

'In a League of Her Own'

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Raechell Smith, director/curator of the Kansas City Art Institute's H&R Block Artspace for 21 years, stands in the 2020 Annual BFA Exhibition, with (from left) Hannah Lee Sun Morrison's fiber piece, "Center," JinBlossom Kim Plati's ceramic "Scholar Rocks" and Paulina Otero's fiber "Hermanas sisters." (photo by Jim Barcus)

With a Focus on Issues and Ideas, Director Raechell Smith Has Positioned Block Artspace at the Cultural Force for 21 Years

For 21 years, the Kansas City Art Institute's H&R Block Artspace at 43rd and Walnut Streets has served as the college's front door to the community, consistently presenting exhibits and displays that inspire, provoke, educate and entertain, furthering the school's intellectual and creative mission. Since the gallery's 1999 opening in a once-abandoned warehouse transformed by BNIM, the

programming has been steered by director/curator Raechell Smith, who came to the post following a stint as a curatorial assistant at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

In short order, Smith established the Artspace as a key player in Kansas City's art ecology, not only through challenging and topical exhibits featuring leading artists of our times, but through collaborations, residencies and lectures that exposed the school and the community to influential curators, critics, collectors and educators.

"Raechell has done a very good job on a shoestring budget and has for the most part had to 'make it up as she goes along,'" said Marc Wilson, director emeritus of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. "Time and again she has been ahead of the curve. She seems to have a super keen nose for opportunities over the horizon that others have not sensed."

In light of the past summer of protests brought on by the killing of George Floyd, who could forget the epochal "Black Is, Black Ain't" exhibit of 2009, which laid out all of the issues and problems we continue to contend with today. Guest curator Hamza Walker, who is now executive director of the Los Angeles nonprofit art space LAXART, gathered works by leading African American artists including Glenn Ligon, William Pope.L, Hank Willis Thomas and Mickalene Thomas.

"Working with Raechell and company was fabulous," Walker said in a recent email. "I also happened to be there the day Michael Jackson died. Talk about Black Is, Black Ain't."

Internationally exhibited artist Sonya Clark praises Smith's "expansive vision." She "makes the impossible possible," says Clark, who spent a year as a visiting instructor at KCAI from 1996 to 1997 and is now professor of art at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts.

A highlight of Kansas City's 2020 exhibition season was Clark's exhibit, "Monumental Cloth, The Flag We Should Know," which presented the artist's many renditions of The Confederate Truce Flag, a woven dish cloth used as the South's flag of surrender at Appomattox, Virginia.

Dominated by the artist's monumental rendition of the Truce Flag, the exhibit played to the ongoing and increasingly heated debate over displays of the Confederate Battle Flag. But driving the show was Clark's well-timed question, "What would it mean to the psychology of this nation if the Truce Flag replaced the flag associated with hate and white supremacy?"

Three years earlier, Smith exhibited Clark's "Unraveled" — a display of three piles of thread from a completely unraveled Confederate Battle Flag — in a flag-themed group show titled "State of the World." She invited Clark back for a one-person show in 2020 as part of a planned year-long series of Block Artspace 20th-anniversary celebrations marking its November 1999 opening.

A timeline exhibit made it to the walls of the second floor Artspace Studio, but a June community party planned to coincide with a 2020 KC Flatfiles exhibit was cancelled because of the pandemic, as was the Flatfiles show. Clark's exhibit opened in January and closed just as the COVID-19 crisis hit in March.

"Monumental Cloth, The Flag We Should Know" had to be adapted from its inaugural presentation at the much larger Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia. "It seemed like magic," Clark said in a recent email. "Raechell installed the work and it seemed it was designed for the Block. And then the programming with the KCAI students and faculty, local radio station and wider Kansas City community felt like a true homecoming. Not many art leaders do that well, but Raechell is in a league of her own."

Culturally relevant programming has been the Artspace's hallmark. Smith set the course with the inaugural exhibit, "The Viewing Room," an engaging look at women's video art by leaders in the field including Janine Antoni and Pipillotti Rist.

Over the years, Smith has frequently combined her commitment to women artists with an internationalist outlook, most notably in her groundbreaking 2004-05 presentation of Shirin Neshat's video,

"Fervor," the Iranian-born artist's attempt to comprehend the changes brought on in her country by the Islamic Revolution. The year 2005 also brought Egyptian-born Ghada Amer's exhibit, "Naughty and Nice," featuring monumental, expressionist embroideries based on images from porno magazines, appropriated as a means to address women's need for pleasure.

These exhibits set the bar for a long line of timely and in-depth one-person shows, including the 2019 exhibit, “Nicky Nodjoumi: The Long Day.” Smith said she was drawn to the Iranian born, New York-based artist’s enigmatic figurative works for their concern with “the implications and the chaotic and destructive — or corruptive— possibilities of power, especially when it goes unchecked or unchallenged.”

Other memorable Artspace exhibits of the past 20 years similarly reflect Smith’s ability to identify a theme that resonates with the contemporary moment and employ it as a lens to take stock of global and national realities. Certainly, “Black Is, Black Ain’t” and “Monumental Cloth” fell into this category, as did “On Watch,” a 2012 exhibit exploring the omnipresence of surveillance in modern life.

Smith has regularly leavened her exploration of serious issues with shows that bring a light touch to human foibles and social problems. The 2006 exhibit “Humor Me” presented droll to hilarious works by 16 artists from a dozen countries. The 2014 “Saints Stars and Selfies” show also highlighted the playful side of contemporary art, including Nina Katchadourian’s Dutch Master-inspired self-portraits taken in airport lavatories, where the artist created hats and collars from the provided tissues and towels.

Smith’s mandate has always been a broad one: It includes showcasing the school’s talent through the Annual BFA Exhibition, presenting curated faculty shows and playing host to the annual Charlotte Street Foundation exhibit of visual artist award winners in rotation with Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art and the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art.

One of the Artspace’s biggest successes is the biennial Kansas City Flatfiles show, born in conjunction with the gallery’s presentation of the Pierogi Flatfiles show from New York in 2001. Every two years the Artspace invites Kansas City artists to submit portfolios of works on paper, photography and mixed media, which viewers can remove and peruse from large flatfile cabinets in the gallery. Offering a mix of works for sale by established and emerging artists, the exhibit has become a time-honored tradition popular with collectors.

The Block Artspace Project Wall, a billboard-sized display mounted

on the building's west-facing wall visible to motorists and pedestrians on Main Street, offers an outdoor forum for the ideas and issues addressed by the gallery exhibits. Artworks have ranged from a poignant photograph from Kansas City artist Deanna Dikeman's poignant "Leaving and Waving" series to the more recent "Refugee Flag" (2016) and leading New York artist and KCAI alum Stanley Whitney's "Say No to Prison Life."

Installed on the eve of the 2020 Presidential election, a new Project Wall by well-known Kansas City artist Art Miller offers a potent metaphor for our times. It's a photograph, showing a replica of the Statue of Liberty in a weedy overgrown setting against a backdrop of evergreens and a cloudy, pale blue sky. The title, "Boy Scouts of America Statue of Liberty Replica (Strengthening the Arm of Liberty Campaign), Meyer Boulevard and Prospect Avenue, Kansas City, Missouri, 2020," alludes to the statue's origins as one of roughly 200 replicas of the Statue of Liberty installed around the country by the Boy Scouts of America for their "Strengthen the Arm of Liberty" 40th anniversary celebration in 1955.

Today, many of the statues have been lost or destroyed; the replica at Meyer Boulevard and Prospect Avenue is one of 100 that still stand. The project was spearheaded by a Kansas Citian: businessman, J.P. Whitaker, who was then Scout Commissioner of the Kansas City Area Council.

Smith said she envisioned Miller's image on the Project Wall the moment she saw it. She has known his work for years — Block Artspace showed Miller's "Habana Inn" series in the 2003 Charlotte Street Visual Artist Awards exhibition.

David Hughes, founder of the Charlotte Street Foundation, calls Smith "a great ambassador for the Kansas City arts community and the Art Institute in the national arts scene.

"The Artspace has made such a major contribution to the city's art ecosystem and the arts community over these 20 years," Hughes adds. "Through exhibitions and outreach, Raechell's quiet but super thoughtful leadership and critical thinking have led to important conversations and learning both for students and the public at large."