

THE SEEN

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ART SEEN: NATIONAL

OPEN SPACES // KANSAS CITY

By Andrea L. Ferber, PhD

At 10 PM the glowing exterior lights of the Nelson-Atkins Museum contemporary wing shut off, creating a perfect outdoor cinema for Jennifer Steinkamp's video installation *Retinal* (2018). Digital bubbles and umbilical-cord-like strands in translucent orange, blue, yellow and green slowly float across six conjoined windows, visible from the street. Crickets and cicadas in surrounding gardens accompany the peaceful movement of gelatinous forms. The effect is mesmerizing. Similarly, down the street at the Belger Arts Center, Denis Rodriguez and Leonardo Remor's *Cinema é Cachoeira (Waterfall as Cinema)* (2018) induces a tranquil state with an image of water rushing down an urban staircase. Both works are included in the inaugural Open Spaces, a biennial in Kansas City, Missouri (KCMO), which runs through October 28.

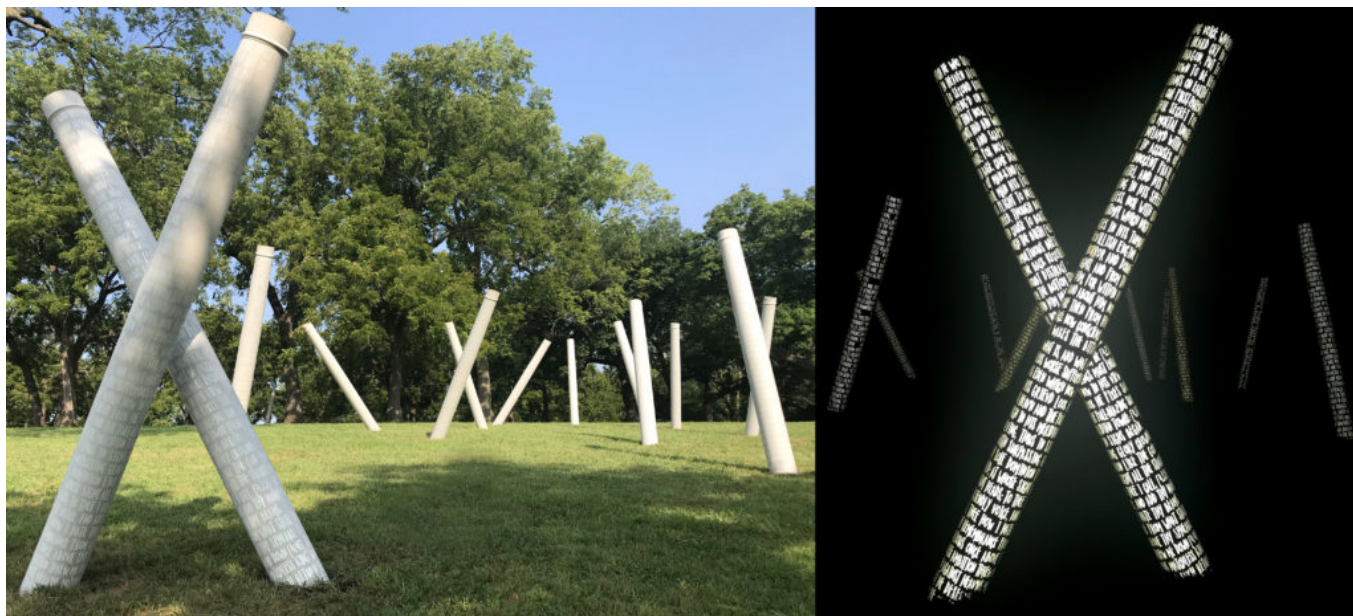


Jennifer Steinkamp, *Retinal*, 2018. Two-channel nocturnal video installation. Lent by the artist, courtesy Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

Initiated by philanthropists Scott Francis and Susan Gordon, as well as KCMO's mayor Sly James, seasoned curator Dan Cameron directs Open Spaces. He invited over 40 artists to create work for the exhibition and coordinated dozens of cultural programs, including music performances by The Roots and Janelle Monáe, and the "The Expanded Field," which encompasses auxiliary exhibitions, poetry readings, and musical events. Kansas City has been ripe for this kind of celebration for years, with robust attendance at First Friday gallery nights and the eighth 21c Museum Hotel opening just this past July. One work made for

Open Spaces is installed inside the suave lounge of the latter. Brad Kahlhmer 'drew' with wire in space to form large dreamcatchers, slightly reminiscent of Alexander Calder's mobiles. The largest is suspended against a green tile wall, while six smaller ones hang from the ceiling. *Super Catcher, Vast Array* (2017) intends to balance the original murals in this room of the restored 19th-century hotel, which romanticize Manifest Destiny (behind his work is a depiction of a covered wagon caravan crossing an uninhabited landscape). One hopes patrons will make this conceptual connection before imbibing at the bar.

Several artist-led walks bring attention to easily overlooked ecologies. Karen McCoy carves listening trumpets from oak, maple, walnut, box elder, and elm for participants to focus and augment sensory experiences during her *Sight & Sound Walks*. The artist creates a meditative encounter on the two-mile Fox Hollow Trail through Swope Park, drawing awareness to slight nuances in tone when directing the wooden ear horns toward a trickling stream, rustling prairie grass, chattering birds, or passing trains. Like forest bathing, engaging in this relational aesthetics is good practice in mindfulness.



Dawn DeDeaux, *Free Fall: Prophecy and Free Will in Milton's Paradise Lost*, 2018. Reflective tape on polyurethane columns, metal bases. Lent courtesy of the artist

Taking an analytical approach, collaborators Trey Hock and Brent Jackson are the Blue River Road Investigators. Influenced by the National Park Service and artists such as Robert Smithson, the team produced a brochure on a closed section of roadway to raise questions about its uses since becoming "useless," such as "What needs are not met that lead citizens to dump garbage here?" Hock and Jackson offer weekly tours of what they termed the Annex, pointing out scenery and changes. As he has done for numerous locales elsewhere, artist Matthew Jensen made a brochure on the Blue River. The diaristic guide mentions points of interest and some history, though both format and content leave one wanting more. A tightly-edited GPS-guided audio tour or an online photo essay would be more engaging and accessible. The first-person narrative reads flatly and suffers from too little research—as in Jensen's gloss of generic "Native history".

In contrast to this use of text, Dawn DeDeaux's site-specific installation based on Milton's "Paradise Lost," entitled *Free Fall: Prophecy and Free Will in Milton's Paradise Lost* (2018), makes one reconsider the 17th century poem in a dynamic new form. Among mature walnut trees in Swope Park, 48 concrete columns appear to have fallen haphazardly from the sky, landing at various angles in the ground. Though phrased in late medieval English, the passages on two sides of each column are contextualized in the present and prompt readers to reflect on the sociopolitical and ecological fate of the earth. This is one of several works which must be viewed at night, as the reflective text was inspired by Milton's well-known phrase "darkness visible."

A short distance from DeDeaux's piece, Jill Downen's site-responsive sculpture similarly suggests a futuristic ruin. *An Architectural Folly from a Future Place* (2018) is a pristine L-shaped fragment of a concrete foundation for a building that never was. Snow white and perfectly smooth, it functions as a bench and fails as a wall. A single line of inlaid lapis lazuli around the perimeter indicates the prestige of the remnant: was it a temple? A monument? A mausoleum? The piece is full of contradiction: it appears to be an archeological site, but is also clean and new. One can walk through a break. *An Architectural Folly* lies uphill from a hidden classical-style monument to Thomas Swope, who gifted the land for the city park. The open patio surrounded by twelve Doric columns and guarded by two stone lions references different "classical" pasts. Downen's non-monument proposes the sleek Tadao Ando-style aesthetic will one day look as classical as the Parthenon.

Like DeDeaux's installation, *This is NOT a Refuge* (2018) by Anila Quayyum Agha offers a daytime and nighttime aesthetic. This tiny white house was fabricated from metal cut with floral designs and a bench in the center invites visitors to watch the clouds



Anila Quayyam Agha, *This is NOT a Refuge*, 2017-18. Stainless steel, fabricated by Zahner, with technical assistance by Steve Prachyl, Richard Sheldrake and Richard Welnowski. Lent courtesy of the artist

through the roof. A single light shines from inside at night, casting elegant shadows on the brick plaza around it. Agha's title questions the meaning of a refuge: an appealing or psychological safe space does not necessarily protect from emotional or physical harm.

Two of the most politically potent works in Open Spaces are on the campus of the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC): one demure, the other damning. In some ways Flávio Cerqueria's figurative sculpture *Any Word Except Wait* (2018) parallels Kristen Visbal's *Fearless Girl* (2017), which stared down Arturo Di Modica's *Charging Bull* (2018) in the Financial District's Bowling Green. Cerqueria depicted a young black girl striding forward, confidently balancing fourteen textbooks on her head. The bronze cast representing female and minority empowerment is particularly suited for a university with a diverse student body; however, Cerqueria does not consider his work site-specific.

Inside the UMKC Gallery of Art, Federico Solmi's 8-minute animation from painted stills is decidedly polemical. *The Great Farce* (2017) opens with a mythologized scene of numerous colonial ships arriving on a shore lined with homogenized natives—offensively flattening disparate cultures into flat stereotypes. On board the boats are controversial leaders from all eras: a Pope, Caesar, Washington, Marco Polo, and yes—45. All appear clown-like with fixed smiles and hands in the air, soaking up the roar of adoring crowds. Carnival music plays as the leaders ride a carousel and float past the White House on their ship. Fireworks and balloons do not ease the dystopian current. Signs blink "ATM" and "Everything 99¢", then suddenly, the clown-like leaders are in a grand ballroom dancing with the faux-Indigenous people. It is a nightmare realized in full color, on loop forever.



Nick Cave, *Hye Dyve*, 2017. 14-channel video installation Lent by the artist, courtesy Shainman Gallery, New York

Across town, Nick Cave's contribution is equally consuming, though much more ambiguous in its message. The artist selected a former Catholic Church for a multi-layered, immersive video piece entitled *Hye-Dyve* (2016). The interior is empty except for a large wooden chair in place of an altar. It might pass as a lifeguard station, but in this post-sacred context on a dark carpet and under an archway topped with a cross and the word "GLORIA," it is no stretch of the imagination to see this as a seat of judgment. Video projections activate the space: water rushes under one's feet, recalling Jesus' miracle at sea. Mechanical sounds shift with changing imagery on all walls: dozens of constructed chicken masks appear to fall down the walls; bright yellow fibers, likely part of a sound suit, spin rapidly; red lantern-like forms pop up; marionette soldiers dance to a drumroll. Perfectly framed within the church's arches, the bewitching projections overlay two extant biblical murals, further emphasizing a religious subtext. Some find the work unsettling, but for those who associate church with oppressive rhetoric and stuffy rituals, the open space and subjectivity with no obligation to follow a liturgy may find it a spiritual experience.

Cave's selection of a site on Kansas City's east side is critical. The city has made efforts to revitalize the neighborhood, though poverty, crime, and racial segregation remain problematic. A major goal of Open Spaces is to stir the demographics of the city, making people aware of neglected and underserved areas. Another artist whose work lifts a veil on an unfamiliar place is Ebony Patterson, who transformed a dilapidated swimming pool in Swope Park into a vibrant memorial for the children with disabilities who swam there in past decades. The shallow cavity became a rainbow field with faux flowers and candles which she entitled ... *called up* (2018). The biennial's Instagram includes photos of the site as Patterson found it: fenced off and full of dirt. The images make the final piece all the more striking, as one can see the artist had the concrete painted its original sky blue and placed gold benches around the pool.



Ebony G. Patterson, ...*called Up*, 2018. Mixed media site-specific outdoor installation with artificial flowers and funerary wreaths, stuffed toys, candles, and customized embellished benches, with additional support from Kickstarter and 106 Kickstarter backers. Lent by the artist, courtesy Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

One of the most important achievements of any biennial is the juxtaposition of work by artists in different phases of their careers. But municipal art festivals are unique in how they function in a specific locale, for particular demographics, and at a given historical moment. Open Spaces is part of Kansas City's ongoing urban renewal, enriching economic, cultural, and social developments. Beyond Cameron's remarkable curatorial choices for temporary public art, Open Spaces stands apart from many art biennials in its equal attention to music and performing arts. A catalog with essays and images will be published next year.

Open Spaces runs throughout Kansas City, Missouri until October 28, 2018.

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