

Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art celebrates its 30th anniversary

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Louise Bourgeois, “Spider” (1996, cast 1997), bronze with dark polished patina, edition 3 of 6, 133 x 263 x 249”
(Collection Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art; photo by EG Schempf)

Reminiscences, collection highlights and memorable exhibitions from the professionals behind them and 15 area experts

David Cateforis, professor and chair of art history at the University of Kansas

A recent highlight was “Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Pulse Topology,” a technologically sophisticated interactive environment that filled the

Kemper’s darkened 5,000-square-foot exhibition space with 3,000 LED filament bulbs hung from the ceiling in a configuration evoking the swells and valleys of the Flint Hills. Visitors were invited to place their hands under suspended sensors that detected their heartbeats through photoplethysmography (PPG) and transmitted the heartbeat’s rhythm to the lightbulbs to ripple through the installation and visually merge with the pulse beats of other visitors, reminding us of our shared connection even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic that generated fear of gathering in public spaces. I’ve never seen the Kemper’s main exhibition space used more ambitiously or effectively.



Installation view, “Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Pulse Topology,” June 25, 2021–Jan. 2, 2022 (photo: EG Schempf, 2021)



Dan Keegan

During my tenure at the Kemper, we were fortunate to feature many terrific groundbreaking exhibitions. Liza Lou’s beaded everyday environments, a fantasy world made of millions of glass



Liza Lou, “Kitchen” (1991–95) installation view (© Liza Lou; photo by Tony Cuñha)

beads, resonated with the community and attracted thousands of visitors. But installing Louise Bourgeois' magnificent "Spider" set the tone and sense of wonder Crosby Kemper was looking for when he envisioned the museum 30 years ago!

Dan Keegan was director of Kemper Museum from 1997 to 2000. He went on to direct the San Jose Museum of Art in California from 2000 to 2008 and the Milwaukee Art Museum from 2008 to 2016. He is an artist and museum leadership placement consultant living in upstate New York.

**Neil Thrun, *KC Studio*
contributing writer**

A Kemper exhibition I'll never forget is Hung Liu's "Summoning Ghosts." Liu's paintings were remarkably beautiful and ethereal, a truly fascinating look into her personal history and that of 20th-century China. She passed away recently; I feel lucky to have seen that exhibition and to have heard her perspective on art and history.



Installation view, "Summoning Ghosts: The Art of Hung Liu," Oct. 10, 2014–Jan. 11, 2015 (photo by EG Schempf)



Dana Self

Fond memories include the esprit de corps and sense of purpose we shared as a new museum in those early years, working with emerging and mid-career artists and the growing collection. My favorite artists and exhibitions include Liza Lou, Do Ho Suh, Ken Aptekar, Shahzia Sikander, Kathryn Spence, Hung Liu and Jim Hodges, to name a few. Additionally, the massive Dale Chihuly and Herb Ritts exhibitions were both exciting and popular good fun.



Installation view, “Do Ho Suh: The Perfect Home,”
Dec. 20, 2002–March 2, 2003 (Kemper Museum of
Contemporary Art)

Dana Self was curator of Kemper Museum from 1996 to 2003. Other curatorial appointments include the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and the Knoxville Museum of Art in Tennessee. She is a marketing strategist at UMKC and writes about art in her free time.

Nan Chisholm, KC Studio contributing writer

Commissioned by Bebe and Crosby Kemper for Kemper Museum’s Café Sebastienne, Frederick James Brown (1945-2012) created “The History of Art Series,” 110 interlocking paintings inspired by a variety of artists ranging from Giotto to Barnett Newman. One of the works, a portrait executed in the style of Mary Cassatt, features the artist’s daughter Sebastienne, for whom the restaurant was named. Brown referred to the work as “a project of love . . . a tribute to art and artists throughout the ages.” This enduring highlight of the Kemper never fails to engage and entertain its viewers.

**Randy Mason, *KC Studio*
contributing writer and former
KCPT executive producer of
cultural affairs**

I have to mention my ongoing appreciation of Frederick James Brown's "The History of Art Series" — the 110-painting installation that wraps around diners in the museum's Café Sebastienne. Over the years, I've consumed many meals surrounded by its lively lines and bold colors. I'm always impressed by the artist's deft balance of technique, humor and respect for the accomplishments of those who came before him.



Frederick James Brown, "In the style of Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), Child in a Straw Hat (Portrait of Frederick James Brown's daughter Sebastienne at age eight)" (1994), part of "The History of Art Series," (1994/2001) in the museum's Café Sebastienne (Collection of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art © Frederick J. Brown Trust / Artist's Rights Society credit (ARS), New York)



View of Frederick James Brown's "The History of Art Series," (1994/2001), oil and acrylic on canvas, on permanent display in the museum's Café Sebastienne (collection of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art © Frederick J. Brown Trust / Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York. photo: Dan Wayne)

Elisabeth Kirsch, *KC Studio* contributing writer

The summer 2023 exhibition "Virginia Jaramillo: Principles of Equivalence" gave merit to a lifetime of work by an 82-year-old Hispanic artist who had not received due tribute for much of her career. Her large-scale, geometric artworks, from the 1960s to the present, were shown along with her groundbreaking, multi-layered handmade papers from

1980 to 2005, considered totally unique. Jaramillo followed her own path no matter the trends, refusing to cater to the political trends of the art world, and the resultant work has a timeless, mysterious presence. Her art is now being collected internationally in major museums. My husband, local gallerist Douglas Drake, exhibited her art in the Douglas Drake Gallery in Kansas City and New York from 1974 to 1995, and I wrote the essay on her handmade papers for the catalog of the exhibit.

**Matt Thompson, *KC Studio*
contributing writer**

One of Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art's most remarkable achievements of the 21st century remains the summer 2023 retrospective exhibition "Principle of Equivalence," featuring the work of Virginia Jaramillo. With more than 70 pieces spanning the arc of Jaramillo's prolific imagination, from her early textured abstractions to the breathtaking "Site: No. 3 51.1789° N, 1.8262° W" (2018), the show demonstrated



Installation view, "Virginia Jaramillo: Principle of Equivalence," June 2, 2023–Aug. 27, 2023 (photo by EG Schempf)



Virginia Jaramillo, "Site: No. 3 51.1789° N, 1.8262° W" (2018), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72" (courtesy of the Artist and Hales, London and New York. © Virginia Jaramillo / JSP Art Photography)

that the Kemper is still a visionary vanguard in telling complex stories through art.



Erin Dzedzic

My tenure at Kemper Museum as director of curatorial affairs (2013 – 2023) was filled with great support and tremendous growth both for myself and the organization. Under Mary Wolf’s leadership we were able to exhibit wonderful projects that were often firsts for the artist and the museum, which always kept things exciting and fresh. The museum supported the first retrospective of artist Virginia Jaramillo, who has been in the permanent collection since the museum’s beginning. Curating that exhibition and building an accompanying catalogue has been a major highlight of my career. Providing support for such unprecedented talent really is a part of the mission. Happy 30th, Kemper Museum!

Erin Dzedzic was director of curatorial affairs at Kemper Museum from 2013 to 2023. Now a curator and writer based in New York, she centers her practice on developing a wide range of projects with contemporary artists and amplifying historically excluded artists. Recent books include a monograph on artist Denzil Forrester to be released this year, a major monograph, “Virginia Jaramillo: Principle of Equivalence,” released in 2023, and the 2017 catalogue, “Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today,” including new scholarship on the intergenerational impact of 21 women artists of color working in abstraction.

Steve Paul, author and *KC Studio* contributing writer

History should not forget that Kemper Museum did not open without a few local hitches and most-curious artworld developments. Still, it took about five years, until 1999, to learn that its highly touted, inaugural Georgia O’Keeffe exhibit was a sham, featuring a collection of 28 watercolors that all proved to be fake. Long story. The building, though, all angles and sleek metal and cool concrete and glass, designed by Gunnar Birkerts, remains a gem on the midtown landscape.



Rachael Blackburn Cozad

When I first met Bebe and Crosby, I knew I wanted the job, even though I knew Crosby would be a demanding boss. He was that (and more), but my time learning from him and seeing firsthand his wisdom, wit, financial acumen, intuition, and his ability to apologize when he was wrong, was well worth it, and I will always value his friendship.

I’d like to think our Collectors Forum program (which took our patrons to the major art fairs, private collections, artist studios, into the back rooms at galleries and other special places), informed our patrons as much as it assisted me in my own professional growth. It was also a true honor to assist our board (in cooperation with DST Systems), with the placement of several works of public art in downtown Kansas City by Michael Rees, Louis Jimenez, and Marc Swanson.

In-house, there were many important acquisitions, such as Andy Warhol’s iconic portrait of “Dennis Hopper” (1970), Tom Otterness’ “Crying Giant”

(2002), a major painting, “In Loving Memory of You” (2008) by Kansas City’s own Archie Scott Gobber, and the now beloved painting, “Rodeo Rider” (1976), by my father, Ed Blackburn. Perhaps a personal triumph was my introduction by Crosby (the business tycoon) to the notion of asking for a “Museum Discount” for acquisitions into our collection — otherwise the always-generous board chair would have continued to pay full price!

Rachael Blackburn Cozad, director of Kemper Museum from 2001 to 2012, is the owner of Rachael Cozad Fine Art, an advisory which sells Modern, Contemporary, and American Art. She is also the owner and principal appraiser of Madison Group Fine Art Appraisals, a national company that provides certified appraisals and expert witness services. She is founder and president of the Riverbank Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization supporting the George Caleb Bingham Catalogue Raisonné.



Tom Otterness, “Crying Giant” (2002), bronze, edition 2 of 3, 132 x 78 x 173” (Collection of Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art © Tom Otterness/tomotterness.net / photo by EG Schempf)

Laura Spencer, staff writer/editor, Kansas City Public Library, and former KCUR arts reporter

My son, Will, who turns 21 this November, met one of his oldest friends — he was two and she was three— as they chased each other outside the Kemper Museum around Louise Bourgeois’ “Spider.” Other highlights of my experience of the museum include chatting with Wayne Thiebaud (by phone). I also interviewed lots of artists during gallery installation, such as Chakaia Booker, who described salvaging rubber tires by the side of the road for her large-scale sculptures. I tagged along on a docent tour as Petah Coyne circled her installation, “Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu),” a 14-foot-high apple tree covered in black sand and hung with taxidermied pheasants and peacocks. And I met Frederick James Brown — a fellow Aquarian who said he could see “my aura” — whose “The History of Art Series” adorns the walls of Café Sebastienne.



Chakaia Booker’s “El Gato” (2001), rubber tires and wood, 48 x 42 x 42”, was part of her exhibit “RubberMade: Sculpture by Chakaia Booker,” June 6–Aug. 17, 2008 (Collection Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art; © Chakaia Booker / photo: Dan Wayne, 2008)

Saralyn Reece Hardy, director, Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas

I recall the commanding sculptures of Chakaia Booker in the 2008 exhibition of her work entitled “Rubbermaid.” Reshaping the space of a gallery and pirating my sense of smell, the work had a direct presence

that would not be denied. What was it about insistent rubber coils, knots, and jagged edges that made mischief in the Kemper Museum?

Harold Smith, artist and *KC Studio* contributing writer

Since its opening, I have frequented Kemper Museum. I was particularly moved by the provocative exhibitions of work by Frederick Brown, Kojo Griffin, Herb Ritts, and the Black women abstract painters of the “Magnetic Fields” exhibition. I was also honored to conduct a drawing event, screen my film “The Gospel According to Glenn North,” and conduct a professional development session for art teachers inside the Kemper Museum. I’m glad that we have this gem.



Installation view, “Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction 1960s to Today,” June 8–Sept. 17, 2017. (photo by EG Schempf)

Elizabeth Dunbar

The Kemper has had such a great history of supporting artists and introducing the community to some of the most groundbreaking art of our times. I am proud to have been part of the Kemper’s curatorial lineage and am thankful that I had the courageous support of Rachael Blackburn Cozad to push the boundaries here and there. I know I didn’t always make her job an easy one!

Through the Kemper I have made lifelong friendships with artists, patrons, and colleagues — and I continue to work with some of them even today. For example, Polly Apfelbaum will forever be one of my favorite



Elizabeth Dunbar at the opening of the Everson Museum's 2023 Pepe Mar exhibition (courtesy of Elizabeth Dunbar)

new. It was exciting, and while I was only there three years, we put on some very ambitious and memorable exhibitions (Hubbard+Birchler, Petah Coyne, Gajin Fujita). And a lot of them! KC and the Kemper played a foundational role in my curatorial career, and I congratulate the museum for continuing to support the art of our time.

artists (and friends), and we have worked together a few times since our Kemper show back in 2004. Tony Feher, who caused a bit of stir in 2005 with his blue bags and Fanta orange soda bottles, became one of my dearest friends, and we worked together several more times before his death.

“Decelerate,” the show that featured Tony’s work, also included that of Anne Lindberg, then a KC resident. Anne’s work is now in the Everson’s collection.

I look back at those times and remember how lucky I was to have such a great team to work with. There was boundless energy and a sense of possibility, perhaps because the museum was still so



Gajin Fujita’s “Ride or Die” (2005), spray paint, paint marker, paint stick, gold and white gold leaf on wood panels, 84 x 132 1/2,” was part of the exhibit “Zephyr: Paintings by Gajin Fujita,” Sept. 8–Nov. 5,

Elizabeth Dunbar was curator at Kemper Museum from 2004 to 2007, where she worked with a number of notable artists, including Hubbard + Birchler, Polly Apfelbaum, Petah

Coyne, Tony Feher, Sheila Pepe, Gajin Fujita and many more. She is currently director & CEO of the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York.

2006. (Collection Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City; art and photo © Gajin Fujita, courtesy of the artist and L.A. Louver Gallery)

Bruce Hartman, founding executive director & chief curator, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art (retired)

The excitement and anticipation preceding the Kemper Museum's opening in 1994 were absolutely contagious. The opening night gala was beyond capacity, with Kansas City's most notable patrons, artists, and arts professionals — a veritable who's who of our city. A new era for the visual arts in KC had begun!

James Martin, Kansas City Public Art Administrator

A Kemper highlight for me from recent years was Dyani White Hawk's solo exhibition from 2021. I love abstraction and I found the blending of abstract traditions in White Hawk's paintings to be quite beautiful and thought-provoking. Along these same lines, "Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today" from 2017 introduced the work of several artists that was previously unknown or little-known to me.

James Brinsfield, artist and *KC Studio* contributing writer

There is a painting in the Kemper collection that I seek out on every visit. Made shortly after her move from New York City to the French countryside, "Untitled" by Joan Mitchell is a 6 x 10-foot detonation of multicolored brush strokes that blends abstraction and landscape with a gestural abandon that is breathtaking. There's a lingering cacophony of

the grit and energy of Manhattan in Mitchell's brushstrokes of acidic reds, greens, yellows and blue, flowing outward from a central armature. Pretty it isn't, not in the conventional sense. However, it rides on the winds of change and freedom that became hallmarks of her mid-career paintings.

R. Crosby Kemper's vision was prescient. While other art collectors concentrated on the male-dominated first generation of Abstract Expressionists, Kemper carved out a niche for himself and the museum by focusing on the second wave of Ab-Exers, choosing works by women artists including Mitchell, Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler, Elaine de Kooning, and Jane Freilicher.

The Mitchell painting entered the museum collection in 1996. Over the last four years her large paintings have sold at auction in the range of \$15-20 million.

Brian Hearn, KC Studio contributing writer

When I moved to Kansas City a decade ago, a public sculpture that immediately caught my eye and invited me in was Jarrett Mellenbruch's



Dyani White Hawk's "Carry III" (2020), buckskin, synthetic sinew and thread, vintage glass beads, brass sequins, copper vessel, copper ladle, 105 x 12 x 10", was part of "Dyani White Hawk: Speaking to Relatives," Feb. 18—May 16, 2021. (Collection Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art; ©Dyani White Hawk, courtesy of the artist and Bockley Gallery / photo by EG Schempf)

“Float.” Eight identical rope hammocks were installed across the verdant moat-like lawns of Kemper Museum over the summer of 2014. Suspended like sailboats, Mellenbruch’s easygoing intervention not only put a smile of joy on my face, but it also signaled to this stranger, “Welcome, friend of culture and nature; come relax and stay awhile.”

**Heather Lustfeldt, *KC Studio*
contributing writer**

I’ll always remember my early days in Kansas City as an art history graduate student and having the good fortune to take a class with Barbara Bloemink in 1996, while she was director at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. Other highlights for me include a mesmerizing video installation by Robin Bernat, “American Pastoral” (2001), also part of the Kemper’s permanent collection, and Joiri Minaya’s layered and fascinating exhibition, “Divergences,” from 2021, curated by Jade Powers, then assistant curator at the Kemper.



Joan Mitchell, “Untitled” (1959–60), oil on canvas, 76 x 114 3/8” (Collection Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art; © Joan Mitchell Foundation photo / photo by EG Schempf, 2019)



“Float” (2014), detail of the outdoor exhibition, “Jarrett Mellenbruch: Float,” May 16–Sept. 1, 2014 (image courtesy of the artist)



Robin Bernat, still from the three-channel video projection, “American Pastoral” (2001), on view in the exhibit, “Robin Bernat: American Pastoral,” Jan. 10–April 6, 2003 (Collection Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art; © Robin Bernat. photograph courtesy of Bruce Mathews)

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