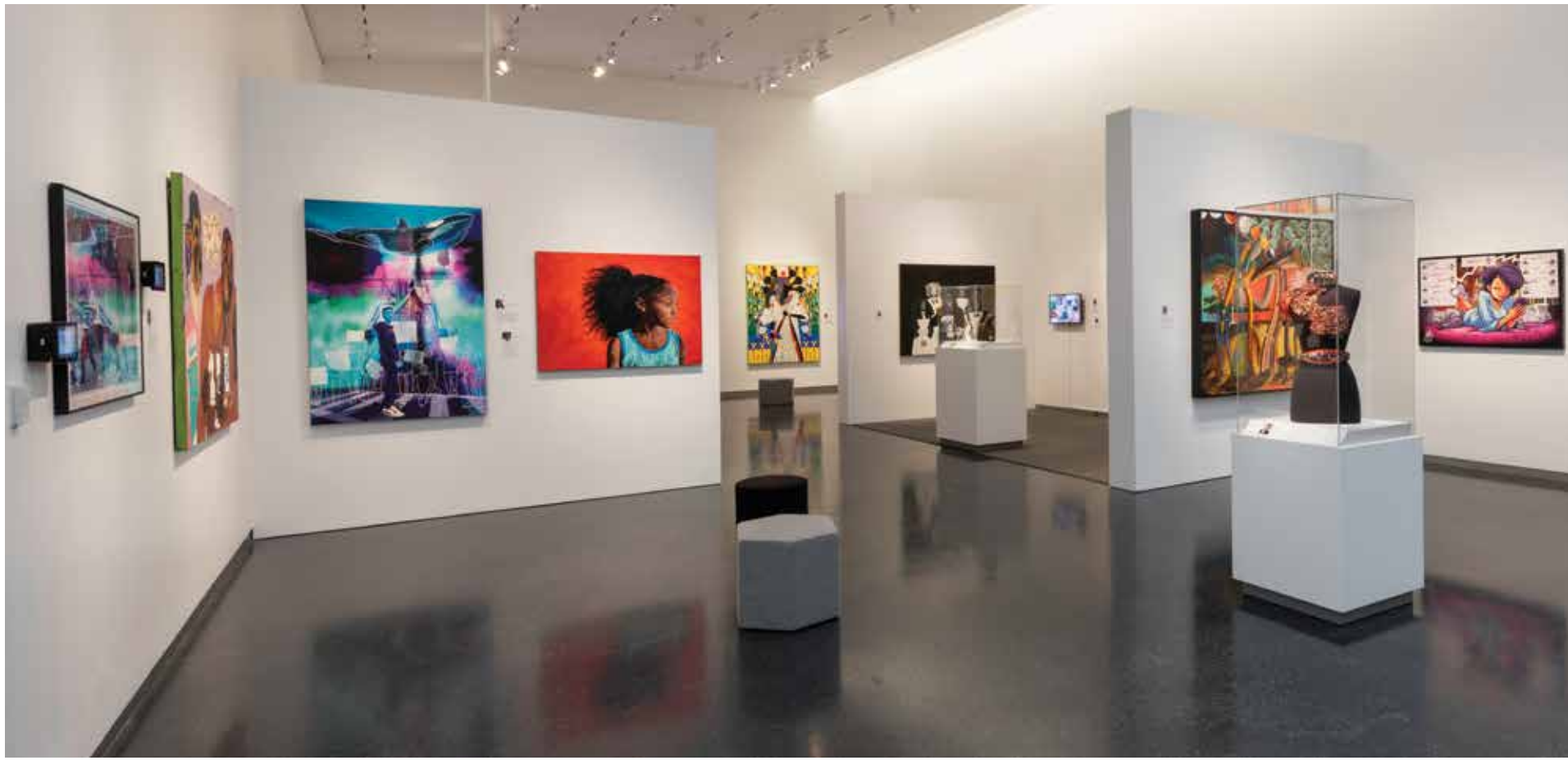

COLLECTIVE SOUL

NELSON-ATKINS' *TESTIMONY* EXPLORES ELABORATE BONDS BETWEEN ART AND AUDIENCE

BY EMILY COX

When was the last time you saw a local, living artist's work featured in an exhibition at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art? It's a trick question. Before June 5 of this year, it hadn't happened.

The Nelson is reimagining their relationship with the local arts community as they launch a new initiative, KC Art Now, to celebrate local artists and their art. The first exhibition under this program is *Testimony: African American Artists Collective*.

The African American Artists Collective (AAAC) formed in 2014 around a table at Gates Bar-B-Q. The collective has grown to 150 artists who live in Kansas City or who have ties here. When the Nelson invited the collective to exhibit there, 35 of those artists answered the call. Half of them created new work specifically for the exhibit.

"The museum always had a great respect for the artists in our community, [and partnered with artists for programming], but work on the walls just carries a different kind of weight and sends a different message," says Stephanie Fox Knappe, the Samuel Sosland Curator of American Art at The Nelson-Atkins.

She continues: "To see Kansas City artists celebrated in the same way as Caravaggio or Monet or any contemporary artist globally is really wonderful."

That is to say, they are on the same walls as these renowned artists. There is a certain validation happening here.

When The Nelson-Atkins announced that they would be showcasing local, living, Black artists in this new exhibition, it was *news*. Whose work is shown on the walls of this museum, and any museum, has always been political. This is one step towards breaking down some of those institutional barriers that disproportionately value certain kinds of art (cough cough, paintings made by Europeans a couple hundred years ago).

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Testimony, as an act, works best in chorus. Whether in court or in church, testimony doesn't happen on its own. It's many voices speaking their truths, offering evidence, and building a story.

As you enter the gallery, you enter a manifestation of the collective: "This is the AAAC," says Knappe. "These are the artists who know each other, who have conversations with each other, who visit each other's studios, who wrestle with ideas together, who are engaged in social justice together."

The show's title, "Testimony," came out of the interviews that museum staff had with participating artists. "We were just talking about their practice and what it means to be a Black or African American artist," says Knappe. "The notion of how important it is for artists to speak their own truths, to not have them mediated, to not have their experiences told from another's perspective, was something that just came up again and again. This notion [considers] art as a testimony."

To that end, Knappe and others at the Nelson decided to forego the typical curatorial comments on the wall placards. Instead, each placard features comments from the artist themselves.

"Because we were so focused on the notion of testimony and one's own truth," says Knappe, "it felt like if we were really going to embrace that fully, it wasn't my place to be necessarily an interpreter, or to say, 'Actually what the artist meant is this,' or, 'This is what the artist wanted you to know.'"

The artists had just a mere 70-90 words to work with—the same as any placard space throughout the museum. They had to carefully consider the way they used this space, according to Knappe, who gave this advice: "As you're approaching these labels, these written testimonies, think about standing in front of your work with a good friend or a family member, and what would be the thing you are whispering in their ear?" They were further counseled by one of Knappe's colleagues, Ariana Chaivaranon, the interpretive planner on the *Testimony* team.

Some artists gave helpful history or context for their work. Harold David Smith wrote about his piece "Friday Night Blues," about how getting together with "the brothers" on Friday nights has shifted from talking about sports and work to a more "bluesy, melancholy feel." The stunning mixed media canvas evokes that late-night melancholy of two longtime friends smoking Newports and drinking Colt 45s. I can feel them mulling over decades past in a hazy basement as if I'm in the room with them.

Other placards left me wanting more information.

One of the first artworks you see as you enter the exhibition is "Embraced Promises," a quilt with a Black mother hugging her son who holds a Black Lives Matter sign lowered in his hands. They stand together against a blue, star-spangled background. Artist Kim Alexis Newton writes on the accompanying plaque, "My work fuses emotional journeys with a time-honored tradition."

She goes on to write about a mother's fear of losing her son, about love and the pursuit of happiness. But there is no contextualization of the time-honored tradition of quilting. This quilted piece fits into a powerful legacy that goes back to Egypt and includes the formidable artists Harriet Powers and Faith Ringgold. The medium has been used by generations of Black women and has been historically relegated outside of "fine art." While the visual of mother and son with the colors of the American flag makes for a potent image in and of itself, this work deserves to be situated in that lineage of Black women artists working with quilts.

In Michael A. Brantley's painting, "A Seat

The *Testify* exhibit, on display at Kemper. DANA ANDERSON

at the Table," we see five Black folks poised as servants, painted in black and white. The central figure, a Black man with Rastafarian locs and white-gloved hands holding a silver-domed serving dish has his mouth covered with a shiny, translucent mask. Draped over his forearm is a cloth featuring the only color in the work, painted like the American flag on the exterior, while the Confederate flag peeks out from the interior side.

Brantley's commentary on the plaque next to his painting is brief, reading only: "Anatomy of progress, visibility, and identity within integrated spaces."

Painting a group of servants under the title "A Seat at the Table"—that oft-used metaphor in dialogues about racial inclusion—is a potent commentary about just what that table might look like and where people stand in relation to it. But in a painting so ripe with symbols, understanding hinges on viewers spotting and connecting those points of reference and their layered meanings.

"The Fife Master" by David Stevens is a triptych of sepia-toned photographs of an older Black man sitting on a bucket outside a shack, playing the fife. There are stories in the photographs and contained in the subject himself. But Stevens doesn't choose to share them, or even who this man is, instead only writing that his photographs capture relationships, that he has a bond with his subjects. This gives us more questions than answers: Who is the fife master to him? The sepia-toned photographs also suggest an older photography process, but that, too, remains a mystery.

Leaving a museum curious—being sufficiently moved by artwork to *want* to know more—is not the worst thing.

This strategy of using only the artists' words is perhaps a rebuttal against museums acting as holders of ultimate knowledge, against their supposed authority and neutrality. But this feels like an overcorrection that makes these artists' work less impactful than they could have been. Talk to me about their lineage in art history—place them there and give them the respect they are due.

Introductions, context, and biography are provided in many settings—think of a public speaker or an introduction to a novel. This added information need not undercut the power of the main event, nor suggest that the work presented is insufficient. Instead, introductions usually suggest a certain status: These artists have earned being discussed and celebrated.

The word "testimony" stands solid in the show's title as a noun. An object hanging in the air, having been given, waiting to be received. It can't exist in that limbo; testimony only exists in relationship. A speaker and a listener. An artist and a viewer.

Speaking one's own truth is a beautiful, vital process. But what if you are speaking in a language that others don't understand? Sometimes there is a gap between truth-telling and truth-receiving. Every truth spoken is filtered through our own knowledge, experiences, and biases. There is no pure understanding; no one-to-one telling and receiving ratio.

So, how can these truths best be received? Is the expression or the reception more important? Here, the curator and artists foreground the expression of their story, hoping the audience can meet them where they are. Or be curious enough to dig deeper.

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Several artists grapple with the notion of testimony and with themes of voice, identity, and place. On the gallery's back wall, a projected video entitled "I Want to Testify" shows dancers sweeping their arms and slowly rolling their bodies through the air in front of Wornall House. It looks every bit the iconic plantation house, all brick and white columns. This is a place where people were enslaved, and the dancers' broad movements feel like a reclamation of space.

The performance was choreographed by Tyrone Aiken, featuring dancers Winston Dynamite Brown and Latra Wilson, with vocals by Hope McIntosh.

In another scene, as they dance in front of Troost Lake, we hear McIntosh's voice: "This plantation watering source sits next to the Paseo and hides secrets in plain sight. And if excavated and unerased, would shed new light on forgotten slaves and indigenous bodies." This line pushed me to research and learn: The natural spring where Troost Lake now sits was the water source for the Porter Plantation, where Rev. James Porter enslaved 40-100 people in the early 19th century.

These scenes are intercut with ones in a white-walled gallery room. As the dancers slowly twirl individually against the white walls, we hear, "I remember being told that museums were for some people, that we would be watched and unwelcome and out of place. Don't go. Things don't change. And besides … ain't none of y'all good enough to be in there anyway."

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"What's wonderful about the collective [is that] in addition to being multi-generational, they're multi-disciplinary," says Knappe. "It was both a thrill and a challenge to figure out how we show the work of two choreographers, or three poets, or two musicians. And from the beginning, we didn't want to simply relegate those performing artists to one evening in the ten-month run, or one Sunday afternoon."

While the effort to exhibit this wider scope of art in a gallery is admirable, not everything fared well in the space. Songs by two musicians were played in separate places in the gallery, but were difficult to hear on a cacophonous Saturday afternoon. Two poets' words were printed on the wall, but were still visually underwhelming next to all the bright and textured art.

The most confusing selection was Kimberlyn Jones' "Kansas City Metropolitan Dance Theatre: A Dance Servant," a video on a small screen on the wall that seemed like a commercial for the dance studio. While they may do excellent and important work there, the video is not compelling and it detracts from the works around it.

These selections felt less like being immersed in a multidisciplinary conversation and more like being chaotically pulled in too many directions.

On the neighboring wall are two impressive large-scale works: bold primary colors and crisp geometry in a portrait of Nefertari entitled "Be forever wonderful… Ahmose-Nefertari" by Joseph Tyler Newton, Sr. and "Journey Legacy Series / Black Cherokee: Slyamore, Arkansas, Trail of Tears, Tennessee to Arkansas, 1830-1850" by Sara Sonié Joi Thompson-Ruffin. The latter is a richly detailed tapestry portrait of a Cherokee man in a feathered headdress. These two works honor ancestral lineages that connect Black Americans to these other nations and cultures through a commentary on global diaspora.

While some artists engage with history, others look to the future. The Afrofuturistic visual poetry by Glenn A. North, Jr., entitled "Blackness to Affinity: (or) Journey To A Corner of the Afrophonic Multiverse," delightfully declares: "At lightspeed we are degentrifying Troost / The Gates on Mars is where we go to eat / We rock the moonboots with the Nike swoosh / The woofers in our spaceships drop the beat."

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How do audiences receive this testimony, this multidimensional offering to our community?

"With the fact that these are local artists," says Knappe. "They're out in the community, they're walking down the street, they're at the grocery store, they have websites, they have social media."

There are opportunities to connect with the artists to see more of their work, to continue to engage beyond the exhibition, in a way that's not possible with artists from far-flung places.

"There's this electric feeling when you have living artists talking about their work with audience members, and it feels like that's still tying into that testimony and truth-telling and truth-receiving," says Knappe.

Hearing this testimony is an invitation into a relationship, an invitation to connect to these neighbors of yours.

Testimony: African American Artists Collective *is currently on view at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art through March 27, 2022. It is free and open to the public. Timed tickets for museum entry can be reserved on the museum's website, where you can also find a virtual tour of the exhibition.* P