



E.G. SCHEMPF | OPPENHEIMER COLLECTION, NERMAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

▲ The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art is celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Oppenheimer Collection with a museum wide exhibition. To date, Tony and Marti Oppenheimer have funded the purchase of 153 works of art valued at more than \$10 million. One of the newest acquisitions is "Yawn 2" (2012), by leading New York painter Dana Schutz.

► The collection features many works that mirror the nation's dark outlook after the 9/11 attacks. Cordy Ryman's "Window Box" (2010), a recent acquisition constructed from 2-by-4s, reflects a recession-era turn to using found and discarded materials.

► The Oppenheimers were honored at a Sept. 29 gala at the museum, where the galleries were filled with works of art they have purchased for the collection. It includes two "Soundsuits" by Nick Cave, a Kansas City Art Institute graduate whose career is skyrocketing.



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VISUAL ART | Oppenheimer Collection celebrates an anniversary

TWENTY YEARS STRONG

Nerman Museum patrons have helped Johnson County Community College acquire a diverse and impressive collection of contemporary works.

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star

The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art and Johnson County Community College mark a milestone this fall, celebrating the 20th anniversary of art collectors Tony and Marti Oppenheimer's patronage.

The couple, former residents of the Kansas City area who now live in Los Angeles, have contributed more than \$2.5 million for the purchase of contemporary art by emerging and established, national and international names. They have also consistently supported local and regional artists, whose works make up roughly 30 percent of the museum's 153-piece Oppenheimer Collection.

Late last month, a museum-wide exhibit of the Oppenheimer Collection opened in conjunction with a 20th anniversary gala honoring the couple. Roughly two-thirds of the collection is now on view, and all of the works are featured in a 340-page hardcover Oppenheimer Collection book, with an essay by critic and Star reviewer Elisabeth Kirsch and pictures of each piece accompanied by short entries written by local art historians.

So it's a good time to take stock of what Nerman Museum director Bruce Hartman calls "the foundation upon which our per-

ON EXHIBIT

"OppenheimerCollection@20" continues at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park, through Feb. 3. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday and noon-5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Monday. It's free. For more information call 913-469-3000 or go to nermanmuseum.org

manent collection rests."

The venture began in 1992, when Byron C. Cohen, Marti Oppenheimer's cousin, introduced the couple to Hartman, then director of the college's Gallery of Art. Impressed by Hartman's contemporary art programming and the growing collection he was assembling for the college, the two made a commitment to buy sculptures for the JCCC campus. They were inspired in part by the example of the Franklin Murphy Sculpture Garden at UCLA, location of the Jules Stein Eye Institute. Stein, founder of MCA (Music Corporation of America), was Tony Oppenheimer's grandfather.

Working together, Hartman and the Oppenheimers acquired

OPPENHEIMERS: Collection mirrors era

FROM D1

a roster of global works by major names, including French-born Louise Bourgeois, Barry Flanagan from England, Magdalena Abakanowicz from Poland and Stephan Balkenhol from Germany.

They pushed the community college's envelope with the acquisition of Jonathan Borofsky's "Walking Man (On the Edge)," installing it on the roof of the JCCC Commons Building — 17 years before Janet Zweig's rooftop boxcar sculpture in downtown Kansas City. In 2002, they commissioned a major piece from Korean-born Do Ho Suh, whose "Some/One" (2004), a robe composed of hundreds of stainless steel military dog tags, has become an icon of the collection.

When the Nerman Museum was announced in 2003, the couple ramped up their commitment to art at the college with an offer to buy work for the new museum's galleries.

As Tony Oppenheimer has described it: "The rate of acquisitions changed dramatically. Instead of one or two pieces per year, we were pursuing more than 100 works in a relatively short time span."

Early purchases included signature paintings by well-known artists such as Carroll Dunham, Kehinde Wiley, Sue Williams and Amy Sillman, representing the first — and in some cases, the only — works by these artists in Kansas City museum collections.

Hartman and the Oppenheimers buy at art fairs and galleries and from artists' studios, and when they see something they want, they act on it.

When it came to the big Wiley painting "Alexander the Great (Variation)" (2005), "we committed to it before it was finished in the studio," Hartman said, "and got the right of first refusal."

As early as 2005, the basic character of the collection had begun to emerge.

Color is a mainstay, as are figurative, narrative works. Stylistically, the Oppenheimer Collection tilts heavily toward surrealism, whether of the gentle variety evidenced by L.A. artist Carlee Fernandez's taxidermic fusion of a white pigeon and a yellow finch or the more aggressive approach represented by Allison Schulnik's dancing skeletons.

And it's a collection laced with a heavy dose of the grotesque, epitomized by the recent acquisition of German artist Stefanie Gutheil's "Berg I" (2009), featuring a mountain of excrement inhabited by screaming zombies.

Hartman points out that the collection mirrors the era in which the works were made.

"9/11 was a watershed moment," he said. "We began two wars and went through Abu Ghraib. It's little wonder that much of the work is grotesque, macabre and dealing with themes of mortality and morbidity."

In 2007, the Oppenheimers commissioned Navajo artist Martha Smith to create a weaving commemorating the events of 9/11. Six years earlier, Smith had woven an image of the New York skyline that included the twin towers as a fundraiser for victims of the attack.

The Oppenheimer Collection textile is a duplicate of that first work, minus the twin towers.

The Smith textile is one of numerous works in the collection that addresses current events and social issues. Brian Tolle's "Pinko," a striking pink silicone rubber house draped on a Communist-era flag pole, comments on suburban conformity. Roger Shimomura's "American Infamy" addresses the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

A huge strength of the collection is its diversity.

The artworks offer windows onto myriad cultures and points of view. Brad Kahlhamer weaves references to American Indian history and culture into his large expressionist painting "Eagle Fest USA" (2005). A new acquisition by emerging L.A. artist Asad Faulwell pays tribute to the three female women who fought in the Algerian war of independence.

Stylistically, Faulwell looks to his Iranian heritage, mining the dense patterns and colors of traditional Islamic art and decoration.

The Faulwell acquisition exemplifies the Oppenheimers' willingness to get in early on an artist's career.

"They were absolutely fearless about purchasing works of emerging artists," Hartman said. "They were less interested in pedigree than in our shared response to the work."

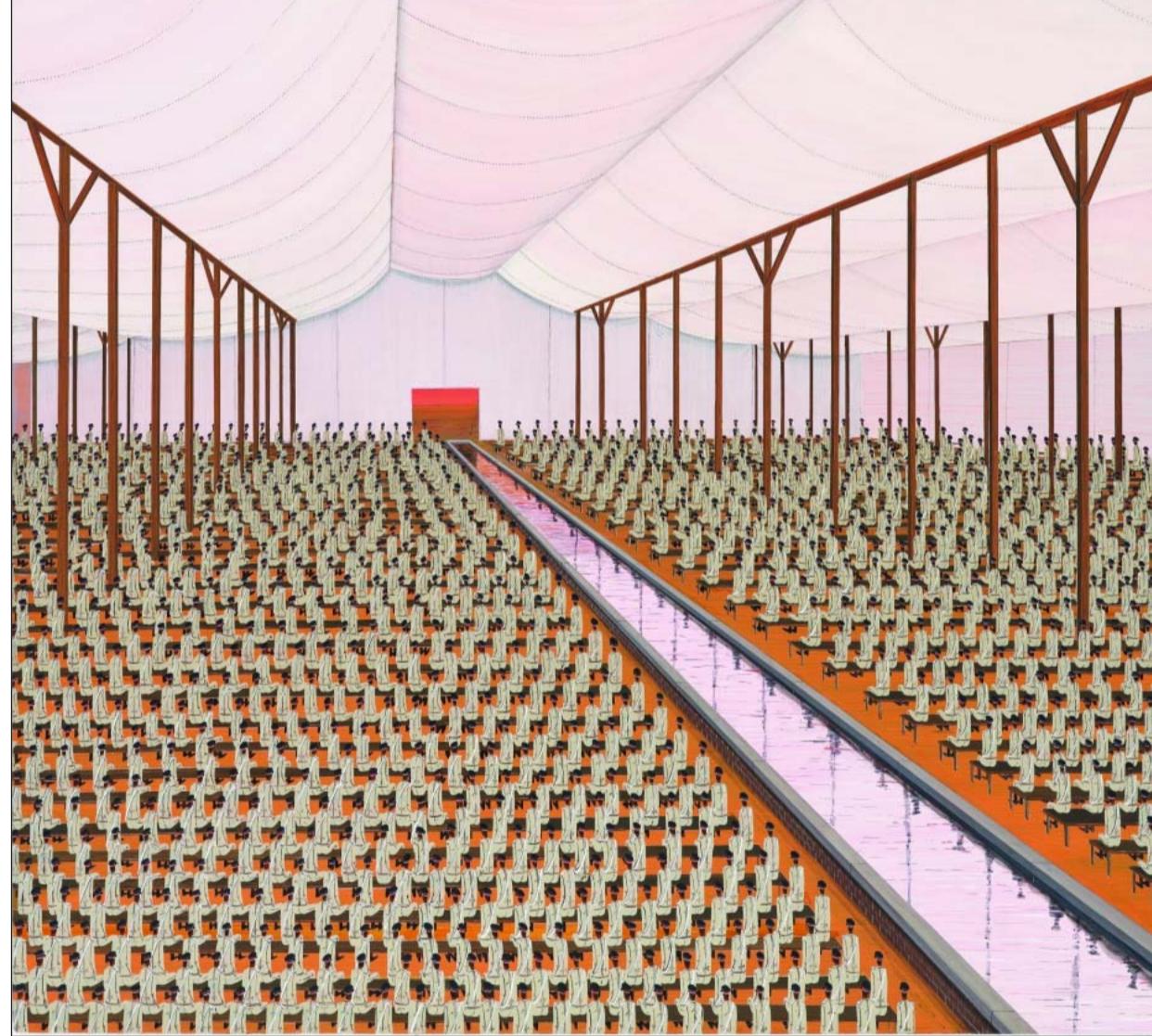
That fearlessness paid off with an artist like Dana Schutz, whose career skyrocketed in the years following the Oppenheimers' purchase of her large painting "Surgery" in 2004. Buys such as this, not to mention those early sculpture purchases, have brought the collection's value to more than \$10 million today.

The Oppenheimers subsequently



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Allison Schulnik's huge canvas, "Skipping Skeletons," exemplifies the strain of the grotesque that runs through the Oppenheimer Collection.



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NERMAN MUSEUM DIRECTOR BRUCE HARTMAN ON THE OPPENHEIMERS

er edge of each image.

Huma Bhabha's untitled sculpture of a prone figure, represented by clay hands protruding from a hunched form covered with black plastic, retains every bit of the power it exerted when it was made in 2005.

A haunting horizontal totem of submission and supplication, the work made a deep impression on Hartman when he saw it in the 2005 "Greater New York" show at MoMA PS1 in New York.

"I thought of the body bag, the burqa," he said at the time. Pakistani-born Bhabha has compared it to a "conceptual golem (that) soaked up my political residue." A selection of her new work is currently on display at Bill Brady/KC; the Nerman's piece will be featured in Bhabha's upcoming one-person show at MoMA PS1.

Hartman and the Oppenheimers have taken the anniversary as an occasion to introduce more than two dozen acquisitions.

A magnificent small painting by Stanley Whitney adds to the collection's colorful holdings in abstraction. Two recent paintings by Ian Davis join a significant number of narrative works evidencing a high degree of finish and detail. His "Reflecting Pool" (2011) is a mysterious account of a gathering of African soldiers, seated in orderly rows inside a huge tent bisected by a reflecting pool.

Similarly compelling is a photo-realist work by recent KCAC alum Chris Biddy that probes the realities of youth in rural Missouri. An oil-on-wood painting by transgender artist Leidy Churchman expands the collection's look at issues of identity and sexuality.

In 2008, Hartman gave "Blink" (1994), a large painting by leading American abstractionist Polly Apfelbaum, to the Oppenheimer Collection in memory of his friend Jim Biffar.

Almost 20 years later, the work, which features cut and applied fabric and dye on a found bedsheet, feels new in an art world where many artists are making work out of found and discarded materials.

Not far away, Hartman has installed an example of this trend: Cordy Ryman's dazzling minimalist revisitation "Window Box," a "painting" composed of nested rectangles made from 2-by-4s, painted white on the exterior and brilliant magenta within.

This is the face of recession-era art, and we can perhaps expect more of it, just as the middle years of the collection reflected the aftermath of 9/11.

"We certainly plan on the Oppenheimer Collection expanding," Marti Oppenheimer said in an interview printed in the catalog. "Acquiring art for JCCC has been a remarkable adventure."

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