

## Art review: ‘K@20’ at the Kreeger Museum



The Kreeger Museum is celebrating 20 years in business. A sculptural installation by John Ruppert greets visitors in the museum’s courtyard. (John Ruppert)

By [Michael O'Sullivan](#) March 14

Most special exhibitions allow museumgoers to get in and get out cleanly. Other than looking at the art — accompanied, perhaps, by a side trip to the gift shop — there’s no requirement to think about, let alone explore, the rest of the museum.

The [Kreeger Museum](#)’s latest show is different.

Called “[K@20](#),” the show commemorates the small museum’s 20th anniversary with an exhibition of work by 14 contemporary artists from the Washington area. Each has shown previously at the Kreeger, the former home of collectors David and Carmen Kreeger, which first opened to the public in June 1994. In ways both subtle and obvious, the art on display invites viewers to contemplate not only the rest of the museum’s collection, but also its building, along with the habits, tastes and mission of its founders, who collected Washington art along with works by Picasso, Monet and other modernist masters.

At the entrance to the show, installed mainly on the museum's lower level, you're greeted by three colorful birch-panel paintings by Sam Gilliam. A mainstay of the Washington art scene since the 1960s, the abstract expressionist is represented in the Kreeger's permanent collection, as are fellow "K@20" artists Gene Davis and William Christenberry. Davis's iconic stripe paintings, two of which are on view here, nicely echo the vertical pinstriping of architect Philip Johnson's building, which includes slatlike vertical louvers in several windows. Christenberry, for his part, reminds viewers of the wooded acreage surrounding the Kreeger, contributing several of his quasi-abstract tree drawings.

Other artists reinforce the museum's architecture and its connection with the great outdoors (prominently framed by the Kreeger's many picture windows). Jann Rosen-Queralt, for instance, contributes what guest curator Sarah Tanguy calls a series of "interventions": mixed-media works loosely built around the theme of water that not only play on the Kreeger's reflecting pool, but also more subtly reference the very material that the building is made of. Hidden in the restrooms and library you'll find bowls of what appear to be soap and candy cast from oyster shells, a calcium-rich material that alludes to the building's travertine facade. (Travertine, a form of limestone, contains calcium.)

On the Kreeger's north lawn, which is being transformed into a sculpture garden, Ledelle Moe's monumental recumbent female figures, "Transitions/Displacements," call to mind the Kreeger's "Pomona," a voluptuous female nude from the early 20th century by French sculptor Aristide Maillol that's on the rear patio. It's worth exploring the grounds to discover the works' similarity as well as the contrast between Moe's roughly modernist concrete forms and Maillol's smooth, black-patinated bronze. This is just one way in which the works in "K@20" engage in a kind of visual dialogue with the museum at large.

Moe's presence also is evidence of the Kreeger's investment in local art. In 2008, she received \$20,000 and a solo exhibition as winner of the Kreeger Museum Artist Award. Established in 2004 (yet now suspended), the biennial prize also has been awarded to Jim Sanborn and Kendall Buster, both of whom are also in "K@20."

Here's the most interesting thing about "K@20": For a museum collection that's mostly paintings, there aren't many in this show. Other than Davis's canvases and Gilliam's panels, there's only one other painting, by Tom Green. (As always, Gilliam's works have a sculptural quality.)

But arguably there's one more painting here: Dan Steinhilber's untitled installation of latex balloons, hundreds of which have been scattered across the floor of one gallery. The display is actually the residue of a series of artworks that the mixed-media artist calls "[balloon paintings](#)," in which he wove inflated balloons into an abstract tapestry, stretching from one end to the other of a wooden frame. As the balloons deflate and burst, the work changes.

Steinhilber saved those spent balloons in a trash can (which also is part of the installation). Spread out on the floor of the Kreeger in a manner that evokes both impressionism and the Washington Color School, they're a reminder of the museum's past and its future.

## The Story Behind the Work

To understand the work in “K@20,” it helps to know a bit of the museum’s history. In addition to collecting 19th- and 20th-century paintings, David and Carmen Kreeger were passionate about African art, which is primarily represented by masks and sculptures that they acquired. Some of those pieces have traditionally been shown in a gallery that’s occupied at the moment by several of Jeff Spaulding’s sculptures.

It may not be apparent, but Spaulding, who typically works with such found objects as toys, sports equipment and home furnishings, was inspired to create the work in “K@20” by the reductive forms of African sculpture. Look closely, and it hits you: What curator Sarah Tanguy calls the “pared-down geometry” of the Kreeger’s African artifacts is suddenly all there, in works at once whimsical and elegant that are made out of lampshades, plastic bats and a bike seat.

— **Michael O’Sullivan**



Born and raised in Washington, D.C., Michael O’Sullivan has worked since 1993 at The Washington Post, where he covers art, film and other forms of popular — and unpopular — culture.