



# Kahlil Robert Irving At Dusk



Kahlil Robert Irving: *At Dusk*, Great Rivers Biennial 2020, installation view, September 11, 2020–February 21, 2021. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

The Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis presents the ninth Great Rivers Biennial, featuring new works by St. Louis artists Kahlil Robert Irving, Tim Portlock, and Rachel Youn. The Great Rivers Biennial Arts Award Program, a collaborative initiative between CAM and the Gateway Foundation, recognizes talented emerging and mid-career artists working in the greater St. Louis metropolitan area, providing each award recipient with a \$20,000 honorarium and a major exhibition at CAM.

Three distinguished jurors selected the 2020 winners from among more than eighty submissions. This year's jurors are José Carlos Diaz, Chief Curator at The Andy Warhol Museum and a 2018 fellow at the Center for Curatorial Leadership; Christopher Y. Lew, the Nancy and Fred Poses Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art and co-curator of the 2017 Whitney Biennial; and Amanda Ross-Ho, multidisciplinary artist and an associate professor at the University of California, Irvine.

Kahlil Robert Irving addresses cultural rules set by colonialism, challenging those constructs through material and form. The artist conflates history and the contemporary through a gathering of multiple images and sources derived from his own physical and social media explorations, his personal biography, and the context of Black life in the Midwest. Irving explores the space of the street and its encoded narratives of class and privilege.



## Audio Tour

Visit [camstl.org/audio](https://camstl.org/audio) on a mobile device to hear directly from the artist and curator on the audio tour.

The artist's tabletop and floor sculptures contain what look like objects discarded on the side of the road or from thrift stores: soda bottles, animal figurines, crumpled fast-food boxes, newspaper fragments, inherited ceramic dishware. These items are signifiers of forgotten and ignored everyday objects that are symbols of the past and present—here set in ceramic. Irving aligns the ways in which we ignore or quickly reject certain items with our denial of social inequality.

Irving's large-scale vinyl wallpaper combines, and even confuses, the relationship between physical refuse with screenshots from his personal archive. The issues these images present are easily overlooked at the speed of screen technology and social media—digital forms that assume metaphorical associations with trash left in cityscapes or along suburban or rural roadsides. Irving tries to slow the digital input and take a detour, like a drive through a city or town to explore what is perpetually neglected: systemic racial inequality, violence, and the continuing impact of colonialism. The wallpaper consists of hundreds of online images, which Irving culled over the past three years. The images refer to various forms of institutionalized racism in this country through historical events, representation, social media, music, museums, and public monuments—at CAM, in St. Louis, and beyond. Irving prompts us to reckon with our violent histories.

Other works in *At Dusk* focus on recent and historical examples of racial injustice and embedded prejudice. **White Matter**, white text [Department of Justice \*memorandum document\* {Darren Wilson, pgs 1 - 86}] centers on the Department of Justice report on the investigation into the shooting death of Michael Brown by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. Mistrustful of the text, Irving layers and confuses the language, drawing attention to the United States' imperfect judicial system. Irving's **Flag Combine** (*Collected objects*), incorporates found and constructed works using signs and symbols from historical and contemporary flags, focusing on notions of statehood, nationalism, segregation, popular music, and the legacy of sundown towns in Missouri and Illinois, where Black people were not welcome past dusk.

The *Great Rivers Biennial 2020* is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Misa Jeffereis, Assistant Curator.

This exhibition is made possible by the Gateway Foundation.

**GATEWAY FOUNDATION**

**Kahlil Robert Irving** (b. 1992, San Diego, CA) completed his first institutional solo exhibition, *Street Matter – Decay & Forever / Golden Age* at Wesleyan University in 2018. His work has been part of exhibitions at Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles; Thomas Erben Gallery, New York; and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik, Iceland. Irving's work is in the collections of JP Morgan Chase Art Collection, New York; Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, KS; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; RISD Museum, Providence; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others. His work is included in the current exhibition *Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950–2019* at the Whitney Museum, through 2021. Irving received his MFA from the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis in 2017, and a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute in 2015.

#### Related Programs

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**Film Screening: John Lewis: Good Trouble**  
Thursday, September 17, 7:00 pm

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**First Friday: Featured Artist Kahlil Robert Irving**  
Friday, October 2, 4:00–5:00 pm

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**GRB Artist and Juror Panel**  
Thursday, February 13, 6:30 pm

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#### Artist's Suggested Reading List

Mercer, Kobena. "Black Art and the Burden of Representation" in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 1994.

Fred Moten on Chris Ofili: Bluets, Black + Blue, in *Lovely Blue*. <https://livestream.com/newmuseum/events/3765202/videos/75377110>; <https://livestream.com/newmuseum/events/3765202/videos/75379957>, New Museum, 2015.

Nooter, Mary H. "The Impact of the Unseen" in *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals*. New York: Museum for African Art, 1993.

Storr, Robert. "Introduction" in *Dislocations*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991.



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# Tim Portlock Nickels from Heaven



Tim Portlock: *Nickels from Heaven*, Great Rivers Biennial 2020, installation view, September 11, 2020–February 21, 2021. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

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Tim Portlock's images are based on construction and demolition sites in various American cities. The artist focuses on recent changes to the skyline of cities that have undergone significant transformation in the past decade, specifically related to the housing market collapse of 2008. Through his imagery, Portlock explores ideas of failed modernist projects, industrial decline, white flight, displacement, and American optimism. In the works on view, Portlock focuses on the phenomenon of entire neighborhoods disintegrating and new developments taking root in the blink of an eye.



## Audio Tour

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The artist blurs the distinction between what is being constructed and what is being replaced.

Portlock trained as a painter and muralist, but rather than using paint as his medium, he employs video gaming software in combination with photogrammetry—or drone aerial scanning—to create his large-scale, cityscape prints. For the work on display, Portlock 3-D modeled buildings that he came across in St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Little Rock, and Camden, NJ. Each print is a constructed landscape containing buildings from multiple cities.

Portlock's hyper-realistic images contain compositional conventions from 19th-century American landscape painting: golden light quality, expansive horizon, aerial views, ominous skies, monumental scale, an absence of humanity. These specific techniques were used to convey a sense of American identity—a feral, bountiful land ripe to be tamed by virtuous citizens. The paintings embodied a particular set of ideas about the national identity at the time, and Portlock compares and contrasts these visual conventions and ideals with our current reality.

The titles of his works—*Distinctive and Commanding* and *Soaring and Idyllic*, for example—are excerpted from Zillow property listings for locations around New York's Central Park. The terms evoke empty concepts of power and optimism amid a global pandemic and unprecedented uncertainty. In a similar sentiment, the exhibition title is a reference to the Depression-era film *Pennies from Heaven*, which offered the public an escape from the daily realities of life during hard times. The notion of escaping from or facing day-to-day realities is ingrained in the subject matter of Portlock's exhibition at CAM.

The 2020 Great Rivers Biennial is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Misa Jeffereis, Assistant Curator.

This exhibition is made possible by the Gateway Foundation.

**GATEWAY FOUNDATION**

**Tim Portlock** (b. 1969, Chicago) is an associate professor in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis. A 2019 Regional Arts Commission Fellow and a 2011 recipient of a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, his exhibitions include *SPRING/BREAK Art Show*, PULSE, New York; *Ruffneck Constructivist*, curated by Kara Walker at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Broadstone Studios in Dublin as part of Photo Ireland; the Tate Modern as a member of the artist collective Vox Populi; and *This is Not a Gateway*, a group exhibition of outdoor video projections in London. Portlock exhibited at the 404 Festival in Argentina and Italy, the ISEA electronic arts festival in Japan, and Ars Electronica, Austria. Portlock was among sixty-one artists selected for the *State of the Art 2020* exhibition, at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and its new contemporary art space, The Momentary, in Bentonville, Arkansas.

#### Related Programs

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##### First Friday: Featured Artist Tim Portlock

Friday, February 5, 4:00–5:00 pm

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##### In the Studio: Tim Portlock

Wednesday, October 28, 6:00–7:00 pm

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##### Drawing from Observation

Wednesday, December 16, noon–1:00 pm

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##### GRB Artist and Juror Panel

Thursday, February 13, 6:30 pm

#### Artists's Suggested Reading List

David Harvey and RSA Animate: *RSA ANIMATE: Crises of Capitalism*; [https://youtu.be/qOP2V\\_np2c0](https://youtu.be/qOP2V_np2c0).

Miller, Angela. *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representations and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999.

Reed, Ishmael. *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999.

Taibbi, Matt. *Griftopia*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2011.



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# Rachel Youn Gather



Rachel Youn: *Gather*, Great Rivers Biennial 2020, installation view, September 11, 2020–February 21, 2021. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

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Rachel Youn sources previously owned items from Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace, transforming electric massagers, artificial plants, and speaker cabinets into kinetic sculptures. The artist became interested in handheld massagers as tools made to provide touch, comfort, and healing. Yet as Youn began acquiring the machines second hand from sellers in the St. Louis region, they learned the items were being discarded or replaced because of an inability to perform their purpose—a condition the artist finds both tragic and endearing.



## Audio Tour

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Youn rescues the massagers from what they call “suburban limbo”; they are brought into the studio and no longer burdened by their expected function. In *Gather*, Youn liberates the inanimate materials so they may become life-like, swaying, flailing figures engaged in a dance of resistance against obsolescence.

Personal narratives lie at the heart of Youn’s sculptural practice. Raised in a conservative Christian household, they felt at odds within the open prayer and song of church, but also alienated within safe spaces made for queer dance parties. *Gather* stems from the artist’s own desire to reconcile a queer body in space. For the audio component of this work, Youn commissioned the St. Louis-based band GodsBod to make the dance music, which competes with recordings from multiple evangelical Korean church services, where the congregation feverishly prays together. The installation gyrates between a lively church gathering and a disco floor. Youn conflates these two spaces, trying to find an intersection between opposing worlds, a commonality found in the need for people to gather together in a spirit of liberation—whether in church, a disco, or a house party. The artist makes a space for the sculptures to move freely, awkwardly, and ecstatically, gathering together in a state of collective vulnerability.

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**GATEWAY FOUNDATION**

**Rachel Youn's** (b. 1994, Abington, PA) solo exhibitions include *WILD WILD*, Monaco, St. Louis; *Pleasantries*, Porch House, Fayetteville; and *Bounty*, Erica Popp Studios + Gallery, St. Louis, in 2019. Their work has been included in group exhibitions at the Truman State University Art Gallery, Kirksville, MO; Gallery 210, University of Missouri-St. Louis; Oui.Gallery, Central, Hong Kong; Flood Plain, St. Louis; Granite City Art and Design District, Granite City, IL; Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Los Angeles; Here/There, Portland, OR; Open House, Kansas City, MO; and CICA Museum, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea, among others. Youn is a recipient of the Regional Arts Commission Artist Support Grant and the Vermont Studio Center Fellowship. They received a BFA from the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis in 2017.

#### Related Programs

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##### Gather Movement Workshop

Wednesday, November 18, noon–1:00 pm

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##### First Friday: Featured Artist Rachel Youn

Friday, December 4, 4:00–5:00 pm

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##### In the Studio: Rachel Youn

Wednesday, January 13, 6:00–7:00 pm

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##### GRB Artist and Juror Panel

Thursday, February 13, 6:30 pm

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#### Artist’s Suggested Reading List

GodsBod, St. Louis-based band that created the dance track for *Gather*; [www.godsbodmusic.com](http://www.godsbodmusic.com)

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies: Roland Barthes*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.

Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011.

Muñoz, José E. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.



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