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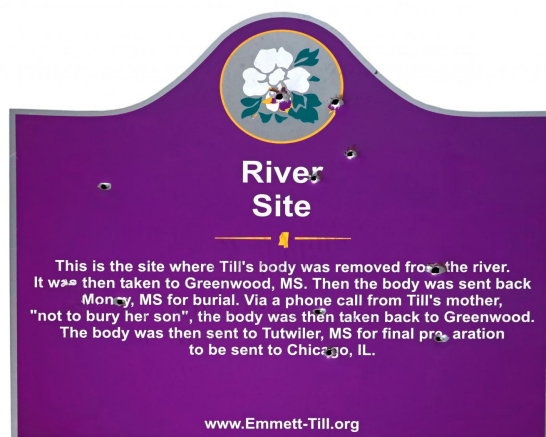
New exhibitions at Spencer Museum explore legacy of Emmett Till and racial justice



Jeffrey Melo, "Leaders of the New School," 2022, courtesy of Bill and Christy Gautreaux Collection, Kansas City, Missouri.

LAWRENCE — This week, the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas opens two exhibitions that explore race in U.S. history, from the Civil Rights Movement to racial justice movements today. The traveling show "Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley: Let the World See" tells the story of Emmett Till and his mother, which continues to inspire generations. A companion exhibition, "One History, Two Versions," features artwork by contemporary Black artists that explores and highlights Black life, Black love, media representation and activism. Both shows open Feb. 9.

“Let the World See” offers insight into Till’s life as a child in Chicago, the events that led to his kidnapping and murder, the racism and biases that allowed his killers to go free, and the ways that Mamie Till-Mobley’s love and bravery in advocating for her son fueled the Civil Rights Movement. The exhibition includes photographs, first-person accounts and other historical materials, including a bullet-ridden historical marker noting the location where Till’s body was removed from the Tallahatchie River.



“Let the World See” features this vandalized marker from the site where Emmett Till’s body was retrieved from the Tallahatchie River. Property of the Emmett Till Interpretive Center.

Dave Tell, KU professor of communication studies, served as a historical consultant for the design and content of “Let the World See.” In 2019, Tell helped launch the Emmett Till Memory Project, an app that highlights important locations related to Till’s murder, including the sign displayed in the exhibition. One of the motivations behind the app’s creation was to counteract ongoing vandalism of memorials for Till.

“The sign at the center exhibit was the third sign to mark the spot where Till’s body was pulled from the river. The first sign was stolen, thrown in the river and never recovered. The second was filled with 317 bullet holes and eventually went to the Smithsonian. The third is here. The fourth — still standing — is bulletproof,” Tell said.

“Let the World See” is a collaboration of the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley Institute, the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, the Till family and The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, where the exhibition premiered in fall 2022. Other locations the show has traveled to include the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library and the National Civil Rights Museum. It is recommended for visitors ages 10 and older due to discussions of racial violence.

Drawing on the legacies of Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley, “One History, Two Versions” highlights the role of art in fostering dialogue about ongoing racial violence, justice movements and Black lived experience. The exhibition includes art from the Spencer Museum’s collection, as well as loans from Bill

and Christy Gautreaux and The Children's Museum of Indianapolis. Sydney Pursel, Spencer Museum curator for public practice, said that the companion exhibition was intended to elaborate on themes presented in the traveling show while uplifting contemporary Black artists.

"The artwork is big, bold, colorful and expands on themes of Emmett and Mamie's story, like the love between a mother and her children, or how media representation and activism have evolved over time, while also recognizing that more work is needed in the fight for racial justice," Pursel said.

Pursel worked closely with a group of community advisers to develop content and resources for both exhibitions. Community partners include the Lawrence branch of the NAACP, the NAACP Youth Council of Lawrence, B.L.A.C.K. Lawrence, the Lawrence/Douglas County Community Remembrance Project Coalition and Justice for Wyandotte.

Wendo Kimori, president of the NAACP Youth Council of Lawrence, said she gained a deeper understanding of the artwork and concepts presented through working with other community advisers and Spencer Museum staff.

"I have always said that anti-racist work is extremely difficult to do alone, and I learned that educating the public through an art exhibit is no exception to this rule," Kimori said. "No two people who visit the exhibit will have the same life experiences. I encourage everyone who visits to bring at least one other person with them."

"Let the World See" will remain on view at the Spencer Museum through May 19. "One History, Two Versions" will remain on view through June 16. Admission to the Spencer Museum is free for everyone.

These exhibitions and related programming are co-sponsored by KU's Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging; Office of the Provost; Office of Research; Hall Center for the Humanities; Department of African & African-American Studies; Department of Communication Studies; Langston Hughes Center and Student Senate as well as the National Endowment for the Humanities and Humanities Kansas, which connects Kansans with stories, ideas and each other to strengthen communities. Additional funding comes from the Friends of the Art Museum, the Linda Inman Bailey Exhibitions Fund and Duane Morris LLC.