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'America: Now and Here' art project to launch in KC

By ALICE THORSON
 The Kansas City Star

You know Kansas City has arrived as a cultural destination when New Yorkers seek it out as a venue.

In recent years, the KC audience has become accustomed to big, multimedia, multidisciplinary events, largely through the Charlotte Street Foundation's Urban Culture Project, which regularly presents showings that mix poetry, dance, music, performance, film and visual arts.

On Friday, much of this local activity and many of its best-known practitioners will be folded into a multimillion-dollar national project spearheaded by NY artist Eric Fischl, a star of the 1980s art boom, and launching in Kansas City's Crossroads Arts District.

It's called "America: Now and Here," and its mission is to "open up a dialogue about America through the arts."

Fischl conceived the project — a traveling show of works by national painters, playwrights, poets, composers and musicians joined by their counterparts from the cities it will visit — "as a way to foster a new civic relationship with the arts."

"We're not about art, we're about positioning art for new and necessary kinds of dialogue about America," said the project's director, Dorothy Dunn, in a phone interview from New York.

"The time is right to examine precisely who it is we are, what we believe in, what our values are," Fischl says in an introductory video on the project's website. With "America: Now and Here," he says, "We're taking that out on the road with the intention of having that work that's in the show begin the conversation."

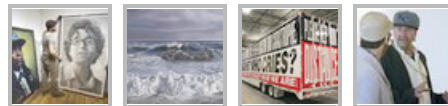
"America: Now and Here" will not be fully realized until 2012, when it will include a half-dozen "mobile truck galleries" that will open up to form a big exhibit and event space in each city it visits.

Project organizers, who are still raising funds for the trucks, say the idea is to "engage audiences who might otherwise see the arts as irrelevant to their daily lives or be disinclined to visit a museum, gallery, theater or



Allison Long

Beniah Leuschke and Jesse Christopher (right) arrange a three-panel piece by Lawrence artist Roger Shimomura at Leedy-Voulkos Art Center for the "America: Now and Here" exhibit. The cross-disciplinary exhibit encompasses visual art, poetry, music, theater and film; it opens Friday and continues through May 28.



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concert hall.”

The Kansas City launch, including a performance by DJ Spooky (also known as the writer and multimedia artist Paul D. Miller), was timed to coincide with First Friday gallery openings, which attract hundreds of people to the Crossroads each month.

It will be centered at the Leedy-Voulikos Art Center, 2012 Baltimore Ave., and spread out to neighboring buildings and the Mid-America Arts Alliance parking lot, where Spooky will set up at dusk. All of the programming is free.

The crux of the production is a show headlined by familiar blue-chip artists including Chuck Close, Jeff Koons, Jasper Johns, Cindy Sherman, Alex Katz, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Bradford, Julian Schnabel and Fischl himself, who has had paintings sell at auction for as much as \$1.8 million.

At his request, big-name artists contributed works that reflect their views on America post 9/11, which was also a criterion in selecting works by 20 Kansas City artists for the local presentation of the show.

That task fell to well-known Kansas City painter and performance artist David Ford, who sought area artists who were “active, consistent and professional” and had relevant works.

“I curated it for (“America: Now and Here”) on their theme,” Ford said in a recent interview. “I wanted it to be really broad, to have an unexpected mix of people, from Roger Shimomura to a local graffiti crew.”

At Ford’s insistence, the Kansas City work will be interspersed with the imported art in the exhibition.

“It was the first thing I brought up,” he said. “I really wanted to see an opportunity for artists to integrate vertically instead of always horizontally. I told them I wanted it hung in parity; I told them I want all the (Kansas City) artists to be guaranteed their work will be picked up, hung, insured and returned.

“I wanted to be sure they were treated with respect,” he added. “That allowed me to get some different pieces.”

The visual arts exhibit features 106 works by 26 Kansas City artists and 52 national artists, Dunn said.

But the total number of artists involved in the project, which includes poetry, plays, music and film, is much greater than that.

“America: Now and Here” organizers enlisted prominent members of the Kansas City theater, film, literary and music communities to select artists from their genres who will play alongside productions by national artists.

Cynthia Levin and Heidi Van chose the local playwrights, whose works will be performed alongside pieces by Edward Albee, Marsha Norman, Jon Robin Baitz and Nathan Louis Jackson.

“The (plays) were all written with the understanding that they will happen in the gallery spaces,” said Kathy Dowell, a Kansas City art consultant who is “America: Now and Here’s” regional manager. Local actors will perform the works, which will be presented randomly.

To keep the event family-friendly, works involving nudity and language will be reserved for a single evening performance, Dowell said.

Kansas City poets Glenn North and Jose Faus selected roughly 30 local poets to participate in the project, which includes national poets Robert Pinsky, Suheir Hammad, Rita Dove and Marc Doty.

Both groups will be represented by a renga, or collaborative poem.

The national poetry renga, created by 54 poets from coast to coast, will be featured at the Leedy-Voulikos Art Center. A one-hour film will show the poets reading their lines, which will also be printed on the gallery walls. The renga has just been published in book form by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

The renga by Kansas City poets, printed by Kansas City’s Incubator Press, will be displayed on a large wall adjacent to the national renga.

Benjamin Meade, professor of film and digital media at Avila University, is curating the local and regional film component of the exhibit, which will have several showings, including an outdoor movie night Saturday.

“America: Now and Here” also lists a big roster of musicians and entertainers, whose works will be piped into the galleries and featured at listening stations installed in a music studio at the Beggar’s Table, 2009 Baltimore Ave., and at Leedy-Voulikos.

Featured artists include, via recordings, Rosanne Cash, Joan Baez, Laurie Anderson, Lou Reed, Steve Martin, Sting, Fischerspooner, Paul Simon and Philip Glass.

In addition, local and regional performers selected by Kansas City musicians Mark Southerland and Ashley Miller will play live music on dates throughout the show.

“America: Now and Here” will have a three-week run in Kansas City, encompassing a score of related events,



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beginning with a pre-Cinco de Mayo crafting event Tuesday at Mattie Rhodes Art Center. Other offerings include celebratory meals with various speakers, yoga sessions, workshops on comic books, hip-hop and other topics, story slams, a bike ride and a magic show.

On May 20, Fischl will engage in a discussion with Julian Zugazagoitia, director/CEO of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, in the museum's Atkins Auditorium.

"We're trying to do this whole thing without a podium and a mic," Dunn said. "This is a conversation. It makes me very proud to see this demonstration of patriotic spirit." The project will cross the state line in the form of a Barbara Kruger truck, printed with the New York artist's signature super graphic, which will circulate to the Nelson, City Market, area shopping malls and University of Kansas. It also will make a stop May 11-12 at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art at Johnson County Community College.

"It's a fabulous-looking thing," Nerman Museum director Bruce Hartman says. "We're going to park it right in front of the museum in the lane where the buses park, and people can look down on it from the museum's big oculus."

Hartman was not surprised that "America: Now and Here" chose Kansas City as its launch site.

"Our city has attained a national reputation for its commitment to contemporary art and artists," he said. "The debut of 'America: Now and Here' in Kansas City is a testament to the vitality — and importance — of our arts community."

Dunn said Kansas City was selected as the first stop after project organizers talked to communities all over the country. Fischl has family ties here and several years ago served as a juror for Sandy Kemper's Collectors Fund, a corporate art program that rotates local and regional art to partner companies and individuals.

Dunn said that Kemper hosted a dinner for "America: Now and Here" organizers, who were struck by the community's connection to the Lewis and Clark expedition (of 1804-06) and Kansas City's pioneering spirit.

"It really is key to the spirit that defines the American innovative, can-do approach," she said.

Kansas City is one of three sites — the others are Detroit and Chicago — where "America: Now and Here" hopes to "leverage support to build the trucks so that the project can carry forward," Dunn said.

To date, the list of local supporters includes Sandy and Christine Kemper, the Collectors Fund, the Sosland Foundation, Brad and Linda Nicholson and roughly a dozen more individual, corporate and foundation donors. Dunn said roughly one-quarter of "America: Now and Here's" budget goes back into regional hires and contracts.

"America: Now and Here" will stop in Detroit in July and in Chicago in October, by which time Dunn hopes to have all the regional partners lined up for the inaugural road trip tour with the trucks.

Part of the plan is to have the exhibition trucks spoke out from the tour's urban stops to the surrounding suburbs and outlying areas, in a full-scale version of what is happening with the Barbara Kruger truck in Kansas City.

But later this week, on the First Friday, the Crossroads will be the place to be.

Despite the overheated rhetoric and the patronizing notion that "America: Now and Here" can initiate a conversation that museums and art spaces in smaller communities have been conducting all along — talk about a New York bubble! — it's the event that counts.

Beginning Friday, Kansas Citians can judge for themselves if "America: Now and Here" fulfills its promise to change people's thinking — about themselves, each other, the nation's future and art.

'AMERICA' MONTH

"America: Now and Here" opens 7-9 p.m. Friday and continues at the Leedy-Vouklos Art Center, 2012 Baltimore, and surrounding spaces through May 28. Hours are 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Wednesday to Sunday. For a complete listing of "America: Now and Here" events, visit kansascity.americanowandhere.org. All programming is free.

To reach Alice Thorson, call 816-234-4763 or send email to athorson@kcstar.com.

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