



Posted on Sat, May. 18, 2013

Spencer Museum's collection inspires two artists to take different paths

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star

A ghostly crowd hovers in the Spencer Museum of Art's Central Court. Positioned at varying heights and seen from different angles, the shadowy figures line the walls to uncanny effect.

Men and women, standing and seated, they point and gesticulate, evincing a variety of attitudes and moods. The images resonate with the media's barrage of shots of individuals gathered for the Boston Marathon.

But their long skirts and lace collars, breeches and cloaks, locate the Spencer's figures in the distant past, centuries removed from a U.S. race celebrating Patriots Day and the contemporary passion for sports and fitness.

In fact, all of the images on the Central Court walls are based on 18th-century Italian figures, made as part of elaborate Nativity scenes known as presepios.

Their gestures and finely worked clothing captivated artist Ann Hamilton when she discovered them in the Spencer's collection while doing research for this show.

Two decades ago, curator Susan Earle saw a Hamilton installation, "Tropos," at New York's Dia Center for the Arts, where the artist covered the floor with horsehair.

In 2000, Earle approached Hamilton about doing a project for the Spencer, but her calendar was jammed. In 1999 Hamilton represented the U.S. at the Venice Biennale and was soon booked with shows at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art and museums in Sweden, Japan and France.

But Earle didn't give up on the idea of a Spencer show, knowing that Hamilton earned a bachelor of fine arts in textile design at the University of Kansas, home of the museum.

Hamilton had studied with Cynthia Schira, who retired from the school in 1999 but returned in 2009 to receive an award. That got Earle thinking about "trying to get both at the same time," and three years ago the two artists began to explore the museum's collection in preparation for their joint exhibit, "An Errant Line," named for a weaving technique.

"They looked at everything," Earle said. "They went to Spooner Hall and explored the baskets, figures and dolls. In storage at the Spencer, they walked past an ensemble of presepio scene figures, and they loved the combination of human figure and fabric."

A small side gallery adjacent to the Central Court displays examples of the roughly 100 figures in the museum's collection. Some represent villagers, others show upper-class figures, clad in silk, brocade and satin adorned with lace and metallic trims. Some even wear finely crafted shoes and boots.

Hamilton placed selected figures on a scanner and then made enlargements of the images on large sheets of Japanese rice paper, known as gampi. Often she fragmented the images, presenting a single figure in parts on two, three or four sheets of gampi that she mounted on cheesecloth for enhanced textural effect.

Hamilton also decided to incorporate the room's grand piano, a famous Bechstein played by composer Franz Liszt during a residency in England.

Earle recounts that during Hamilton's research for the show, she learned that it was St. Francis who developed the presepio tradition and that his father had been a cloth merchant. Those discoveries fueled the artist's decision to cloak the piano in a bronzy pink satin, which echoes the hue of the background of her presepio scans.

Hamilton's Spencer installation comes on the heels of a spectacular project at New York's Park Avenue Armory, where she installed a huge white curtain set in motion by visitors arcing to and fro on a series of 42 old-fashioned

playground swings. Her current piece reflects the more meditative side of the artist's production and her longstanding interest in historical gatherings and communities.

In a large gallery just west of Hamilton's display, Schira hung long, banner-like textiles based on digitized details of the presepio figures' clothing.

Where Hamilton's installation mines the poetics of the figures, zeroing in on their worldliness and antic humanity, Schira's installation has an academic emphasis.

Divided into three parts — Making, Showing and Saving — her display focuses on how her textiles were made and the way museums care for textiles in their collections.

Schira was a pioneer in the use of computer assisted design programs to direct the loom.

Anchoring her installation are two enormous textiles made at the computer-controlled Oriole Mill in Hendersonville, N.C., which enabled her to work on a monumental scale. In "ETYMON," bands of varying widths feature abstracted details of works in the Spencer's online collection database. The other large textile is a word piece, emblazoned with a multitude of cloth and textile terms and other words extracted from the museum's website.

A "work" area includes a casual display of her sketches along with woven strips featuring details of her textile designs. Joining the woven banners in the center of the room are lengths of mesh and panels of sheer patterned fabric made with a dye sublimation process that uses heat to bond the printed design to the fabric.

One section of the installation takes its cues from museum storage. A stand holds tubes of fabric; a rack of rolled textiles replicates the appearance of museum quilt storage. Nearby, wall-mounted shelves hold numbered and lettered boxes and various objects Schira selected from the collection.

While intended to provide a kind of glimpse behind the scenes, the tubes and boxes leach the wonder from "An Errant Line," which derives its most compelling moments from the human drama of the presepio.

To reach Alice Thorson, call 816-234-4783 or send email to athorson@kcstar.com.

© 2013 Kansas City Star and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansascity.com>