Undercurrents
Recent Acquisitions of Contemporary Art

Undercurrents features 30 acquisitions from the past 5 years representing the exciting growth of the KMA’s contemporary collection through gifts and purchases. It includes a diverse selection of figurative works by Katherine Bernhardt, Richard Jolley, John Kelley, Marin Majic, Daniel Pitin, Denise Stewart-Sanabria, and Charles E. Williams; abstractions by Hamlett Dobbins, Michelle Grabner, Howard Hull, Josh Smith, and Jered Sprecher; sculptures by John Himmelfarb and Creighton Michael, atmospheric photographs by David Allee and Robert von Sternberg, and works that test the boundary between representation and abstraction by Nathan Hylden and Antonio Santin. Spotlighting artists from East Tennessee and beyond, Undercurrents attests to the wealth of new ideas invigorating international contemporary art.

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Michelle Grabner (Oshkosh, Wisconsin 1962; lives and works in Oak Park, Illinois)

**Untitled (Four Paintings), 2013**
Flashe paint on panel
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2019 gift of Elin and Michael Nierenberg

Michelle Grabner is known for her diverse studio practice, which includes a variety of media and techniques. The artist’s paintings, for instance, reflect her ongoing interest in building compositions through repeated forms and gestures. These paintings are from a series inspired by Grabner’s memories of domestic textile patterns from her childhood home on Lake Michigan. While nostalgic and intimate, the artist’s gingham-patterned compositions call attention to the ongoing trivialization of women’s domestic roles and labor traditions and offer a wry equivalent to the male-dominated tradition of hard-edged abstract painting.

Flashe is a vinyl paint that allows painters to achieve a smooth, flat opaque surface with no brush marks.
Howard Hull (Welch, West Virginia, 1932; lives and works in Louisville, Tennessee)

*Late Summer*, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2019 gift of Anne and Fred Moffatt

Since the 1960s, East Tennessee-based Howard Hull has produced an extensive body of abstract paintings inspired by his rural environment. *Late Summer* represents Hull’s method of using views of rugged terrain as points of departure for boldly abstracted landscapes featuring vibrant color and undulating contours.

According to Hull, the structure of his paintings “is the result of growing up in Western Virginia. When I got up in the morning and walked outside and looked at my surroundings, I saw mountains in every direction...There seemed to be only a small strip of sky above the tops of them...The various shapes and colors of land formed below that strip of sky are so deeply embedded in my subconscious that they will probably always have an effect upon what I paint.”
Katherine Bernhardt (Clayton, Missouri 1975; lives and works in Brooklyn)

**Nicki Minaj**, 2010

Acrylic on canvas

Knoxville Museum of Art, 2019 gift of Elin and Michael Nierenberg

*Nicki Minaj* stems from the prominent New York painter Katherine Bernhardt’s celebrity-based series in which models and other popular culture icons appear immortalized in intentionally spontaneous brushwork and flashy colors on large canvases. As the artist explains, “I made a whole series of paintings of Nicki Minaj. They are based on video stills. With her crazy hair and the color of her lipstick, the angles, the tone—it was the perfect thing to paint basically.” She depicts the performer as a universal icon of feminine allure. More recently, Bernhardt has moved on to a succession of brief series featuring Pop Art motifs such as fast food and sports paraphernalia. Her restless shifting of subject matter is a direct reflection of contemporary online culture’s short-lived obsession with the latest trends.
Josh Smith (Okinawa, Japan 1976; lives and works in Knoxville and New York)

*Untitled*, 2010
Oil on canvas
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2019 gift of Elin and Michael Nierenberg

*Untitled*, 2010
Oil on canvas
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2019 gift of Elin and Michael Nierenberg

Contemporary painter Josh Smith challenges notions of authorship, authenticity, originality, and an artist’s “signature style.” He often works in series featuring specific motifs—fish, tropical sunsets, skeletons, The Grim Reaper—painted on large scale using garish color combinations and spontaneous brushwork that intentionally resists traditional expectations of artistic “finish.” Perhaps Smith’s best known and most frequent motif is his own name, which acts both as an image and as a signifier of his identity. In these two untitled works, however, the artist uses the impression of his hand as a timeless form of artistic identity and self-reference.
Nathan Hylden (Fergus Falls, Minnesota 1978; lives and works in Los Angeles)

*Untitled*, 2014
Acrylic on aluminum
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2019 gift of Elin and Michael Nierenberg

Since 2014, Nathan Hylden has explored the subject of his own Digital Age studio as an intriguing and elusive subject for expansive compositions that blend photography, printmaking, painting, and sculpture. He often works in series, and begins by taking photographs of seemingly random reflections, and ghostly shadows cast by studio equipment rather than depicting the objects themselves. Masking-taped right angles often appear, suggesting the spot where an artwork once hung or will hang. After adjusting his photographic imagery on a computer, the artist silk-screens it onto aluminum panels at human scale using dark pigments. Shifting angles present the notion of each panel in the series as a frame in a film sequence. However, bold passages of white acrylic paint create rich surface textures and call attention to the reality of each panel as a material object. In this manner, Hylden presents the artist’s inner sanctum as an enigmatic space in which infinite possibilities and contradictions unfold moment by moment.
Jered Sprecher (Lincoln Nebraska 1976; lives and works in Knoxville)

Technology of Dirt, 2018
Oil on linen
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2020 bequest of Daniel F. McGehee

Jered Sprecher is among a generation of contemporary painters exploring anew the creative territory between figuration and abstraction. He describes himself as a “hunter and gatherer” who draws inspiration from an eclectic array of image sources including graffiti, architecture, cut gemstones, family photographs, and ancient frescoes. Having gathered his source materials, Sprecher constructs each painting through a combination of digital tools and virtuoso brushwork. Technology of Dirt stems from a current body of work concerning window views and reflections seen in public garden centers.
Marin Majic (Frankfurt am Main, Germany 1979; lives and works in Berlin)

Foyer, 2010
Oil on canvas
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2018 gift of Stephen Hanson

Croatian painter Marin Majic combines familiar objects in strange imaginary scenarios intended to provoke new narrative possibilities. His figurative subjects are rendered using a meticulous painting technique that recalls the smooth finish and intricate detail associated with photography. In Foyer, Majic seamlessly blends imagery pulled from various sectors of Croatian daily life to construct an enigmatic scene laced with references to consumer culture, nightlife, and the Cold War era.
Trained as an urban planner, David S. Allee brings an eye for design to his studio practice as a contemporary photographer. “My interests haven’t changed much since becoming an artist... structures, the built environment, that’s what I’m still drawn to, but in a less tangible and more abstract way.” The artist focuses his lens on New York locations, both urban and suburban, photographed at night illuminated by intense artificial lighting. The resulting compositions present ordinary settings as otherworldly arenas of dramatic light and shadow.
Antonio Santin (Madrid 1978; lives and works in Brooklyn)

Cajón Desastre, 2018
Oil on canvas

Knoxville Museum of Art, 2021 gift of Sherry and Joel Mallin

In labor-intensive paintings, Antonio Santin uses rugs and their traditional patterns as avenues for exploring the territory between abstraction and representation. Resembling spontaneous accumulations of pigment at close range, each work also appears at arm’s length as a vivid overhead view of a rug adorning the floor of an unseen interior environment. His paintings begin as studies of actual rugs from which the artist makes adjustments designed to infuse the composition with new narrative possibilities, most notably in his inclusion of oblong masses that suggest enfolded human figures. This painting’s title, which literally translates as “disaster drawer,” also reflects the artist’s interest in word play in its literal proximity to a “tailor’s drawer” containing masses of tangled thread.
Creighton Michael (Knoxville 1949; lives and works in New York)

**KOAN 288**, 1988
Plywood, tin, screen and acrylic
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2018 gift of Jerry H. Labowitz

Creighton Michael blends analog and digital techniques resulting in sculptures, paintings, and drawings endowed with unexpected qualities. In **KOAN 288**, for instance, he presents an object whose open, linear structure possesses qualities more often associated with drawing than sculpture. **KOAN 288** is also designed to occupy an atypical display space—the ceiling. The title is taken from Zen Buddhism concept of presenting an article that appears outside the norm for the purpose of sparking mediation.
Hamlett Dobbins (Knoxville 1970; lives and works in Memphis)

Untitled (for I.V./C.B.), 2016
Acrylic on canvas
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2018 gift of the artist and David Lusk Gallery, Memphis

Hamlett Dobbins’ inventive abstract paintings are often based on memories of specific people from his personal life. He explores subtle variations in edge, color, pattern, density, and texture, and spatial relationships and their ability to produce certain emotional responses. After manipulating both drawn and photographic imagery on his computer, Dobbins then transfers the digital sketch onto the canvas grid by grid.
John Himmelfarb (Chicago 1946; lives and works in Chicago)

Garcia Madero, 2010
Ink on Japan paper
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2019 gift of John Himmelfarb

John Himmelfarb specializes in idiosyncratic modernist works rendered in a wide variety of media and techniques. Like Red Grooms, Himmelfarb is deeply influenced by Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, and is known for creating playful works informed by his interest in a diverse range of topics including language, industrialization, and urban sprawl. Also like such artists as Grooms and Picasso, he is a master technician who goes to great lengths to make objects that appear spontaneous and impulsive.
Trucks appear frequently in the work of Chicago-based veteran artist John Himmelfarb. Starting out as an abstract doodle, truck imagery soon began to appear in his paintings, drawings, prints, and eventually in cast metal sculptures such as Delegate, some of which are as much as 60 inches high. As Himmelfarb explains, “The trucks are always anthropomorphic. Their titles sometimes indicate this. “Delegate” is both a noun, suggesting that this vehicle is a representative, and a transitive verb, demanding or reminding someone of an important executive technique. Much as sculpture expects to be viewed from many points, the title and form of Delegate suggest two very different ways of viewing and interpretation.”
Charles E. Williams (Georgetown, South Carolina 1984; lives and works in Greensboro, North Carolina)

Nightstick - Harlem, July 1964, 2016
Oil on watercolor paper
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2018 gift of the artist

Charles Williams is known for socially-charged paintings in which he recontextualizes fragments of civil rights imagery using a range of brushed passages. Nightstick - Harlem, July 1964 stems from a 2016 series “Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Can See” that is inspired by Francisco Goya’s Disasters of War prints, the civil rights movement, and police brutality in America. Williams uses archived photographic images as starting points, often selecting those with flashbulb effects and dramatic action. He combines in a collage-like approach the original photographic imagery with layers of expressively brushed, smudged, and smeared paint. In the making of this work, Williams appropriated an archival press photograph taken July 20, 1964 near Harlem’s Apollo Theater.
Daniel Pitin (Prague, Czechoslovakia 1977; lives and works in Prague)

Waiting, 2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 15 7/10 x 23 3/5 inches
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2018 gift of Stephen Hanson

Contemporary painter Daniel Pitin uses film footage from the Communist period of his youth and stills from popular television series of the 1970s to construct fictional settings in which anonymous characters gather in ways that suggest an unfolding drama of unknown significance. As seen in Waiting, his signature painting method blends hard-edged imagery with loose, gestural passages to create murky narrative scenes that appear pulled from memory.
Robert von Sternberg (Glendale, California 1939; lives and works in Malibu)

**Arlanda Airport, Stockholm**, 2010
Archival inkjet print
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2017 gift of the artist

**Rockview Trailer Park**, 2013
Archival inkjet print
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2017 gift of the artist

In his color photographs, veteran artist Robert von Sternberg examines Southern California’s suburban sprawl and other effects of the postwar population explosion. Despite this focus, his images are generally devoid of any traces of human activity. Instead, he photographs public places and roadside attractions after hours when no trace of human life is visible. Whether the incandescent glow of a gas station or shimmering strands of string lights against the night sky, the interplay of natural and artificial light remains central to his work.
Julius Weiland (Lübeck, Germany 1971; lives and works in Berlin)

*Untitled*, 2009
Blown and hot worked glass
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2020 gift of Mary Hale Corkran

Julius Weiland represents a new generation of contemporary artists bringing new ideas to the possibilities of glass as a sculptural material. His process-oriented approach involves fusing tubular elements into clustered forms with little or no color in order to emphasize their internal structures rather than the more obvious surface qualities of his chosen material.
René Roubícek (Prague 1922-2018 Prague)

**Bubble Form, 1976**

Blown and hot worked glass
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2020 gift from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. M. Blair Corkran

René Roubícek was a central figure in the Czech glass scene and known for his spontaneous and expressive blown works. Deeply inspired by nature, the artist ignored traditional vessel shapes in favor of sculpting glass in ways that echoed the appearance of liquid substances or plant life. Roubícek was esteemed for his ability to create technically difficult forms that appear effortless. He was also a pioneer of using glass as a material for expansive installations as in his *Bohemian Glass Forest* (1967) for the Czech Pavilion at the ‘67 Montreal World’s Fair, which featured tendrils of hot glass wrapped around tall metal rods to create soaring tree-like structures.
Richard Jolley (Wichita, Kansas 1952; lives and works in Knoxville)

**Woman with Garland, 1993**
Monoprint on Rives BFK paper
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2019 gift of Ellen and John Buchanan

The theme of young women adorned with elaborate floral garlands is one that has appeared in art since ancient times. Richard Jolley used it as the basis of a series of his signature glass sculptures during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although best known for his work in glass, Jolley explores other media as an integral part of his studio practice. Works on paper, such as this unique print, enable him to focus on line and elements of two-dimensional design in a way that complements his sculptural work.

A monumental example of Jolley’s sculpture can be seen in *Cycle of Life*, which is permanently installed in the KMA’s Bailey Hall (ground floor).
Denise Stewart-Sanabria (Worcester, Massachusetts 1956; lives and works in Knoxville)

18th Century French Pastoral Toile Culture Shock, 2016
Oil on canvas
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2017 purchase with funds provided by anonymous friends and Stuart Worden

Denise Stewart-Sanabria is perhaps best known for her meticulous and often provocative paintings of contemporary food items. While honoring centuries-old still life painting traditions, she creates scenes in which objects are moved about haphazardly as if the inhabitants departed only minutes before the painting’s completion. This work is part of a series in which the artist examines contemporary cultural obsessions and deceptions, and contrasts them with idealized imagery from the past. She is concerned with ways in which certain objects reflect social patterns and values of a particular time and place (her inclusion of the Moon Pie, for instance, is a reference to East Tennessee).
John Kelley (Knoxville 1952; lives and works in New York and Knoxville)

*Bacchus with Grapes*, 1987
Oil on canvas
Knoxville Museum of Art, 2020 bequest of Daniel F. McGehee

John Kelley’s work, like that of French neoclassical masters Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1781-1867), is heavily inspired by themes from antiquity. Using smooth, highly controlled brushwork, Kelley frequently depicts key figures from Greek and Roman mythology, as in this image of *Bacchus*, the Roman god of agriculture, wine, relaxation, and fertility.