

Chester Arnold

The Press Democrat

Museum of Sonoma County offers tour of landscape exhibit online

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Chester Arnold's Mending Wall on exhibit at the Museum of Sonoma County's Landscape: Art to Activism. (Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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The Museum of Sonoma County in downtown Santa Rosa, like so many public venues closed by the by the shelter-in-place order during the coronavirus crisis, now stands empty. But you still can get a look inside at its newest exhibit. In response to the closure, Jeff Nathanson, the museum's executive director and curator of the current exhibit, "Landscape: Awe to Activism," hosted an 11-minute recorded video tour of the show, paired with a roughly 2-minute video scan of the artwork, set to music. Both are available for free at museumsc.org/landscape. Watching it is like taking a walk through the show with a knowledgeable, personable guide.

Nathanson also will talk about the exhibit in a live Q&A and "virtual cocktail hour" from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. April 18 via the Zoom conferencing service. Register in advance at museumsc.org.

When most people think of landscape paintings, pretty scenery comes to mind. But as Nathanson explained in the video and expounded more thoroughly during an interview before the museum closed last month, the artwork also has plenty to say about the impact of civilization on the planet.

"The concept for the exhibition started with the museum's desire to share some outstanding selections from our permanent collection with the public," Nathanson said. "We have these phenomenal 19th-century landscapes. For the more modern and contemporary works, we borrowed from other museums as well as private collections."

As Nathanson planned the exhibit, he began to broaden its scope.

"In researching my survey of landscape art, I came to the realization that there is this range of approaches — from artists who are awe-inspired by nature and want to represent their love and appreciation of nature through landscape art to artists, especially in this day and age, who are seriously concerned about climate change and environmental impact, so their art reflects that," he said.

He discovered that artists had long shown concern for the environment, not only recently.

"So that helped shape my approach to curating this exhibition, which led to the theme of awe to activism," Nathanson said.

One of the earliest paintings viewers will encounter on the video tour is “Korbel Flat Near Guerneville” by San Francisco painter Ransome Gillet Holdredge, from the 1870s.

“Because of his dismay with the lumber industry and the cutting down of redwoods, we have this pretty incredible painting of Korbel Flat and what was left after the loggers got done there,” Nathanson explains in the video. From there, the tour moves on to art that deals with such issues as borders, land ownership and displacement of indigenous cultures.

Sonoma artist Chester Arnold chose the controversial wall along the Mexican border as the subject for a series of paintings, including “Mending Wall” from 2018. It’s not the only work in the show on that topic. Berkeley photographer Richard Misrach’s “Wall, Tierra Del Sol, California, 2014” documents a portion of the existing barrier as part of a series the artist began in 2004, long before President Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign and election made the border a political flashpoint.

The show also features work by Philadelphia painter and photographer Diane Burko, who travels the globe to document melting glaciers and shrinking coral reefs and give lectures on her findings.

“I really like what has happened in the curating of this show, which is we are looking at the way the border wall and other human interventions affect the landscape,” Nathanson said during his interview in March.

Photographer and installation artist Mercedes Dorame, a member of the Gabrielino Tongva Indians of California, stages her own symbolic interventions, conducting ritual ceremonies at sites of ancestral significance in the Los Angeles area and documenting them in photographs.

“She leaves her marks on the land where her performance has taken place, and she photographs where she has been,” Nathanson explained. For example, one photo shows spices and red string Dorame left on the rocks.

A classic example of an art installation remembered for its temporary impact on the landscape and the lasting impression it left in photos and documentation is Christo’s “Running Fence” project in Sonoma and Marin counties in the early ’70s, with nylon fabric stretching more than 20 miles across the terrain to Bodega Bay.

It's represented in this exhibit with a photograph by Wolfgang Volz of the completed fence from the Sonoma State University collection. And from the Museum of Sonoma County's Christo collection, donated two decades ago by Tom Golden, there's a collage of preliminary sketches by Christo for the project. Of course, any comprehensive survey of landscape art would be incomplete without photographs by San Francisco legend Ansel Adams, and this show includes two of his silver gelatin prints: "The Teton Range and the Snake River," from 1942 and "Winter Sunrise, from Lone Pine" from 1944.

Sonoma County artists are well represented in the show, including "Gravitas," a new oil painting of a distant horizon dominated by Monterey cypress branch hanging in the foreground, created by Brooks Anderson of Santa Rosa for this exhibit. There's also a section devoted to the works of the famed Sonoma County Four: William Paul Morehouse, Tony King, Bill Wheeler and Jack Stuppin.

"The four artists started in the early 1990s, painting together doing plein air on location, and they decided in 1992 to travel across the U.S. from California to New York, painting in locations all across the country," Nathanson said. The exhibit includes a more recent solo effort by each of the artists, as well as a quartet of paintings of Niagra Falls from their cross-country sojourn, one by each of them.

"They painted the same scene, but in looking at these paintings you just get a very striking sense of their stylistic differences," Nathanson said. Adam Wolpert, co-founder of the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center and a close associate of the Sonoma Four, also is represented in the show. "Adam had a relationship with the members of the Sonoma Four," Nathanson said. "Although he wasn't an official member, he did exhibit with the members of that group."

Painting and photography aren't the only artistic media represented in the exhibit. One of the more unusual entries is from Naomie Kremer of Berkeley. "These scenes of hers, which she refers to as hybrid, are a combination of paint and video projections," Nathanson said. "It's really worth just standing and looking at them for a moment. They're illuminated, and they have this really interesting spiritual glow to them. The movement is quite extraordinary. It's as if they're alive."

Far from being some outdated style from the distant past, landscape art continues to grow and change, reflecting the complex relationship between nature and the human race, Nathanson said.

The show, which opened in February and was scheduled to run until mid-July, is expected to resume after the stay-home order is lifted, so you if you're intrigued by the video tour, you could get a chance to follow up in person.

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<https://www.pressdemocrat.com/entertainment/10821854-181/window-on-the-world-museum?sba=AAS&artslide=2>