Friends & Neighbors :Community Curators' Choices

To create this exhibition, the Spencer's four curators invited four Lawrence community members to each select an object for display from the Museum's collection. The conversations that took place within the pairings of community and Museum curators identified issues and objects that had meaning for each guest curator. Our goal was to focus on just one or two works in each collaborating pair. The neighborhood curator took the lead and set the tone for object selection. In response to this, each Museum curator chose an object that connects in some way to the work of art and theme suggested by the community curator.

The topics that emerged from these dialogues are listed below, along with the names of the guest and staff curators. One of the many interesting results of these exchanges is that the themes that developed are surprisingly interrelated, even though none of the community curators consulted with each other directly. We hope you will enjoy these connections and the selection of objects.

Here are the themes identified by the collaborating pairs of neighborhood and Museum curators:

Satire & Survival
Joni Murphy, Professor of English, Haskell Indian Nations University
Nancy Mahaney, Curator of the Arts & Cultures of Africa, Native America, & Oceania

Political Activism & Racial Discrimination
Lynne Green, Executive Director, Van Go Mobile Arts, Inc.
Susan Earle, Curator of European & American Art

Isolation & Connectedness
Molly Murphy, Lawrence Artist & Freelance Curator
Kris Imants Ercums, Curator of Asian Art

Repetition & Pattern
Reid Harrison, Artist / Lawrence High School Class of 2010
Stephen Goddard, Senior Curator and Curator of Prints & Drawings

Satire & Survival

In times of stress our ability to laugh may mean the difference between survival and succumbing to the mounting pressures of our lives. Dr. Joni Murphy's selection is an illustration of the importance of humor in Native American survival in the face of adversity, poverty, and rapid acculturation. The subtlety of the humor embodied in these pieces engages the audience on multiple levels, utilizing satire, irony, and parody to entertain and educate by reflecting on beliefs, behavior, and identity.

Nancy Mahaney, Curator of the Arts & Cultures of Africa, Native America, & Oceania

Community Curator: Joni Murphy

Diego Romero
born 1964, Berkeley, California
Cochiti Pueblo
When Titans Collide, 1999
ceramic, gold
Museum purchase: Peter T. Bohan Art Acquisition Fund and Spencer Museum of Art, 1999.0143

I chose Diego Romero's *When Titans Collide* because I think it makes an important statement about the unique qualities of contemporary Native American art. Romero addresses the history of his ancestors by creating a fusion of Eurocentric art forms and traditional Native pottery techniques.

Romero combines Anasazi and Mimbres pottery styles with elements from Greek black-figure painting, comic-book art and elements of pop culture. The result is a biting social commentary that conveys the innate humor of America's original indigenous peoples. In my view, humor is a key factor in the survival and tenacity of the Native American race. Romero uses both his urban and traditional experience to teach the viewer that American Indians have a vast and varied history beyond the one dimensional portrayals so often seen in museums and history books.

Joni Murphy, Professor of English
Haskell Indian Nations University

Spencer Curator: Nancy Mahaney

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, artist
born 1940, Flathead Reservation, Montana
Flathead Salish
Zanatta Editions, publisher
Michael Sims, printer
Humor, 1996
from *Survival*
color lithograph, chine collé
Museum purchase: State funds, 1996.0011.04

An inverted horned figure pointing in opposite directions provides the focal point in this work. The text, "Coyote made me do it…" suggests a transgression that is being blamed on the wily trickster who is known for getting caught in the crossfire of his own devious plans. All the most potent symbols of the historic plains landscape are here, but they are rearranged, encouraging us to consider alternative ways of viewing the significance of these symbols.

Neal Ambrose-Smith
born 1966, Texas
Flathead Salish, Cree, Metis
Coyote Says Eat Your Grease, 2007
solarization, letterpress on paper
Museum purchase: Gift of Janey L. Levy, 2008.0304
[a second copy, exhibited open, private collection]

By cleverly cloaking his hand-printed version of the coyote trickster tale inside the covers of discarded children's books, the author satirizes the morality of mainstream American culture. The coyote tale contained within tells a story of survival, suggesting that subtle trickery may be a critical element to survival.

Nancy Mahaney, Curator of the Arts & Cultures of Africa, Native America, & Oceania

Text of Exhibited Book

Introduction

Coyote stories began thousands of years ago and have been retold by many tribes throughout the Americas. The trickster, the Creator's helper, Coyote does great things and helps people through many troubles and hardship. Coyote also gets in trouble. As with all stories this one begins with a bit of truth and a bit of story. In truth during winter when food is scarce coyote and raven can be seen interacting, hunting or even playing with each other. A symbiosis. Upon witnessing them together a child may tell an elder what had been seen. Imparting the importance of having a proper diet, a bit of truth, and a bit of story, the elder might just have a "Coyote Story".

It was long ago that humans needed more fat in their diet, in fact their body would crave it. Fat was energy to keep them alive through the long harsh winters when food was scarce. And even though we don't need quite as much fat in out diet today, we still crave it.

WARNING!

This Coyote story can only be read during the winter months, when all the hunting and harvesting is done. In spring and summer there is much work to be done and no time for Coyote stories. Reading stories during working months can upset the balance or nature as everyone wants to hear the stories. When the birds listen they stop building nests and won't tend to their eggs. It is said if you choose to read this story during working months you may find a toad in your bed or quite possibly a snake.

Flathead Proverb

Coyote Says Eat Your Grease

One day a long time ago, in a winter forest far far away, Coyote was hungry. He had been working all day and hadn't seen any berries and not one root. He was thin from walking, tired from the pain in his belly and his ribs began to poke out.

All was lost. Coyote was doomed. He looked up at the Sun to prepare for his journey and said, "It's a good day to die." That's when he saw a shadow across the sky. Raven had zoomed by!

"Where is Raven going in such a hurry?" Coyote thought. He quickly gathered himself, pulling some energy from the Sun and ran after Raven.

Again Coyote ran and ran to catch up to Raven. That is when Coyote saw a piece of grease in Raven's mouth. "A ha!" Coyote exclaimed. "Raven is ignoring me because he has food!" Now Coyote was determined to get Raven to talk.

Catching up to Raven, Coyote began to call him. "Raven, Raven wait a minute," but Raven just ignored Coyote's plea and flew right by. I must find out why my friend ignores me, Coyote thought.

"Raven old friend, why won't you talk to me? I thought we were old friends. Please Raven, whatever I have done that displeases you, I am deeply sorry, just one word from you and I promise I'll never bother you again!" Coyote painfully exclaimed, clutching his side and reaching to the sky.

Finally Raven opened his mouth and said, "Don't be silly Coyote, of course you are my good friend". But as he opened his mouth to speak he dropped the piece of grease and Coyote gobbled it up before it even hit the ground.

"Oh I'm so glad we're still friends, I was so worried. And thank you for that tasty treat, I was starving," said Coyote as he lay in the snow and let his tummy relax a moment.

Perhaps if you are lucky enough to catch a glimpse of coyote and raven together you will see them playing their games.

THE END

Political Activism & Racial Discrimination

Community Curator: Lynne Green

Faith Ringgold
born 1930, New York, New York
Flag Story quilt, 1985
cotton canvas, dyeing, piecing, appliqué, ink
Museum purchase: Peter T. Bohan Art Acquisition Fund, 1991.0040

"Faith, Hope, and Clarity"

In the 2008 presidential election when candidate Barack Obama refused to wear the ubiquitous American flag pin, pundits on the Right pounced, calling him un-American. But instead of going on the defensive, Obama confronted the issue head-on, taking the political "road less traveled" by beginning a *real* conversation about patriotism:

"…after the Iraq war, the pin became a substitute for *true patriotism*—which is speaking out on issues that are important—I decided not to wear that pin on my chest. Instead, I'm going to tell the American people what I believe will make this country great- hopefully, that will be a testimony to my patriotism."

Likewise, in the 1960s, when 30-year-old artist Faith Ringgold gave up her safe, still-life painting to create overtly political work, she, too, veered away from "easy street." (Growing up in Harlem in the 1930s, she clearly remembers her third-grade teacher's assertion that "slaves didn't mind the trip here from Africa because they were happy-go-lucky.") More than ready to join heroes Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks in the struggle for civil rights, Ringgold leaped into the fray with her confrontational, 1967 oil on canvas *The Flag is Bleeding,* deliberately shocking the White establishment; through the outrage the painting provoked, Ringgold intended to advance the ensuing, uncomfortable conversation about race in America.

It was Ringgold's first use of the American flag as a symbol of racial injustice—but not the last.

In 1985, she once again discomfited viewers by altering this sacred iconography in her *Flag Story Quilt.* With her no-holds-barred tale of racial injustice juxtaposed against the comfy, fabric quilt, Ringgold takes on the myth of the flag as the indisputable symbol of American freedom. And, like feminist contemporaries, artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Goldberg, she uses the traditional medium of soft, non-threatening fabric to deliver her hard-edged truths.

Barack Obama confronts these same truths in much the same way, when, like artist Ringgold, he fearlessly forces us to reconsider our cherished ideals. In his groundbreaking, March 19, 2008, speech in Philadelphia, candidate Obama dared to begin a "real" conversation about race in America:

"….for the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor have the anger and bitterness of all of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table…."

…or in Faith Ringgold's *Flag Story Quilt.*

Lynne Green, Executive Director,
Van Go Mobile Arts, Inc.

Spencer Curator: Susan Earle

Marion Palfi
1907–1978
born Berlin, Germany;
died Los Angeles, California
Chicago, 1964, School boycott ("Man dreams of himself as a human being then turns and kills his dream." Lillian Smith.), 1964
from *Civil Rights: That May Affect Their Hearts and Minds*
gelatin silver print
Gift of Marion Palfi, 1973.0162

Lynne Green's sense of clarity in choosing Faith Ringgold's *Flag Story Quilt* for this exhibition was impressive. She knew that the work would speak to many people and help to open up conversations.

Ringgold's *Quilt* is so strong that it was not easy to find something to pair with it for this display. Marion Palfi's photograph of a Chicago school boycott also makes a powerful statement. Where Ringgold uses narrative and the allure of fabric to deliver her message, Palfi uses the documentary quality of photography to portray a real event, giving us an instant "story" through a visual snapshot. This photograph also includes a text, like Ringgold's *Flag Story Quilt,* although here the text takes the form of a protester's placard. Its potent message challenges us with truth and simplicity: "Freedom Must Be Lived."

German-American artist Marion Palfi documented the lives of many Americans who were neglected or mistreated by society, including orphaned children, African Americans and Native Americans. She herself fled from Nazi Germany to the United States, where she worked as a political activist through her photography. The University of Kansas Museum of Art organized the first major exhibition of her work in 1973.

Susan Earle, Curator of European & American Art

Isolation & Connectedness

Community Curator: Molly Murphy

Carey Maxon
born 1978
Jolie Holland and her 8 Fold Path, 2007
graphite on paper
Museum purchase: Gift of Collette and Jeff Bangert, 2008.0287

The information superhighway. Globalism. "The world is flat." We are bombarded with the notion that we can have all information and connection at our fingertips. With every click of a button, swipe of a credit card, update of Facebook status, download of a television show, upload of a photo, text, "tweet," blog, or email, a new piece of information is recorded about us. Simultaneously, our information is data-mined by tireless statisticians, collected for the purpose of determining the type of person one is. Gone are the days of deleting browser histories to erase our embarrassments. Someone is always collecting and recording, creating a portrait of us out of our Google searches and shopping habits.

As the pencil nears a place of obscurity, Carey Maxon employs delicate graphite marks to express her compulsion and stress about the availability of more and more information. Tubes seem to travel from her hand up and out into eventual knots and sometimes voids. When Maxon learned her boyfriend had dated the famous folk artist Jolie Holland, she found herself searching and reading further and further into the life of the internet darling. Photos, updates, and articles were everywhere. This piece seems to suggest the isolation and tension within the endless connections to the digital portrait of Holland, and somewhere, the misinterpreted portrait being compiled of Maxon.

The world of global communication possibly necessitates isolation as both our introductory point and outcome. The technology that is supposed to lend unfettered exploration and connection is also placing tailored suggestions and ads in front of us, leaving out all we have deemed uninteresting. We are slowly being separated and categorized, removing certain aspects of common experience. I wonder as I look at the more familiar marks of Maxon's pencil on paper if it will be necessary to disconnect in order to reconnect to our actual selves.

Molly Murphy, Lawrence Artist & Freelance Curator

Spencer Curator: Kris Imants Ercums

Japan, Edo period (1600–1868)
Star (Hoshi) Mandala, late 1700s
tempera on paper on oil cloth
William Bridges Thayer Memorial, 0000.1278

Long before the invention of the World Wide Web, Buddhist thinkers imagined time and space through interconnected, dimensional diagrams known as mandalas. My initial foray into the world of esoteric Buddhism also happened to correspond with my first exploration of the internet. Since those undergraduate days in the 1990s, both the internet and the mandala have been conceptually linked. I remember when I first read William Gibson's 1984 cyberpunk classic *Neoromancer.* I was entranced by the idea of cyberspace which describes a virtual world interfaced by computers. The word "mandala" itself is derived from the root *manda,* which means essence, to which the suffix *la,* meaning container, has been added. In this respect, mandala and cyberspace have wondrous connections; they are strategies for giving form and cohesiveness to something vast and formless. When I went to see *The Matrix* on opening night in a grungy theater in north Chicago in 1999, mandalas were on my mind. In the final scene, when Neo suddenly sees the green-coded substructure of that virtual world, it related to a moment of enlightenment described in Buddhism, and to the visual paradigm obtained through the use of a mandala.

This mandala from Japan, which has at its center the Nyoirin Kannon—a bodhisattva or "enlightened being" depicted holding a jewel—is part of a pantheon of immensely powerful beings. They have imposing titles like Surya, Hindu God of the Sun, who is shown seated upon a lotus throne carried by five horses. They remind me of the opening scene of the "Second Renaissance" in *The Animatrix;* or avatars in Second Life; or the personification of data as seen in the 1982 Disney movie *Tron*; or maybe even the infinite geometric replication embodied in a fractal. They are forever and infinite, like the Hindu adage about the foundation of the world resting on a turtle: "What's under that turtle? Well, its 'turtles all the way down.'" Yet, while the diagram seems to

imply a connection between these powerful entities, I cannot help but sense a feeling of isolation. After all, these awe-inspiring gods are each contained in separate, discrete "bubbles." It makes me think of the *South Park* episode "Make Love, Not Warcraft." Suddenly a team of grotesquely overweight computer nerds toggle F1 and animate an army of awesome spiritual perfection.

While Senator Ted Stevens' now-infamous reduction of the internet to a "series of tubes" has been lambasted countless times, his frustrated attempt was not unique. Indeed, I believe his attempt to reconcile the incomprehensible complexities of networks that deliver information to us at the flash of a keyboard still resonates deeply with the vast majority of us, myself included. I used to be an avid letter writer, but my email account killed that. Now I dash off instantaneous messages to friends in Mongolia and Berlin. But do I feel any closer to them? Has the level of meaningful relationships in my life increased or decreased? What does all this convenience and "social networking" really mean? Don't get me wrong, I'm a huge fan of technology, and I'm not advocating to any one that we give it up (though I sometimes want to throw my phone into Clinton Lake). However, I do think we can take a lesson from Buddhist thinkers and begin to contextualize the scale of our world within the larger workings of the universe and history. When we do that, even the millions of Twitter fans following every quotidian move of Ashton Kutcher become a miniscule speck and, conversely, spending the day sitting in the sun with someone you love expands to infinity.

Kris Imants Ercums, Curator of Asian Art

Repetition & Pattern

Community Curator: Reid Harrison

Weegee
1899–1968
born Zloczew, Austria-Hungary (present-day Poland); died New York, New York
Asleep on Fire Escape During Heat Spell, 1938
gelatin silver print
Museum purchase: Peter T. Bohan Art Acquisition Fund, 1985.0082

Coney Island Beach, 4 p.m., July 28, 1940, 1940
gelatin silver print
Museum purchase: Peter T. Bohan Art Acquisition Fund, 1985.0081

Robert Dale Anderson
1949–2009
born Glendale, California; died Austin, Texas
Show Pink, 2002
color etching, relief roll
Gift of the KU Art Department, Intaglio Area, 2002.0198

Global Worming, 2002
etching
Gift of the KU Art Department, Intaglio Area, 2002.0199

In my own art, I work to combine dreamlike settings and captured moments manifested through the use of pattern, repetition, and the human form to convey tangled emotions within the human consciousness. The works chosen for this show beautifully reflect this idea of almost ordered chaos perfectly, each relating to the next, adding layer upon layer to the chaotic thought of interacting subject and human involvement.

Reid Harrison, Artist / Lawrence High School Class of 2010

Spencer Curator: Stephen Goddard

Jim Nutt, artist
born 1938, Pittsfield, Massachusetts
Timothy Berry, printer
born 1948
Teaberry Press, publisher
Oh! My Goodness (No No), 1977
etching
Museum purchase: Peter T. Bohan Art Acquisition Fund, 2005.0083

This installation is the result of a three-way conversation that revolved around prints, drawings, and photographs in the Spencer's study room. The discussion included community member Reid Harrison, an artist and junior at Lawrence High

School; Stephen Goddard, Senior Curator and Curator of Prints & Drawings; and Meredith Moore, 2008–2009 Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Curatorial Intern in the Department of Prints & Drawings.

Reid asked to see all the Museum's works by Weegee, an artist she especially admires. Her favorite work by Weegee, *Asleep on Fire Escape During Heat Spell,* typifies, as Reid noted, the photographer's ability to make images that are very sad without being depressing; images that still allow some hope for humanity.

Weegee's *Coney Island Beach* had some points in common with Reid's description of her own work as "very involved with repetition and pattern." In discussing repetition and pattern we looked at works by several artists and Reid settled on two etchings by Robert Dale Anderson because of their clear resonance with some aspects of her own work.

A discussion followed about *Horror Vacui* (fear of leaving empty spaces in a composition) and I suggested inserting Jim Nutt's *Oh! My Goodness (No No),* as a visual connector between Weegee's mildly troubled and richly peopled world and Anderson's compulsive, swarming fields.

Stephen Goddard, Senior Curator and Curator of Prints & Drawings