

From Texas to the World

Common Ground at UT Dallas and the Dallas Museum of Art

In April 2023, The University of Texas at Dallas and the Dallas Museum of Art announced a landmark multi-year partnership to celebrate the opening of the Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum. Phase 1 of the O'Donnell Athenaeum, designed by Morphosis Architects, includes not only the Crow Museum of Asian Art as its resident museum, but also two galleries that will display significant works of art on long-term loan from the Dallas Museum of Art, in exhibitions curated by UT Dallas faculty members and guest curators.

The inaugural exhibition in this series is From Texas to the World: Common Ground at UT Dallas and the Dallas Museum of Art, curated by Dr. Michael Thomas, who is Director of the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, Richard R. Brettell Distinguished University Chair and Professor of Arts, Humanities, and Technology. From Texas to the World focuses on artworks which came to the DMA's collection through the generosity and vision of Eugene and Margaret McDermott, Cecil and Ida Green, Erik Jonsson, Rick Brettell, and Bonnie Pitman, all of whom have contributed to UT Dallas as founders and members of the academic community.

Athenaeum Review interviewed Dr. Thomas about From Texas to the World. This is an edited excerpt of the conversation; the full interview can be heard on the Athenaeum Review podcast.

Athenaeum Review: Could you speak about how this show came together?

Michael Thomas: When I first arrived here in 2019, Rick Brettell was still alive, and we already had the research center at the DMA (which we still have). We had just received the news that UTD had been given the spectacular Crow Museum, which is really one of the great collections of Asian art, with a lot of variety, and a really good sampling across Asian culture. I also wanted the Athenaeum to have exhibitions outside of Asian art. So I started a conversation, and I found out that the DMA had an interest in expanding north, and had the idea of a footprint in the northern suburbs of Dallas.

So we came up with this idea, and it took about four years—much of it was interrupted by the pandemic, but we ended up with an agreement that was signed just barely a year ago between Agustín Arteaga, director of the DMA, and President Benson, here at UT Dallas. The new Athenaeum has two distinct exhibition spaces: the main body of the museum is all for the Crow Museum, and then there is what we affectionately call the bar gallery, which is rectangular. It looks like a bar that juts out into the space. Two galleries there are now dedicated to this UTD-DMA partnership.

I've taken on the role of managing curator of this space, so it's my job to try to find faculty members who are interested in looking to the DMA's collection and curating exhibits, and this is going to be an annual rotation. The first rotation fell on me, and we didn't have a lot of time to do it. In talking with the President and some other members of the UTD community, there was some desire to try to highlight connections between the Dallas Museum of Art and UT Dallas. All three of the university's founding families, the Jonssons, the Greens and McDermotts, played a part in both institutions, and our other big connections were faculty members, namely Rick Brettell who was director of the DMA, and then came here to UT Dallas and was the founding director of the O'Donnell Institute, and Bonnie Pitman, who was also director of the DMA and was a scholar-in-residence here and part of the O'Donnell Institute family, and is now affiliated with the Center for Brain Health at UT Dallas as well.

We ended up looking specifically at pieces that were tied to these people that had ended up in the DMA's collection. The McDermotts and the Greens are responsible for an amazing amount—they both have funds that had been used for purchases over the years, and the McDermotts actually gave a lot of important pieces from their private collection to the DMA, and obviously acquisitions happened under the directorships of both Rick Brettell and Bonnie Pitman.

One of the things I noticed as I was going through the collection, is that there were a lot of Texas artists. Rick Brettell became a champion of regional artists, and specifically Texas artists, and one of his last projects was the planned Museum of Texas Art, which would have been in the old Dallas Museum of Fine Arts space in Fair Park. Rick really looked at a lot of Texas artists—the DMA already collected Texas artists, but he really made it a priority, and Bonnie followed suit.

The title of the exhibit is *From Texas to the World*, and the galleries are split evenly between the “Texas gallery,” largely pieces that came in during the directorships of Rick Brettell and Bonnie Pitman, and what we call the “global gallery,” the “to the world” part. The funds of the McDermotts and Greens especially went to a wide variety of pieces. We have a Greek vase that came from the Greens, and the Braque that came from the McDermotts, but we also have pieces from Veracruz culture, Olmec, indigenous African art, indigenous Indonesian art, so we have this global component. So that gallery is dedicated to this array of global pieces that go all the way from ancient Greece and ancient Egypt into the contemporary world.

AR: The kind of trajectory *from Texas to the world* reminded me that, if I’m not mistaken, Margaret McDermott was the only one of these individuals who was raised in Dallas—all of the founders and directors came here as a place they could make their mark, which they did. It’s a kind of testimony that this is a place where new people can come in and have a big impact.

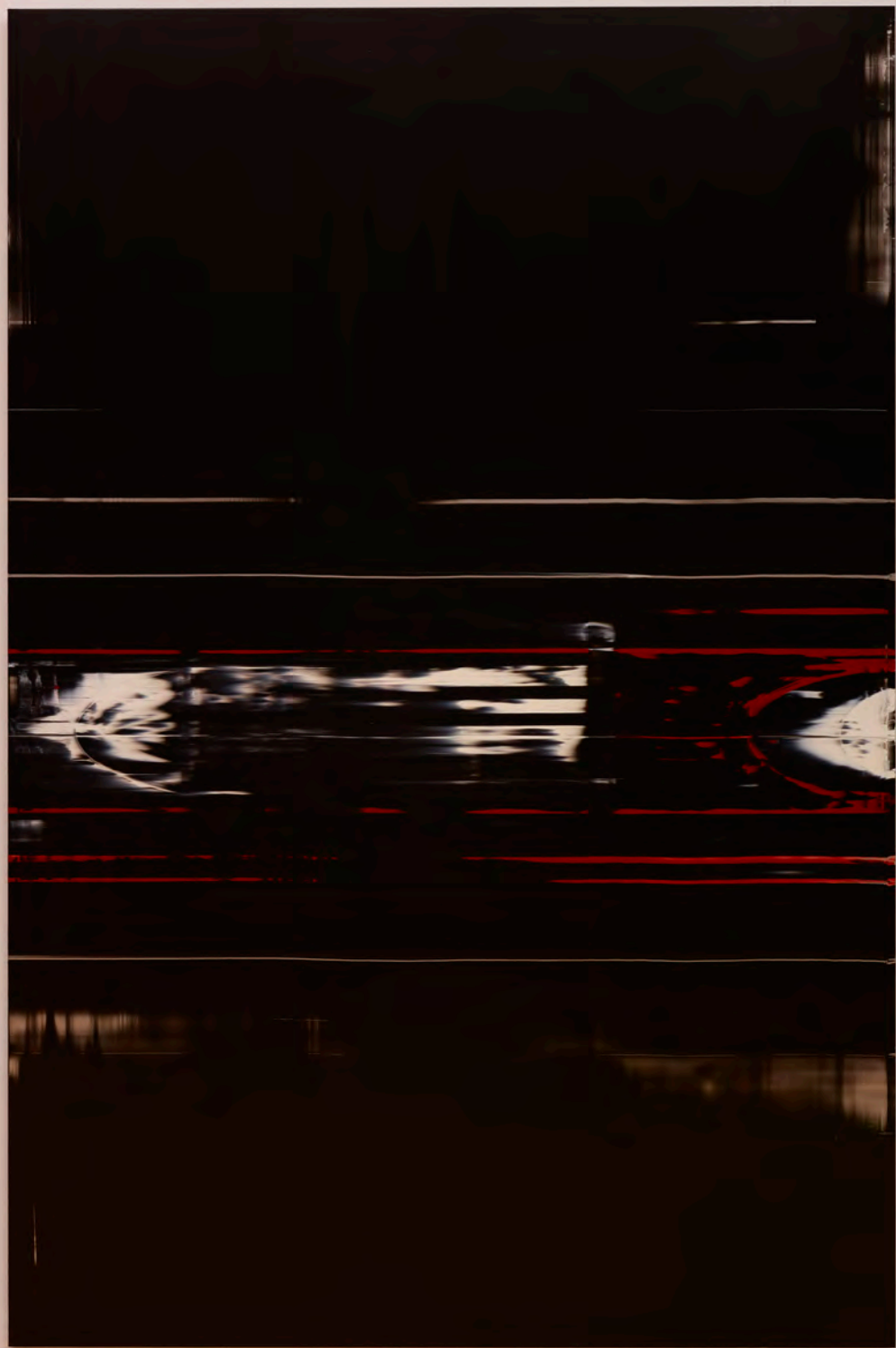
MT: Yes, and the other reason along those lines is that *From Texas to the World* was representative of UT Dallas. We have roots in this idea that UT Dallas was a technological center and initiator for North Texas, but now we have one of the most diverse and global student bodies of any university in Texas, if not the most, and so in a way, I felt that theme mirrored who we are.

From Texas to the World: Common Ground at UT Dallas and the Dallas Museum of Art is on view at the Edith and Peter O’Donnell Jr. Athenaeum at UT Dallas, beginning in fall 2024.

TOP: Roger Winter, *El Paso*, 1983, oil on canvas
Dallas Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. S. Roger Horchow, 1990.184
© Roger Winter

BOTTOM: Billy Hassell, *Blue Jay Diving*, 1986, oil on canvas
Dallas Museum of Art, anonymous gift, 1992.315
© Billy Hassell





John Pomara, *Deadline No. 5*, 2001, oil enamel on aluminum
Dallas Museum of Art, Texas Artists Fund, 2001.311
© 2001 John Pomara



Door, 19th–20th century, wood, metal, and fiber. Côte d'Ivoire, Baule peoples
Dallas Museum of Art, The Gustave and Franyo Schindler Collection of African Sculpture, Gift of the
McDermott Foundation in honor of Eugene McDermott, 1974.SC.25



Panel (Kirekat), ca. 1930, Wood, pigment. Indonesia, Siberut Island, Mentawai peoples
Dallas Museum of Art, The Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund, Inc., 2017.38.1.McD



Seated female figures (pair), 1200–400 BCE, ceramic, slip, and paint. Mexican, Puebla, Las Bocas, Olmec
Dallas Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene McDermott, the McDermott Foundation, and Mr. and Mrs. Algur H. Meadows and the Meadows Foundation, Incorporated, 1973.70.1–2