

From the exhibition, *Crystal Bridges*

*Crystal Bridges* Exhibition to Include Kansas and Missouri Artists

By Blair Schulman

Logging over 100,000 miles, and visiting with 1,000 artists, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas announced their selection of 102 artists for *State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now*, running September 13, 2014 - January 19, 2015.

“The result is a one-of-a-kind exhibition that draws from every region of the U.S., offering a diverse and nuanced look at American art. The exhibition will examine the myriad ways in which today’s artists are informed by the past, innovating with materials, old and new, and engaging deeply with issues relevant to our times.”

As an enormous undertaking to present a cross-section of artists from around the country, this institution will offer its interpretation of contemporary American art.

Seven of those chosen are from Kansas and Missouri. They include Jamie Adams (St Louis, MO), Miki Baird (Kansas City, MO), Julie Blackmon (Springfield, MO), Calder Kamin (Kansas City, MO), Mary Kay (Lindsborg, KS), Tim Liddy (St. Louis, MO) and Randy Reiger (Wichita, KS), I spoke with some of these artists to find out more about the selection process and how their work fits into Crystal Bridges’ conceptualism for this exhibition.

Although a call was not put out to artists, the museum did request recommendations from arts professionals around the country. Miki Baird says, “I was contacted by a representative of the museum who made a request for a studio visit on behalf of the museum president, Don Bacigalupi and assistant curator Chad Alligood.”

Last August, the museum got in touch with Calder Kamin, whose work concerns itself with the environment, and requested a studio visit shortly thereafter.” We had an amazing conversation, which was filmed and recorded ... and I soon learned I was one of the first to be selected. The staff at Crystal Bridges values the environment surrounding the Crystal Springs and makes efforts to protect the flora and fauna that share this (Moshe Safdie-designed) space. The state of the environment should be the greatest concern for the next century.”

“A number of us Wichita artists notified Crystal Bridges of our existence,” says Randy Reiger. “They (Don Bacigalupi and Chad Alligood) followed through and came to visit all of us that were willing and able, about 14 in number.”

For Reiger’s work the general territory of conversation was literary precedence and inspirations; the writings of Walther Benjamin’s and W.G. Sebald’s, themes of melancholy and ‘Heilbroner’s theory of America (in the 1950s) as a country of unparalleled optimism and self-confidence, and how that has largely gone to shit. The work they selected, “NuPenny’s Last Stand” was not actually at my studio, it was perched in Hays, Kansas at the time. So, the ‘art’ that I had to offer him was limited to the language of why I make art at all.”

At one point Julie Blackmon recalls being asked what she was trying to accomplish with each piece. “I’m just trying to charm myself.” She continues, “And they looked at me like they were hoping for a little more. I remember one of them saying that’s not how they would describe my work. And I said “Well, your version of charming is different from mine. It’s not as simple as it sounds. To me, that’s when everything happens to come together in a way that I know might work. And it’s usually a moment that’s a little bit dark, a little bit funny... and something that’s relatable.”

Hearing these stories led me to consider how this exhibition will reconcile the look and feel of American art?

Mary Kay remarks, “I certainly believe that my work connects to the ideology of the show that Crystal Bridges is putting together, as I clearly am not a widely known artist; I live off the beaten track ... My understanding and hope is that it will in fact reflect the very wide, diverse and eclectic artistic population of the U.S., and help expand the definition of what exactly constitutes art in America at this particular time.”

Reiger notes that concerns of ideology are different for everyone but, “But, my understanding of the basic conceit of this exhibition is one of showing under a brighter light to a broader audience those artists that work (in the so-called fly-over places) either between the traditional centers of focus or within under-represented pockets of major centers. My location in the Midwest seems a good alignment.”

Blackmon mentions they were interested in today’s artists that are informed by the past, using materials old and new, and engaging with issues relevant to today... “And this work of mine... I guess you could say it’s influenced by paintings of the distant past, but I’m using the tools of today (digital photography) -- exploring the stress (in a lighthearted way) that people (especially women with children) are feeling in today’s world.”

At one point Blackmon was asked if she considered her work to be “American” art? “And it was funny because as they asked me that we were all looking down at a piece of mine where there are all these people watching *The Sound of Music* on an outdoor screen. I told them I didn’t think they ever cared much for *The Sound of Music* in Europe.”

It appears *State of the Art* will introduce an abundance of styles and disciplines. Judging from the show’s title, this expects to define what they feel is the epitome or consensus of contemporary art and such an undertaking by this institution is preparing to make a definitive statement. One expects and hopes for ideas that illuminate subject, process and presentation and I look forward to seeing how far and wide Crystal Bridges casts their net.