

In KU exhibit, Kansas quilt artists piece together story of racial violence from Emmett Till to today

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Arts & Life



Lawrence Brooks IV

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Renowned quilter and textile artist Marla Jackson stands with her quilt “First Born,” part of the “One History, Two Versions” exhibit currently on display in the Spencer Museum of Art. The hand- and machine-made quilt was constructed using cotton, wood, beads and various fabrics.

A pair of exhibits at the Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence are inspired by the life and death of Emmett Till, which helped launch the civil rights movement. The work of area textile artists helps connect the 1955 killing to contemporary violence against Black people.

Marla Jackson grew up in the shadow of Jim Crow segregation and Emmett Till's 1955 murder. The 71-year-old says the story of Till, killed by vigilantes in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman, is still relevant.

"It's the same stories now," says Jackson, a renowned quilter and textile artist. "Only thing changed is social media."

"They're just shooting your babies right in front of us, and one calling for his mama," she says, referring to George Floyd, who could be heard on video in 2020 calling for his mother while being asphyxiated by a Minneapolis police officer.

The high-profile killings loom large in a pair of exhibits now on view at the Spencer Museum of Art on the University of Kansas' Lawrence campus.

Jacksons' artwork, and that of 13 more contemporary Black artists, is featured in the "One History, Two Versions" exhibit. The show plays companion to another exhibition that's traveled across the country since opening in the fall of 2022, "Emmett Till & Mamie Till-Mobley: Let the World See." Both have been open since February.

The Till exhibit, in part, sets about humanizing the historical figure's boyhood existence, and conveying the depths of a mother's love for her son, even in senseless tragedy.

The complimentary exhibit draws on themes of Till's story with a singular focus: drawing a direct line from Till's murder to Trayvon Martin and beyond.

In Jackson's piece, titled "First Born," a mother in African-themed clothing is seen holding her child upwards, towards the sun.

"It is such an honor and privilege," says Jackson, who owns Marla Quilts Inc. in Lawrence and works with a network of quilters across North America.



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Kansas City, Kansas, artist Nedra Bonds' quilt "A Kiss From The Ancestors," on display in the "One History, Two Versions" exhibit at the Spencer Museum of Art.

Artist Nedra Bonds is a Kansas City quilter whose work is also included in "One History, Two Versions."

Bonds, now 75, was 7 when Emmett Till was lynched. She says that moment is forever etched in her mind.

“I remember seeing that photograph of Emmett Till when they pulled him out of the water, and his mom had the open casket in Chicago,” says Bonds, who was born and raised in the historic Quindaro neighborhood of Kansas City, Kansas.

Bonds is best known for creating the “The Quindaro Quilt” in 1988. The 4-by-6-foot protest quilt depicts the neighborhood's history in abolitionism and the Underground Railroad.

Like Jackson, Bonds’ work in the KU exhibit depicts the bond between Black mother and child. Her “A Kiss from the Ancestor” piece uses beads as Bantu knots in the head of an elder, who is kissing a young family member on the forehead.



C.J. Janovy

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Nedra Bonds in the lobby at the University of Kansas Cancer Center in 2017, with one of her recent quilt pieces.

As a retired educator in early childhood education and art at Pembroke Hill School and Operation Breakthrough, Bonds sees the importance of passing down the stories from one generation to the next.

“It's important for young people to know, especially now, when governments don't want us to know the true history of Black people in this country,” she says. “So the way that I let people know is through quilts.”

'Art as a way to teach these histories'

Sydney Pursel, the Spencer Museum's curator for public practice, helped curate the exhibit in Lawrence. She says attacks in Kansas and Missouri on how Black history is taught is why some of the new artwork ties the past to the present.

“We have students from all walks of life that come through our building, but they might not go attend a Black Lives Matter protest,” she says. “So it's a way that we can reach broader audiences and use art as a way to teach these histories.”



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Sydney Pursel, right, gives an exhibit tour on Feb. 29. "I think art is a really useful tool for having deep conversations, like ones about race and injustice," she says. "Artists are always reflecting the world around them and questioning our current state of the world, current events, the status quo."

Pursel didn't come up with the intersecting exhibit themes alone. She notes contributions from partner organizations like the [NAACP Lawrence, KS Branch](#) and [Justice for Wyandotte](#), a nonprofit dedicated to criminal justice reform.

She says the museum was intentional in making this project a true community collaboration and they had great discussions on how the new exhibit contributes to the traveling exhibit.

"The piece that you see initially and the piece that ends the show are about those two boys that have become martyrs for different generations," Pursel says. "It really demonstrates the need for social justice work and activism to continue today."

KU professor of communications Dave Tell served as a historical consultant for the design and content of the “Let the World See” exhibit. Tell, a scholar on the life of Emmett Till, also helped launch the Emmett Till Memory Project, an application that details important locations related to Till’s murder.

Tell says he dedicated some of his life’s work to keep Till’s memory alive partly because of the efforts to keep this story hidden where the crime took place.



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A decorative hoodie made by artist Devan Shimoyama to commemorate the life of Trayvon Martin. It's part of the "One History, Two Versions" exhibit at the Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence. To honor Martin's legacy without showing the brutality associated with his killing, the artist used decorative fabric, silk flowers, rhinestones and beads.

“There has been a lot of resistance to telling Till's story,” Tell says. “If you start with the 1955 murder, you have to count 49 years and 11 months before the state of Mississippi dropped a single dollar to tell the story of Emmett Till.”

Helping curate a nationwide exhibit that does just that, he says, and bringing the exhibit to his home in Lawrence, is a surreal moment.

“What I get excited about is helping the family of Emmett Till as a historic consultant doing work that's important,” he says. “I'm just grateful that my job as a professor gives me a chance to do meaningful work that hopefully will change culture in the long run.”

“Emmett Till & Mamie Till-Mobley: Let the World See” runs through May 19 at the Spencer Museum of Art, 1301 Mississippi St., Lawrence, Kansas 66045. “One History, Two Versions” is on view through June 16. More information is at Spencerart.ku.edu.



Lawrence Brooks IV

As KCUR's race and culture reporter, I work to help readers and listeners build meaningful and longstanding relationships with the many diverse cultures that make up the Kansas City metro. I deliver nuanced stories about the underrepresented communities that call our metro home, and the people whose historically-overlooked contributions span politics, civil rights, business, the arts, sports and every other realm of our daily lives.

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