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Exhibition focuses on women artists and their work

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"Fancy Shawl Project" by Wendy Red Star is part of "Powerful Women: Contemporary Art from the Eiteljorg Collection," now on display at the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis.

Submitted photo



Energy flows through the artwork, equal parts strength and beauty, in the aptly named "Powerful Women: Contemporary Art from the Eiteljorg Collection."

A pair of Chinese girls peer defiantly from the canvas in Hung Liu's "Sisters." Technicolor garments blend Native American design with modern imagery in Wendy Red Star's "Fancy Shawl Project."

"Boda Bacalar" – chosen as the main subject of the painting because they cross all class, cultural and gender lines – portrays a hidden wedding underneath a mantle of stars.

These and a myriad of other works tell the story of how women artists have left their imprint on contemporary painting, sculptures, fabric and other arts. “Powerful Women,” an ongoing exhibition at the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, emphasizes artists whose work speaks to issues of personal identity, political agency memory and violence against women.

“Powerful Women” is the final exhibition organized by longtime curator of contemporary art Jennifer Complo McNutt before her death in August 2021. In its message, it speaks to the legacy that Complo McNutt strove for throughout her life.

“I hope that they learn more about women artists, and think of the Eiteljorg as a place for contemporary art. I know it’s very important endeavor that Jennifer had, and I worked closely with her,” said Dorene Red Cloud, associate curator of Native American art at the Eiteljorg. “Hopefully people want to see more contemporary art.”

“Powerful Women” was created as part of a larger Eiteljorg theme, “Honoring Women,” planned for 2020 and 2021. The idea that Complo McNutt had was a celebrate the centennial of women’s suffrage and accomplishments with public programs, online content and special exhibitions.

“Jennifer had developed this beautiful contemporary art collection, and she said she wanted to do an exhibit on women – powerful women,” Red Cloud said.

The first rotation of “Powerful Women” opened on Sept. 19, 2020, and featured works primarily by Native American contemporary artists.

This second rotation, which opened in spring 2021, put more emphasis on a diverse group of artists.

“(Jennifer) wanted to include other women and women of color, whose work is not shown as often,” Red Cloud said. “Most museums have exhibitions about white male artists. But Jennifer has put together this amazing collection with these really beautiful and thought provoking and unique pieces of artwork, which is the focus of this rotation.”

Red Star, who grew up on a Crow Indian reservation, uses photography, video, and performance pieces encourage people to weigh dehumanizing interpretations of Native Americans versus more accurate and contemporary views.

Alison Saar utilizes sculpture and mixed media, with influences ranging from African, Caribbean, and Latin American folk art and spirituality, to depict the African diaspora and black female identity.

Liu was a Chinese-born artist who immigrated to the U.S. in the 1980s. While in China, she often created images of refugees, street performers, soldiers, laborers, and prisoners, among others, that countered Chinese government propaganda.

Among other topics after moving to the U.S., her work depicted the displaced families and individuals who were impacted by the Dust Bowl in the 1930s, moving from the Great Plains to find work and a better life in the West.

“She was an artist who would create images that somethings the Chinese government had issue with,” Red Cloud said. “Being an American and living in California, I think she has an important view to share with the world.”

“Powerful Women II” was originally supposed to close in February, but museum officials opted to extend its run to March 13. Not only does it offer more exposure for this work, but it offers a chance to recognize Jennifer Complo McNutt for her contributions to the art world.

Complo McNutt worked at the museum for more than 30 years, and was the engine behind the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship, a program aimed at supporting the work of contemporary Native American artists.

Her unexpected death on Aug. 27 shook the Eiteljorg and entire art community.

Those who have worked with the exhibition, as well as those who were close with Complo McNutt, are excited for people to glimpse the dynamic work that has been assembled.

“It’s very difficult to be the one talking about this exhibition without her. But we wanted to convey the importance of the work she’s done, and the collection that she’s put together,” Red Cloud said.