

# kci: past and future

A public forum will examine the airport's design origins and its fate. | D4



**MUSIC** | A buoyant celebration

# ODE TO A 'GLORIOUS' SEASON

Kansas City Symphony will close its first Kauffman Center series with Beethoven's Ninth, in all its glory.



Michael Stern leads the Kansas City Symphony in a rehearsal last week. The orchestra winds up its first Helzberg Hall season next weekend.

**PATRICK NEAS**



THE CLASSICAL BEAT

Perhaps even more than his Symphony No. 5, Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 has become the iconic work of classical music. Its final choral movement, the "Ode to Joy," is an ecstatic hymn to universal brotherhood that always leaves audiences on, well, cloud nine.

Michael Stern could have chosen no better work to end the Kansas City Symphony's triumphant first season in the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts than Beethoven's final symphonic masterpiece.

The Symphony, with the Kansas City Symphony Chorus, will perform Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 next weekend. Friday and Saturday's performances are at 8 p.m., and Sunday's is at 2 p.m. at Helzberg Hall.

Also on the program are "Fratres" by Arvo Pärt and "Mysterious Mountain" by Alan Hovhaness. The concerts are sold out, but it is possible to be put on a waiting list for tickets.

When asked to describe Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, Charles Bruffy, director of the Kansas City Symphony Chorus, said, "It's loud and high."

"I've never heard it live or sung it or conducted it," he said. "It's been a nice personal adventure to investigate the intricacies that lie beneath the surface of loud and high. For example, there is an unrecognized playfulness that occurs probably in the middle of the "Ode to Joy" where there is a 6/8 lilt that is rather fuguelike and has the orchestra dancing all over the place. The feeling of the 6/8 offers a real buoyancy and celebration."

Beethoven's Ninth is certainly associated with celebrations. In

SEE NEAS | D3

FRED BLOCHER | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

**FINE ART**

# Nerman shows the power of ceramics

Three artists present images past and present, all with a haunted air.

By ALICE THORSON  
The Kansas City Star

"I just want to say one word to you. Just one word. Are you listening? Plastics."

Ceramics artist Matthias Merkel Hess wasn't born yet when Mr. McGuire uttered those famous words to young

Dustin Hoffman's character in "The Graduate," circa 1967.

Hess, a native of Iowa now based in Los Angeles, where he earned a master of fine arts at UCLA two years ago, grew up in a world where McGuire's prediction of "a great future in plastics" had come true.

Ordinary household items once made from metal or ceramics — buckets and gas cans, laundry hampers and

milk crates — all have been remade in plastic.

In "SUM," an exhibit of room-sized ceramics installations by three artists at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Hess addresses this wholesale change, returning all those plastic wares to their ceramics origins. His area of the exhibit is "Bucketry II."

"The root of this is me looking at things like crocks," he

said in a recent interview at the museum, where his slip cast porcelain and press-molded versions of plastic housewares form a colorful array on the gallery floor. "The 5-gallon bucket is the equivalent of the crock. I started as a potter and thought about, 'What is the place of ceramics today?' Plastic changed things."

SEE NERMAN | D2



E.G. SCHEMPF | NERMAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

"Bucketry II," an installation by Los Angeles-based Matthias Merkel Hess at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, features ceramic versions of mass-produced plastic containers.

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E.G. SCHEMPF | NERMAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Chicago artist William J. O'Brien's installation features dozens of funky ceramic objects and odd bundled items arranged on an X-shaped table.

## NERMAN: Glazes, textures set artists apart

### FROM D1

Hess went on eBay and bought old plastic gas cans and began collecting vintage Rubbermaid laundry baskets with the classic tulip-form pattern. He looked for older milk crates "that had more plastic in them."

"I was looking at design history," Hess said. "Someone took a lot of care with the industrial design."

Hess echoes that care in his treatment and glazing of old forms and occasionally works his own variations on classic designs. One is a triangular milk crate; another is a "double-tall" 5-gallon bucket. "I wanted to make it surreal," he said.

In Hess' remaking, glazing and texture confer individual personalities on formerly mass-produced items, elevating them from their quotidian functions into singular objects.

The 40 or so containers gathered in his Nerman installation seem to gabble and converse about their past lives and unlikely rebirth as artworks in a museum. Their display is not organized in any particular way, as if the artist, in a last loop to ceramics, had just removed the pieces from the kiln and set them out.

### William J. O'Brien

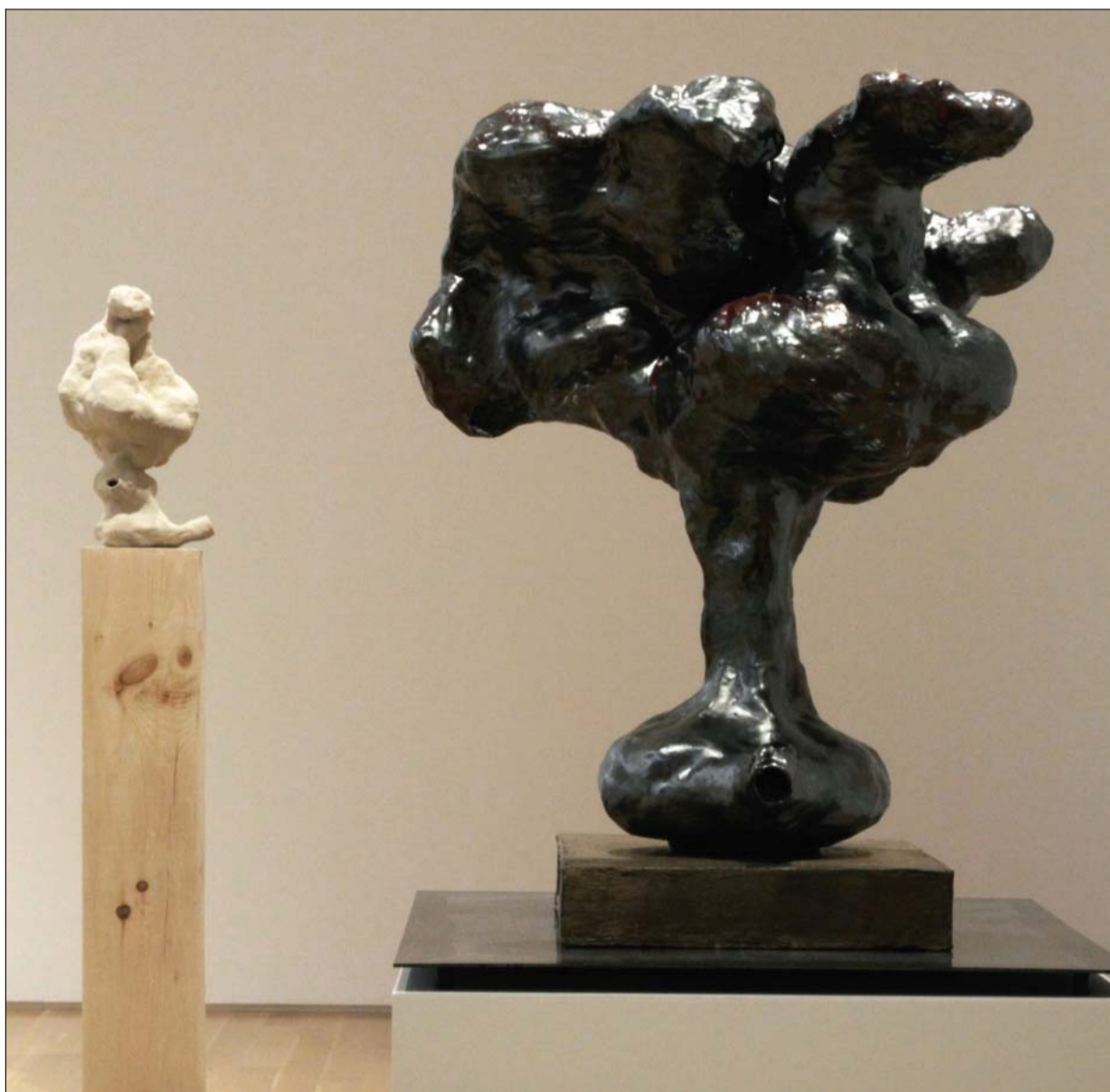
A huge, white X-shaped table supports a rummage sale assortment of glitzy, funky, surreal and primitive objects in William J. O'Brien's "(Untitled) X."

O'Brien teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but his approach to ceramics is anything but academic. There is an implicit rejection of the standard container in his unruly sculptural creations, which find inspiration in everything from face jugs to modernist sculpture, Picasso and African art.

The display has several odd, bundled items incorporating cloth and string that speak to the artist's background in fiber as well as ceramics. Scattered among the many evocations of busts and heads, they read as mummies; in fact, they represent O'Brien's concession to a recycling ethic, containing items that would otherwise end up in the trash.

The display includes occasional hard-edged objects in the tradition of early modernist geometric abstraction, but O'Brien often softens and adorns them with colorful patterns and obsessive wrappings of string. The prevailing vocabulary of this assortment is one of expression and gesture that confers an animist spirit on the whole. As O'Brien said in a recent interview, "A lot of the work is about ritual."

But it's also clearly about a weird insistence on liberation from proper ceramics behavior. Anything goes when he sets out to create a work. The forms and their varied embellishments — bobbles and faces, pricks and perforations, glitter, glazes and yarn — seem to emerge from a state of trance, un-



ART MILLER | NERMAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

When she made "Air Time" (right), New York artist Arlene Shechet said she was seeking something "gorgeous, creepy and uncomfortable." On the left, "Borrowed from Ghosts" declares a kinship with the paleolithic Venus of Willendorf.



E.G. SCHEMPF | NERMAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Arlene Shechet's "So and So and So and So and On and On" (2010), an homage to painter Philip Guston, appears in the center of this installation view of her work in the "SUM" exhibition.

censored by the conscious mind.

In an interview in conjunction with a show last year at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, O'Brien said that what he makes is influenced by what's

going on in his life at the time.

In a way, each object — visceral, immediate, at times, needy — exists as a talisman of a lived moment, sweet or sad, frustrating or fulfilling.

### ON EXHIBIT

"SUM: Matthias Merkel Hess, William J. O'Brien and Arlene Shechet" is at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park through Sept. 2. The exhibit is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. The Nerman is closed on Mondays. Admission is free.

For more information, go to 913-469-3000 or [nermanmuseum.org](http://nermanmuseum.org).

"One and Only" evokes a charred figure — melted, lava-like and without a head — like an icon uncovered from a natural disaster.

Shechet said she was thinking about flesh when she created "So and So and So and So and On and On," a pair of abstracted pink heads set atop stacks of glazed kiln bricks. She conceived the work as an homage to Philip Guston, transforming his painterly evocations of existential crises into totemic monads of petrified interiority.

Shechet employed the traditional coil method in the creation of "Better Than Black," but she deliberately kept the construction loose to allow views into and through the sculpture and to convey a sense of precariousness. And the body references don't stop — the animated, roiling coils evoke masses of viscera.

The saggy, folding mass of "Is and Is Not" suggests a Ken Price blob that has lost the battle with gravity or a human organ snipped from its bodily moorings. Richly glazed in an extraordinary shade of powdery blue, the form rests on a column of kiln bricks, deliberately chosen to contribute an element of geometric structure to the whole.

"Whatever you put it on becomes part of the object," Shechet said. She doesn't conceive of separate bases for her sculptures; nor does she think of glazing as embellishment.

In "Reclining Incline," Shechet used 10 glazes, which glisten and pool in the crevices of a form that suggests an undulating figural landscape.

"The glaze is fired into the form," she said. "The color is oozing from the inside out."

The power of Shechet's sculptures rests on the uncanny kinship she establishes between flesh and mud. Their tactile, visceral character speaks directly to and of the body — the artist's and the viewer's.

"It's something more than you can think of," she said. "I don't want to make an idea."

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### Arlene Shechet

As it turns out, all three of the installations in "SUM" are haunted. The ghosts of Ken Price, Philip Guston, Louise Bourgeois and the Venus of Willendorf hover about New York-based Arlene Shechet's quasi figural clay sculptures.

Each piece is more sensuous and seductive than the last. Yet with their gestural massings, hollowed deflations and fleshy protuberances and orifices, they are not beautiful in the conventional sense, nor does the artist want them to be.

"I'm more interested in some edge," Shechet said. "I want to embrace, talk about, the human condition."

Dominated by a gnarly fissured mass that rises like a fist or cloud from a low, pointy-ended vessel, the magnificent, metallic-glazed "Air Time" is a triumphal exhalation, a tribute to the power of all that is earthy and profane.

Elsewhere, Shechet glories in human vulnerability and imperfection.