



Montclair Art Museum launches retrospective of Kay WalkingStick



Kathleen Ash-Milby, co-curator of "Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist," talks about the artist's work during a press walkthrough on Thursday morning. GWEN OREL/STAFF

Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist, through June 17 at the Montclair Art Museum, 3 South Mountain Ave., montclairartmuseum.org, 973-746-5555.

By GWEN OREL

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The work of American artist Kay WalkingStick draws on her Native American culture, and it is also influenced by modernism and postmodernism of the 1960s and 1970s.

National Museum of the American Indian Kathleen Ash-Milby, who co-curated a retrospective of WalkingStick's work, with David W. Penney, led a walk-through of the exhibit at the Montclair Art Museum on Thursday, Feb. 1. This is the first large retrospective for the artist, born in 1935. The exhibit was organized by the American Federation of Arts and the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, and will be at MAM through June 17. It includes 60 works. MAM is the exhibit's final stop, after appearing at the National Museum of the American Indian, Heard Museum, Dayton Art Institute, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, and Gilcrease Art Museum.

Ash-Milby said it was hard to choose. Many of the paintings come from private collections and museums, and many are on loan from the artist.

WalkingStick herself will visit the museum for the official opening on Friday, Feb. 2. As MAM curator Gail Stavitsky explained, WalkingStick taught at the Yard school at MAM for many years.

Ash-Milby explained that Native American art was often excluded from the discourse on modern art. When

shows began to be made in the 1980s and '90s, they were often group shows. And while that gained exposure for a lot of artists, “we were losing the opportunity to really understand an artist’s work in depth.”

WalkingStick, she said, is an “iconic artist who has really changed the field, and inspired the following generations of artists.”

The artist is of Cherokee descent on her father’s side, Ash-Milby said. She grew up in Syracuse, the youngest of four siblings, after her parents had separated. She began painting professionally in the 1970s, with work that was modernist and feminist, with her work becoming increasingly abstract.



Detail from the “Chief Joseph Series.” National Museum of the American Indian. COURTESY AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS

The artist’s “Chief Joseph Series,” panels created from 1974 to 1976, were a result of her asking her father, not long before he died, to name an important Native American leader. He answered [Chief Joseph, who led the Nez Perce in their battles with the U.S. army](#). A later painting, “Howitzer Hill Fusillade” (2008), commemorates the U.S. cavalry’s dawn raid on a sleeping tribe at the Battle of the Big Hole.

The exhibit traces the artist’s early works into a period of diptychs (two-panels), often an abstraction with landscape; through a period of introspection following the sudden death of her husband; through her Italian-influenced work, inspired by teaching semesters abroad while a professor at Cornell University from 1996 to 2005, up to her more recent work, which often incorporates Native American decorative imagery.

“Night” (1991) was borrowed from MAM for the national tour. The portions of the diptych “represent two kinds of knowledge of the earth,” Stavitsky said in a release. “One is visual, a memory of a stream bed near Tucson, Arizona, and the other is more spiritual.”

MAM has organized some events related to the retrospective:

- Third annual Gaelen family artist lecture on Thursday, April 26, with Kathleen Ash-Milby
- Art classes, including Parent/Child Diptychs on Saturday, March 10, and “Exploring Kay WalkingStick through Watercolor,” an eight-week class beginning April 12

For a complete list, visit montclairartmuseum.org

The Rand Forum is an affiliate group open to MAM members interested in exploring Native American art. For information on it, and a curated trip to the Santa Fe Indian Market in August 2018, email members@montclairartmuseum.org.