

# A FAMILIAR PIECE OF AMERICA

Exhibit features a stellar lineup of artists, but fresh, rabble-rousing voices are missing.

By **ELISABETH KIRSCH** Special to The Star

A giant \$5 bill with a blinking eyeball, a moving mouth and wiggling ear. A bunch of red, white and blue balloons covered with words such as “Happy,” “Security,” “Before” and “Relief.” A super-attenuated, empty metal shopping cart. A mural-sized drawing of a diverse group of imposing women sketched, unframed, on the most fragile of papers.

These are just four of the 80 artworks in the visual arts component of “America: Now and Here,” the cross-disciplinary, cross-country extravaganza that also incorporates poetry, music and theater in an effort to stimulate conversation about the state of America today.

The project is the brainchild of artist Eric Fischl, who achieved international prominence in the 1980s with his erotic and psychologically charged paintings of the American middle class. Its organizers will travel around the country, collaborating with artists, writers and filmmakers in various cities for several years.

Kansas City is the first venue for this ambitious venture, which eventually will include a half-dozen “mobile truck galleries” that will open up to form a big exhibit and event space in each city it visits.

Fischl curated the national portion of the visual art show, and Kansas City artist David Ford selected 25 local artists for the combined installation at the Leedy-Voukos Art Center and surrounding venues. The Kansas City works will not travel.

This is an exhibition of real wall power, with a lineup of A-list artists typically seen in museum collections. To house this show, Leedy-Voukos cleaned up its act, literally, and the sprawling space, with its multiple galleries, high ceilings and weathered floors, is now a great showcase. New lights, new walls and fresh paint have turned a tired old lady into a dowager queen.

One cannot question the star power of Fischl’s selections. Anyone who cares about contemporary art will be familiar with most of the names on his roster. The works of many, such as Robert Rauschenberg, Cindy Sherman, Alex Katz, Martin Mull, Mark Klett, Andres Serrano, Chuck Close, Jasper Johns, Carroll Dunham, Sally Mann and Kiki Smith, have been shown here repeatedly.

The inimitable Laurie Anderson has performed memorably here in the past, and Ghada Amer recently completed a residency at the Kansas City Art Institute. Vik Muniz contributed the first Project Wall for KCAI’s Block Art-space in 2000.

So what are the troubling issues with this inaugural “Now and Here” exhibit? They are less about what is here than what isn’t here.

On the one hand, you can’t get too much of a good thing. Even if you know the work of Amer and Muniz, for example, their pieces in this exhibit are powerful and moving. The videos by Bill Viola, Anderson, Tony Oursler and Mark Bradford are terrific. The technical and conceptual prowess of photographers Serrano, Laurie Simmons, Gregory Crewdson and Sherman is exceptional. Fischl’s sculpture “Samaritan” — one of the few free-standing works in the show — is unforgettable.

On the other hand, there’s also a conservative bent to the national selections, perhaps in an effort to avoid the kinds of confrontations that took place during the culture wars of the 1980s. But these are troubled times that demand troubling art. So where are the young artists? The upstarts? The impudence that, like it or not, bubbles at the heart of American culture?

The show selected by Fischl cries out for the maniacal energy of paintings by Peter Saul or George Condo, a Red Grooms pop sculpture, one of Kara Walker’s enraged videos or anything from the mondo bizarro of Ashley Bickerton.

Missing is unfamiliar art by artists whose work is fresh and hasn’t yet been sanctioned by the auction houses. How about some great contemporary pueblo pottery or some installation art? No doubt, there are many physical obstacles

involved in transporting such objects, but a show this large and ambitious could benefit from more three-dimensional art.

The fact that Fischl is a realist artist may also explain the dearth of abstraction in his national selections, but there are any number of artists working abstractly (Pat Steir, for instance) whose work would have expanded the visual scope of the exhibit.

For the Kansas City portion of “America: Now and Here,” David Ford is to be commended for insisting that the art by local artists not be hung separately, but be interspersed with work from the national show. Not only are the transitions seamless in terms of overall quality, but a number of the local pieces empower the exhibit.

Art Miller’s sexually edgy, black-and-white photos from his “Habana Series,” Roger Shimomura’s witty three-panel painting “Shimomura Crossing the Delaware” and Dylan Mortimer’s wall work “God Hooks My Ass Up” should certainly stimulate discussions. (In Mortimer’s case, a text panel explaining that his piece is a rapper’s version of the 23rd Psalm would help).

James Brinsfield’s large abstract painting, “Nik Nik,” the only abstract work in the Kansas City group, is terrific, and a welcome relief from the barrage of figuration. Archie Scott Gobber’s massive, colored billboard of a painting (“Never Abandon Hope”), has sock-it-to-’em power

Once again, what isn’t here detracts from what is. Only four of the 25 Kansas City artists represented here are women. Anyone have the phone number for the Guerrilla Girls? Nor are any Hispanic artists apparent. For shame. Quota systems may be passé, but given the diversity of the art scene here, that’s inexcusable.

“America: Now and Here” aims to start all kinds of discussions in and around the country, but this is the sort they don’t need.

The United States is a big place, and many people are in a lot of pain. The arts in America have redemptive power and exemplify the country’s creativity at its best and messiest. Here’s hoping this project accomplishes its mission and more as it moves on from here to everywhere else.



IMAGES FROM AMERICA: NOW AND HERE

The “America: Now and Here” exhibit intends to spark a conversation about America through artworks such as Tony Oursler’s giant enhanced \$5 bill.

## THE SHOW

“America: Now and Here” continues at the Leedy-Voulikos Art Center, 2012 Baltimore Ave., and nearby spaces through May 28. Hours are 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday. For a complete listing of “America: Now and Here” events, visit [kansascity.americanowandhere.org](http://kansascity.americanowandhere.org). All programming is free.



Issue-oriented pieces include Catherine Opie's photograph, "Untitled #1 (Immigration March, Los Angeles, CA)."

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The exhibit includes national and Kansas City artists, including Miki Baird, who applied archival pigment prints to felt and cotton in her piece, "Temporal Ties.....the anatomy of a zipper" (2011).



The exhibit includes Kansas City artist Beniah Leuschke's shopping cart sculpture, "Keep America Rolling: Like A Replica Monger A Rolling Cake Empire."



New York artist Kiki Smith is represented by this delicate unframed drawing.