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## Kemper at the Crossroads exhibit highlights Kansas City artists' vigor and invention

BY ALICE THORSON - THE KANSAS CITY STAR  
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"Le Morne Echoes" (2014), a photograph by Diana Heise from her ongoing exploration of the culture of Mauritius, shows an important national landmark where escaped slaves once settled. FROM THE ARTIST

For her first major show since becoming the Kemper Museum's curator in April 2013, Erin Dziedzic decided to re-examine the idea of regionalism through works by Kansas City artists.

Regionalism, once equated with scenes of rural life produced by artists such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, takes on an expanded scope in Dziedzic's exhibit, "The Center Is a Moving Target," on view at Kemper at the Crossroads.

Trading insularity for a global outlook, her chosen mix of 12 emerging and established artists drawn from a 20-mile radius of Kansas City is marked by a vigor and diversity of ideas and an inventive handling of materials.

Garry Noland endows discarded polystyrene with an aspect of treasure by topping columnar chunks of it with glimmering gold tape. Otherwise, the alluring colors and rough, stone-like textures of his sculptures are ready-made. "It's foam they used to use to float docks," he said, "but the government outlawed it because it would break down and pollute the water."

Grouped like old headstones jumbled by time, these craggy forms reprise the delight of discovery in an archaeological dig.

Noland calls them "Failed Monuments."

"I was making them when there was a lot of discussion in the media about the failures in the Catholic Church with the sex-abuse scandals and failures in our government with all the internal fighting," he said. "We've erected

these institutions that are supposed to help us see ourselves through.”

Noland's gilding of this shabby polystyrene speaks to the eminence we've accorded the institutions that have let us down, but his monuments also carry an environmental message. Approached creatively, discards represent a treasury of recyclable resources, with artists like Noland pointing the way.

A 25-minute video and a color photograph by Diana Heise provide a portal to her ongoing immersion in the culture and history of the island nation of Mauritius off the African coast. Heise's previous work has included research into the traditional instruments used in Sega music, which originated with slaves imported by European colonizers. Both works in the current exhibit focus on Le Morne, a mountain on the island's southwestern tip where runaway slaves, known as maroons, sought refuge in its caves and cliffs.

The exhibit's painting selections include abstraction and figuration and points in-between.

The show marks the debut of Robert Josiah Bingaman's striking swimming pool abstractions, which will be the focus of a one-person show opening June 27 at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art. Bingaman approaches painting as a screen for haunted comminglings of memory and experience. The resulting images, whether pools or the red edifice portrayed at night in "Trinidad 1" and "Trinidad 2," are suffused with a wistful quietude.

Corey Antis demonstrates a new gravitas and confidence in three, 24-by-30-inch "Untitled" abstractions.

In one, a black rectangle edged with pink all but obscures a sanded black-and-white underlayer visible at the sides and top. A second piece features a sanded yellow square, endowed with volume by a tan zigzag right border that exerts a toothy profile against the black-and-white surround.

These new works sever the connections with the boxes and rocks of Antis' previous abstractions. A pared-back palette sacrifices decorative appeal for a more rigorous, almost minimalist, mien, as seen in the third work, which presents a wavy yellow rectangle striated and thatched with black.

Two large paintings by Ricky Allman feature enigmatic futuristic scenarios of structures and events whose logic and purpose elude us.

An "entombed" mountain surmounted by a floral bouquet appears before a ghost-like white structure in "All of Us Redux." In "This Is a River," we witness the workings of what seems to be a nocturnal laboratory or space station. There is a new sense of stability about both of these compositions, but that doesn't make them any less unsettling.

Paul Anthony Smith's large grisaille paintings of airport tarmac workers continue his project of dignifying the common worker. In both canvases, the figures converse, stressing the importance of communication in a setting that depends on it.

Among the experiments are a set of collaborative sculptures by Mark Southerland and Linda Lighton, fusing his brass instruments with her organic porcelain forms. Dziedzic relates them to the entwined histories of

jazz and the visual arts, but these disparate conjoinings also hark to the famous surrealist line about the “chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella.”

Miki Baird's rhythmic collages of tiny photographs taken on her daily commute are assembled with a weaver's precision, aligning them with fabric and basketry. The palette is alluring, and there is no mistaking Baird's genius for pattern, texture and design. But as art, the work feels pat — one longs for some loose ends and animating disruptions.

Cary Esser's shallow monochromatic fritware boxes, hung side by side on the wall, assert the presence of minimalist sculptures, although here, torn edges and fragmented planes shift the emphasis to texture and the fragility of the clay. An exquisite, three-part white piece with the aspect of handmade paper presents an elegant organic abstraction made up of creases, tears and holes. A two-part terra-cotta-colored work presents a softened geometry of slits and slabs.

The largest work in the show is Rashawn Griffin's “Fissure,” a walk-in room covered with his characteristic selections of patterned fabric and plaid kilts. Light flashes and changes color within, where he has lined the walls with silver moire, and an enigmatic soundtrack plays. The room is a refuge of sorts, continuing the artist's exploration of the idea of home.

The stars of the show are modestly scaled black-and-white photographs created by Ahram Park. Their subject — the gravel roads and scrubby vegetation of the Kansas countryside — could not be more ordinary, but the Korean-born Park transforms these nondescript scenes into images of compelling power.

“One of my first memories on moving to Kansas was driving down a gravel road and getting covered by dust — whited out. It was kind of terrifying,” he said.

Park re-creates this effect by using a leaf blower to create piles of dust that the wind turns into smoky atmospheric clouds.

In “Property Line” (2013), the dust hovers about the weeds and tangled grasses at the foot of wire fence, bleaching out parts of the delicate linear grid it creates across the center of the composition.

“I like this idea of the order of nature,” Park said. “It doesn't matter where the property line is, the wind will just take (the dust), defeating the whole ‘manmade property’ aspect.”

“Send It (Again)” is an equally powerful image, in which a dusty ball of light at middle ground asserts a near religious immanence, blasting out the details of a gravel road and bordering vegetation.

The effect derives from a deliberate act of photographic transgression on Park's part, inspired by photographer Robert Adams.

“Adams would photograph at a high elevation on brightly lit days and it would wash out,” he said. “I'm going for that aesthetic, photographing at midday when the sun is harshest, so when the dust gets blown it gets bleached out.”

“I was told for such a long time not to photograph then,” he added. “It's so harsh, but it adds a glow to all the dust.”

The idea of regionalism, most often manifested as an attachment to place, does not weigh heavily on this show. Dziezic largely allows the works to speak for themselves.

And there will be more, she says. "The Center Is a Moving Target" is the first in a planned series of exhibitions and programming that "will continue to be developed on exploring themes of regionalism locally, nationally and globally."

*To reach Alice Thorson, call 816-234-4763 or send email to [athorson@kcstar.com](mailto:athorson@kcstar.com).*

#### ON DISPLAY

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"The Center Is a Moving Target" continues at Kemper at the Crossroads, 33 W. 19th St., through Aug. 1. Hours are 5-10 p.m. Friday and noon-5 p.m. Saturday. For more information, 816-753-5784 or [www.kemperart.org](http://www.kemperart.org) (<http://www.kemperart.org/>).