

Summer Wheat

JewelHouse

If a man can keep alert and imaginative, an error is a possibility, a chance at something new; to him, wandering and wondering are part of the same process, and he is most mistaken, most in error, whenever he quits exploring.

— William Least Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*

Kansas City–born writer William Least Heat-Moon writes extensively on the subject of travel, deep mapping or extensive explorations beyond the two-dimensional, and the blurred lines between society and nature. He intentionally diverges away from any set pathways to reveal fascinations and phenomenon that take shape by our ever-constant inquisitive nature. This kind of artistic inquiry is imbedded in Summer Wheat’s (American, born 1977) new site-responsive JewelHouse project for the Kansas City Museum.

Reflecting deeply on the permanent structure of the former beaux arts conservatory on the westside grounds of the Kansas City Museum (its most recent iteration as a planetarium in the early 1950s), Wheat’s JewelHouse will transform the space to engage vast and intimate connections between people, nature, and the cosmos. Wheat’s iconic female water bearer, a figure of nourishment and one who honors the history of women’s labor, is the gateway to the color-filled space. Her presence is symbolic of making women the central agents and guides of this space and of their own narratives. The water bearer is surrounded by colorfully abstracted stained-glass representations of snakes comprising the windows surrounding the structure. The snakes’ tongues are marked by a star, their eyes are crystals, and each is attached to prismatic bodies that unfurl as diamond shapes set within the panes of glass. Throughout religious and secular histories the symbol of the snake denotes a shedding of the past, a reference to rebirth, and an emblem for earthly and heavenly connections.

In the interior visitors can roam the intimate space set between a monochromatic black, white, and gold mosaic perimeter on the floor depicting carnal delights, such as cookies, ice cream, cupcakes, and pizza pies, intermixed with insignias of the everyday, such as computers, flowers and plants, and people walking, boating, and cooking. A skyscape above resembles a night sky with stars surrounded by a kaleidoscope of colored jewels. These and all of the glass elements of the JewelHouse are created in collaboration with artist Tyler Kimball of Monarch Glass Studio in Kansas City. The Earth- and cosmos-related features reflect ideas of simultaneously understanding both the concrete, tangible intimacy of nature—gardens, flowers, stones—and the abstract vastness of space depicted by the infinite sky and an otherworldly essence informed by the colors streaming in through the glass. Being inside this immersive space simulates a firmament, or the vaulted celestial sphere referencing Earth and the heavens—an external and internal space that reinforces the nurturing yet questioning and inquisitive premise of the structure.

Together, these colorful, joyful evocations reflect Wheat’s signature artistic practice while presenting a new type of historical project in Wheat’s oeuvre. Like a poem whose structure speaks to its content, and vice versa, the art entities of color, objects, and light speak to (and perhaps for) the historic structure in which they are housed. It is both reflective and transformative. Likewise, the human, animal, and nature references anchor swirling relevant topics of gender and identity, ecology and survival, empowerment and growth invited to meet within an intimate space. Wheat progresses personal experiences and universal life events often depicted in Western art into past, present, and future scenarios where women occupy the foreground and direct the gaze, their reflections, and their energies. Wheat’s JewelHouse, indeed her very wheelhouse, makes space for new dialogue to reenvision critical relevance, to honor the individual and the collective, and to experience the wandering and wondering of Least Heat-Moon’s Midwest.

—Erin Dziedzic, Director of Curatorial Affairs, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri