

SMART'S 'EXPANDING THE 50TH' OPENS NEXT WEEK

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When the Smart Museum of Art opened its doors in 1974, its permanent collection consisted of nearly 2,500 works. In the five decades since, the museum's holdings have expanded to upwards of 17,000 objects, including a painting by Mark Rothko, an album of etchings and engravings by Francisco de Goya and 152 photographs by Andy Warhol.

The museum's 50th anniversary exhibition, which opened last September, draws on this permanent collection, along with four newly-commissioned artworks, to reflect on the history of the institution and the ways it has changed.

The first phase of the exhibition, which ran from late September through early March, highlighted more than 180 works from across the museum's holdings, including sculpture, paper, paintings and other materials. The second iteration, "Expanding the 50th: Shared Stories," launches March 25 with a new lineup of artworks from the museum's permanent collection and four new works commissioned as "interventions in the museum's and our collective histories," according to the exhibition description.

"We at the Smart have had a lot of really incredible, exciting exhibitions, but very few of them really highlighted our permanent collection," curator Galina Mardilovich told the Hyde Park Herald. "We wanted to make sure to look deep and wide at the richness of our holdings and show some things that haven't been on view in a long time or some things that audiences might have already been familiar with in a different light, making the familiar a bit unfamiliar."

The selected pieces span the museum's history. On display is the first photograph acquired by the museum in 1975, by abstract photographer Aaron Siskind. According to Mardilovich, the museum was criticized for the purchase at the time, as photography was not yet considered a fine art medium or widely collected by most art museums. Also featured is "Untitled (21.039)," a work of embroidery on paper by contemporary Iranian artist Abdolreza Aminlari, gifted to the museum in 2023.

Although the rotation of artworks between phases of the exhibition was partially driven by the need to care for light-sensitive pieces, Mardilovich says it also provided a way to tell a deeper history of the institution.

“We thought that that’s a really exciting opportunity to show more stories and nuances,” she said. “Expanding the 50th” also features a “newly designed gallery space (which) asks what it would mean to change a museum’s approach to storytelling, the way it narrates art to be meaningful, and the way we all communicate about the role of art within the world at large, ” according to the exhibition’s description.

Meg Jackson Fox, the director of the museum’s Feitler Center for Academic Inquiry, said that one of the ways she hopes to accomplish this is by inviting visitors to add their own stories and reactions to the gallery wall. “We traditionally have been the ones to shape the story. The story is on behalf of the creator and the museum and the artist, and I thought it would be interesting to critically consider how we create those stories,” Fox told the Hyde Park Herald. “Art has multiple layers. You add your own layers and your own story to the art work. I wanted that to be visualized in the exhibition space, these narrative layers that artworks accumulate over time depending on who’s looking at them.

As visitors explore the gallery, they are invited to write responses to prompts on cards. Those cards can then be hung on the wall, adding their own voices to the exhibition.

The gallery will also highlight historical voices, pulled from the museum’s archives, alongside new responses penned by university faculty, students and community members. “Museums aren’t static, like any other institution,” Fox said. Both Fox and Mardilovich agree that one of the museum’s biggest changes has been its shift toward interdisciplinary programming.

The museum was founded as part of the University of Chicago’s Art History Department, before becoming a separate unit of the university in 1983. Today, Fox said, the museum’s focus is “cross-campus.” “We really think about the way that art can engage with other disciplines in another way than we would have in the 70s,” Fox said. “Now, we’re really thinking about the sciences as well because we think the arts are for everyone.” The second phase of “Expanding the 50th: Shared Stories” opens March 25 and will run through July 13. The museum will host an opening reception at 6 p.m. on Friday, March 28 at 5550 S. Greenwood Ave. The reception will include a panel with commissioned artists Collins, Kent and Mattingly, moderated by Mardilovich.