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Summer Fun visual arts | The shows to see this summer

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star

Modern Mexican art, contemporary New York abstraction and probing photographs of the American West head up the summer's offerings at Kansas City's art museums.

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art has been gearing up for months for "Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and the Masterpieces of Modern Mexico," an exhibit of highlights from the collection of Jacques and Natasha Gelman.

From 1943 to 1986, the Gelmans assembled a collection representing the greats of modern Mexican art, including Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Rufino Tamayo. Since the Gelmans' deaths, the collection has continued to add works of contemporary art through the Vergel Foundation, which was established to carry out their wishes.

Stephanie Knappe, the Nelson's associate curator of American art, is in charge of the presentation at the Nelson, which will feature 118 works from a collection that now numbers roughly 300 pieces.

"Kahlo and Rivera were the heart and core of the collection, and their works make up about a fifth of the exhibition," Knappe said. "Come for the headliners and stay to be thrilled by the diversity of Mexican art in the 20th and 21st centuries.

She predicts contemporary artist Cisco Jimenez will be "an eye-opener.

"He's wonderfully irreverent and witty and turns what we might revere on its head," she said.

The exhibit will occupy an environment that Knappe describes as "immersive, transformative and multigenerational" and will include an experiment with dual labels.

Traditional labels will accompany all of the works, but about 40 of them will also have labels written by students from Shawnoe Elementary School in Shawnee and by juniors and seniors in advance placement art class at Kansas City's University Academy, Knappe said.

"We've been working with these students since last August, going to their schools; they came to the museum," she said.

The student labels will feature their responses to the artworks in the form of brief stories.

The exhibit runs June 1-Aug. 18. Tickets are required; for information go to nelson-atkins.org.

At the Kemper

The Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art's big summer exhibition, "Laura McPhee: River of No Return," offers a thoughtful take on the American West today.

Over the course of five years, McPhee made nine trips to the Sawtooth Valley in Idaho, a place, she says, "where animals far outnumbered people, a place of intense beauty and severe weather, a place where some species lived in abundance and others were on the verge of extinction."

In the show's more than two dozen 6-by-8-foot photographs, McPhee captures it all: the people, the animals, the natural beauty and their interrelationships, good and bad. The exhibit continues through Sept. 22. (kemperart.org)

At the Nerman

Opening June 14 at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, "Polychrome Fiction" pairs new works by New York abstractionists Joanne Greenbaum and Jackie Saccoccio.

Color, layering and an immersion in process are key to both artists' works.

Greenbaum's display will include large-scale pieces as well as a site-specific installation of more than 60 small paintings spanning a 50-foot gallery wall.

Saccoccio will exhibit paintings from a new "Portraits" series. The works are unabashedly opulent, with compositions distinguished by a large central mass.

The show ends Sept. 8. (nermanmuseum.org)

At Red Star Studios

"Akio Takamori: Lust" is a fitting high-profile opener for Red Star Studios' spectacular new exhibition space at the Belger Crane Yard. The exhibit, which continues through Aug. 24, features 20 pieces, including groupings of figures that spell out words such as "lust," "war" and "keep."

The show's highlight is a trio of sculptures of sensuous, yet vulnerable sleeping women, who, Takamori says, "are living their own life as calmly as possible amidst the hyper and absurd contemporary world." The exhibit also features multiple prints that Takamori created at the Lawrence Lithography Workshop over the past two decades.

"Teapot Invitational" opens June 7 at Red Star's space at the Belger Arts Center (redstarstudios.org)

At the Spencer

The Spencer Museum of Art's "An Errant Line" exhibit, pairing an installation by University of Kansas alum Ann Hamilton with one by her former teacher Cynthia Schira, runs through Aug. 11. On Aug. 31, the museum honors another artist with local ties in the exhibit "Rockne Krebs: Drawings for Sculpture You Can Walk Through."

Krebs, a native of Kansas City and KU alum, went on to make his base in Washington, D.C. The artist built a national reputation for his works with lasers and light, which he worked out in drawings and documented in photographs and writings.

The Spencer's exhibit features 18 drawings and a Plexiglas sculpture given to the museum in 2010 by Krebs' friend Philip M. Smith, a prominent member of the national scientific community.

The exhibit runs through Jan. 5. (spencerart.ku.edu)

At the Artspace

The Kansas City Art Institute's H&R Block Artspace hopes to weigh in with a show in mid-July, "pending some facilities issues," says director Raechell Smith. "At this point," she explained, "the idea is to give thought to Kansas City and to include Judith Levy's 'NV in KC.'" (kcai.edu/artspace)

See more in St. Louis

It's a big summer for art in St. Louis, where on June 29-30, the St. Louis Art Museum will hold a grand opening of its 211,431-square-foot wing designed by David Chipperfield. The galleries will highlight the museum's holdings of contemporary art in two exhibits. "A New View: Contemporary Art" features roughly 90 works of postwar American art. "Postwar German Art in the Collection" has 60 pieces. (slam.org)

Visitors can see what German artists have been up to since reunification at Washington University's Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, where "Contemporary German Art" runs through Sept. 7. (kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu)

The Pulitzer Foundation enriches the mix with "Donald Judd: The Multicolored Works" on view through Jan. 4. Curated by Marianne Stockebrand, former director of the Chinati Foundation, the exhibit features more than 20 wall-mounted works, a large freestanding piece, and 20 drawings and collages borrowed from collections in the U.S. and Europe. The show focuses on the artist's activity during the last decade of his life, when he typically used from four to eight colors within a single piece. (judd.pulitzerarts.org)

Next door, the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis has assembled a major solo show of veteran L.A. artist Lari Pittman, known for his wildly imaginative paintings of dense, layered images. "Outlandish and fanciful, flowery and formal, preposterous and promiscuous as (Oscar) Wilde's prose" is how critic David Pagel once described them.

Curated by CAM assistant curator Kelly Shindler, the exhibit will feature paintings and works on paper from the last two decades. It runs through Aug. 11. (camstl.org)

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