justice that drove protesters to the streets in 2011 became even more relevant during the pandemic and continue to shape our society today,” Meyer said.

Shepp will visit the Spencer Museum later this spring to engage with KU classes and the public. “Dissent, Discontent, and Action” will remain on view through June 25. It is co-curated by Meyer and Luke Jordan, the Spencer Museum’s photography specialist and lecturer in KU’s Department of Visual Art. The exhibition and related programs are supported by KU Student Senate and the Linda Inman Bailey Exhibitions Fund.

Image: Accra Shepp, "Andrea, in Times Square, protesting 150th day of Breonna Taylor murder, 2020," courtesy of Accra Shepp and Convoke NYC.



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