

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Meditations from the Middle

by [Alicia Eler](#) on May 2, 2014



Linda Lighton and Mark Southerland, "Sisters" (2013), brass and porcelain, 25 x 18 x 14 inches (image by EG Schempf)

KANSAS CITY, Missouri — There is nothing in the center, because it's the middle and the middle doesn't matter. At least, that's what interest in smaller non-coastal American cities historically tends to be. Detroit pops up on the art world's radar when it comes to [ruin porn](#) and [rebuilding](#). St. Louis offers cultural gems like the [Pulitzer Foundation](#) and the [World Chess Hall of Fame](#). Elsewhere in Michigan, the city of Grand Rapids is visible in part because of the [absurd art party](#) that is ArtPrize. Chicago is always the best and windiest second city with the [weirdest dude](#)

[energy](#) and [Michelle Grabner](#), and Milwaukee is its first cousin where portraits of the Roman Catholic Pope made out of condoms causes [something of an uproar](#). And then, smack dab in the middle of it all is [Kansas City](#), Missouri. Is this city the middle, center, heart of it all, flyover country, or an experiment in regionalism? In the exhibition [The Center is a Moving Target](#) at the Kemper Museum of Art's Kemper at the Crossroads (located in the Crossroads District), curator Erin Dziedzic considers that question through works by 11 artists who either currently live in or used to call Kansas City their home. With such a loose curatorial theme organized under the term "regionalism," almost anything goes.

As a non-native of Kansas City, I identified three different conversations going on here. In the first room that houses Diana Heise's video about the [isle of Mauritius](#), an island located off the southeast coast of India with a history of British and French colonialism that is now advertised as the [perfect tourist destination](#), and Ahram Park's pigment prints of Kansas landscapes, the conversation is focused on landscape and place. In the largest room down the hall, the talk is focused on domestic space particularly as it relates to artists in this region; but what makes domesticity in Kansas City different from other parts of the country is not explained. And in the middle room, the one that all must walk through in order to get around, the talk extends outside of Kansas City and into cycles of death and resurrection, and who is allowed to have these types of conversations in the first place.



Garry Noland, “Failed Monuments (Warm)” (2013-14), polystyrene and gold colored tape, dimensions variable. (image courtesy of the artist)

Gary Noland’s “Failed Monuments (Cool)” and “Failed Monuments (Warm),” (both 2013–14), appear to be giant hunks of fresh faded blue styrofoam with strips of golden tape pasted on top, and they are arranged like oversized crayons, precious rocks found deep in the desert of New Mexico, or a cluster of stalagmites. Yet these blocks could just as easily have been found on a boating dock, under a bridge, in a dumpster, or somewhere else where objects are left and discarded.



Paul Anthony Smith, “Untitled Tarmac #001” (2013), oil on canvas, 74 x 96 inches. (image courtesy of the artist and ZieherSmith, New York, New York)

Artist and jazz musician Mark Southerland combines his signature horn sculptures, which are crafted from brass horns that he discovers in graveyards where vintage car horns, trumpets, and tubs go to rust and fade, with Linda Lighton’s porcelain flowers to create “Sisters” (2013), “Chet’s Bootleg” (2013), and “Wishing Miles” (all 2013). These works ultimately suggest cycles of life and death using characters such as famous jazz musicians Miles Davis and Chet Baker, and the

relationships between sisters. Lighton's flowers look positively vaginal inside Southerland's horn openings, blooming yet oddly still in their "birth" state. The horns would have metaphorically died, and Lighton's flowers would not exist if it weren't for her hand that shaped them. These deflowered horned sculptures are both a cycle of beginnings and endings, and a graceful collaboration between these two artists.

Paul Anthony Smith's oil on canvas paintings, "Untitled Tarmac #003" and "Untitled Tarmac #001" (both 2013), of tarmac workers as we would expect to see them on runways from the windows of airplanes offer a quiet look into the lives of workers who are having conversations amongst each other, not with the viewer. And the viewer is not a voyeur or privy to any of this; in separate worlds, Smith's paintings keep the conversation out of range.



Cary Esser, "Untitled Set 4" (2014), earthenware, 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches (each) (image courtesy of the artist and Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri)

In this last room, Robert Josiah Bingaman's "Pool 1" (2014) painting of a pool, with everything black save for the shiny blue chlorinated waters is a pool that one would only see if they left the middle of America. Miki Baird's many duplicate photographs of her drives to the studio and to work are chopped up and braided in a way that makes them look like tiny rugs hanging on the wall. But the subject matter of her drives is as mundane as a cornfield. Corey Antis experiments with painterly textures in his works, and Cary Esser creates trompe l'oeil-esque earthenware sets

that, from afar, look like beat-up leather mailing envelopes. In another room, Ricky Allman's large-scale paintings "All of us Redux" and "This is a river" (both 2013) portray large empty spaces free from human interactions, and Rashawn Griffin's "Fissure" (2013) is a walk-in installation created from domestic materials that have been melded together as a way to discuss the materials present inside.



Diana Heise, "Le Morne Echoes" (2013), archival pigment print, 40 x 60 inches (image courtesy of the artist)

Save for Diana Heise's video "Visions of Le Morne Inscribed," a video from her project that documents the lives of people and histories on Mauritius's Le Morne peninsula, where myth has it that escaped slaves once lived, and the works of Lighton & Southerland, Noland, and Smith, the majority of work in this show is in dialogue with itself and the region. What is meant by regionalism then, really? Is it moreso about keeping a dialogue going that is focused on hyperlocal landscape and domestic spaces, and understanding the self in relation to the region?



Ricky Allman, "All of Us Redux" (2013), acrylic on canvas, 5 x 7 feet (image courtesy of the artist)

The Center is a Moving Target runs through August 1 at Kemper at the Crossroads (33 W 19th Street, Kansas City, Missouri).

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