

Mildred Lane
Kemper Art Museum



**KAHLIL ROBERT
IRVING**

FEBRUARY 23—JULY 29, 2024

**ARCHAEOLOGY
OF THE
PRESENT**

KAHLIL ROBERT IRVING

The St. Louis–based artist Kahlil Robert Irving (American, b. 1992) creates assemblages made up of layered images and sculptures composed of replicas of everyday objects. He often explores ways that systems of control, oppression, and histories of anti-Blackness operate on the edges of our attention. Like sifting through archaeological strata, Irving’s work reveals how our present moment is made up of physical remnants that begin to tell a fragmented story. This exhibition features new sculptures, videos, paintings, and industrial-made found objects that together consider our relationship to the city street as both a place and a concept.

Irving situates his sculptures and other manufactured items within a stage-like platform in the gallery. Viewers are invited to move onto the structure to explore the works. Rising from the platform are a large, industrial, ceramic pipe and an eleven-foot-tall tile sculpture that resembles a brick wall, while sculptures echoing elements from the street are visible within or on the platform’s surface. Cutouts across the floor make room for each work to be revealed, drawing attention to what Irving calls “the unspoken, liminal gaps between life and poetry.”

With this installation, the artist suggests that the city street can be considered a place of not only collective gathering but also transit between points of safety and security. Shifting our focus to the unseen or overlooked materials existing just beneath our feet, Irving poses questions about forces that shape these public spaces and our experiences of them. These questions are firmly local, deriving from the artist’s own experiences and losses living in St. Louis, yet emphatically universal:

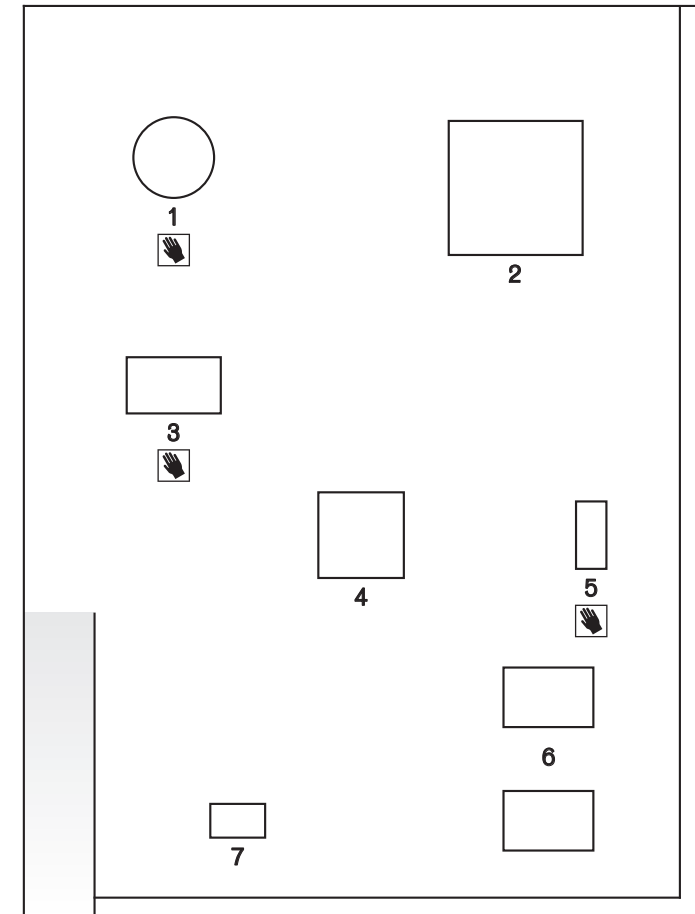
Which buildings and neighborhoods are devalued and demolished, and which are preserved? Which historical figures deserve commemoration in the form of monuments? How can we make space to build a stronger and more honest collective memory?

Visitors are invited to move onto the viewing platform.
Please do not touch the art unless otherwise noted with this symbol.



Photography is permitted.

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PRESENT



8

9

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

1. **Monument** *{from an act to a void}*, 2023

Painted ceramic



2. **Flat Smoke** [{my heart is and ain't heavy}]

Can we remember MS Green!], 2024

Glazed ceramic, decals, metallic enamel

3. **Tomb Raider** (archaeology of the present)

BLACK GRANITE [1], 2023

Black granite



To create this horizontal work in black stone, Irving translated one of his digital collages into bas-relief using CNC milling, a computer-controlled manufacturing process. The imagery includes a photograph of asphalt taken by the artist as well as news clippings, social media posts, a QR code, and advertisements. It also includes memes that reference Irving's own artistic practice and personal biography while reflecting on Black life, death, and joy more broadly. Irving is interested in the inherent degradation of digital imagery as it is compressed, reformatted, copied, and pasted into other forms of distribution, including his stone and ceramic works. This tactile sculpture speaks to current conditions of existence—infinite digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities—while the near inscrutability of the images carved into stone draws parallels to our fragmented understanding of ancient artifacts.

4. **Soul on Stars** (*****), 2021

Unglazed ceramic

For this ceramic work Irving was inspired by the elaborate mosaic floors of Antioch, an ancient city in what is now Turkey. These floors, found in public and private spaces including homes, churches, and baths, feature imagery ranging from the pictorial to geometric abstraction. In Irving's tiles the imagery recalls both the asphalt of a city street and a night sky flecked with stars. While there is little resemblance between the ancient tiles and these, the artistic gesture is the same: using visual materials of the time to narrate a culture's stories, values, and everyday life.

For Irving the separation between what is shown (the tiles) and the real thing (actual city streets) is important to consider. This perspective prompts new ways of looking at something familiar. As Irving has described, the work also aims to bring awareness to how systems of control—demolition, public maintenance, and redlining, for example—create different lived experiences based on race, class, and other factors.

5. **Stele** [(A scraper)], 2023

Brick tile, wood



This eleven-foot-tall sculpture emerging from the platform resembles a chimney or a section of a brick wall that would have supported a larger structure. It also functions as a stage prop; the structure is hollow, and its surface is covered in thin pieces of industrially produced mortared tile made to look like real brick. Irving's faux architectural fragment points to the preponderance of brick in St. Louis architecture—including the vertical piers of Louis Sullivan's Wainwright Building, one of the first skyscrapers built in the world—and to the city's history of racialized abandonment and devaluation. The word "stele" refers to an ancient marker taking the shape of an upright stone or column, underscoring the work's commemorative function.

6. **Sky View** *{(For wonder) “Snap”}*, 2023
Two-channel video, stitched personal video footage
and photographs (color, silent)

Inset into the platform, this two-channel video features footage of a city street on one screen, while the other centers on imagery of the sky. Throughout the history of Western culture, the sky has represented a place of potential, ideals, and utopianism. The street, by comparison, is characterized by necessity, stagnancy, and difficulty. By placing this imagery side by side on the floor, Irving aims to collapse the difference between the celestial and the earthly. The sky, with its idealism, is brought down to the level of the concrete and all its practical needs. The gesture calls into question our assumptions of where change and progress come from, suggesting that these possibilities can be found communally and in our present moment rather than in some lofty future.

7. **Caution** *MASS(in the bank) | Media flow + Ground Swell / Pipes tubes Chimney*, 2023–24
Glazed and unglazed ceramic, decals, luster, enamel

At first glance this ceramic sculpture resembles an archaeological specimen; a closer look reveals that much of it in fact documents the near present. Irving integrates elements of historic ceramic-object production and associated techniques—slip casting, extrusions, image transfers, lusters, and colored enamels—alongside ceramic replicas of apples, a piggy bank, and other items often considered street debris. The artist covers these objects, in part, with ceramic image transfers of news clippings, social media posts, and photographs. Prominently placed atop a ceramic copy of a cinder block, for instance, is a fragment of a 2019 article appearing in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that tells of a local television newscaster who used a racial slur while talking about the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The cacophonous sculpture draws from what the artist describes as “an everlasting feedback loop” of his experience, both in person and online.

8. **SENTINEL [Blockade]**, 2023–24
Digital print on polyester, nylon

9. *A Mystikal Landscape, Afeni Sang it to Us (Mirror)*, 2023
Oil on canvas

In his paintings, as in his ceramic sculptures, Irving employs techniques of collage and fragmentation to create works that capture a particular time or experience, often filled with personal references. This four-part composition juxtaposes distinct emotional impressions and features painted images taken from photographs by the artist and others culled from online sources: a mural of a tiger seen through a window, a screenshot from YouTube of Afeni Shakur (mother of Tupac Shakur, who was murdered in 1996) singing “Ella’s Song (We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest until It Comes),” shards of glass, and a neon sign in the shape of a palm tree. United by a black background, the work is also a memorial piece: Irving painted it after the death of his grandmother in 2023 and infused the composition with references to grief, loss, and aspirations for the future.

All works appear courtesy of the artist.
To access the map and labels online, scan the QR code.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kahlil Robert Irving was born in San Diego in 1992. He lives and works in St. Louis. He attended the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis (MFA 2017) and the Kansas City Art Institute (BFA, art history and ceramics, 2015). Recent solo and group exhibitions include *Projects: Kahlil Robert Irving*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2021); *Social Works II*, Gagosian, London (2021); *Soft Water Hard Stone*, New Museum Triennial, New York (2021); *Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950–2019*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2019); and the Singapore Biennale (2019). Irving was awarded the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant in 2020 and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award in 2019. He was an artist in residence at Art Omi in summer 2018. Irving's work is in the collections of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Foundation for Contemporary Ceramic Art, Kecskemét, Hungary; JP Morgan Chase Art Collection, New York; Ken Ferguson Teaching Collection at the Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, Kansas; Riga Porcelain Museum, Latvia; RISD Museum, Providence; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



RELATED PROGRAMS

All programs are free and open to the public and are held at the Kemper Art Museum unless otherwise noted.

For event descriptions visit
kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu/events

February 23

4:30 pm Member and WashU Preview
5:30 pm Artist Q&A: Kahlil Robert Irving with Hamza Walker
6:30–8 pm Public Opening

April 3

5:30 pm Archaeology and Contemporary Art: A Conversation with Kahlil Robert Irving and Andrea Achi

April 13

2–4 pm Kemper Live: Assemble

Public Tours

March 23, 2 pm, English
March 30, 1 pm, Spanish
April 21, 2 pm, Chinese
April 27, 2 pm, English
May 18, 2 pm, English
June 8, 2 pm, ASL

To request a tour of the exhibition for your class or group, please email
kempereducation@wustl.edu.

Space Mapping: Video Art Series

Video Gallery

In coordination with the exhibition *Kahlil Robert Irving: Archaeology of the Present*, the artist Kahlil Robert Irving selected a series of contemporary video works to screen concurrently in the Kemper Art Museum's Video Gallery. This is the second time the artist has curated a video series alongside a presentation of his own artworks. The seven videos he selected highlight intimate moments in time and space when Black people are present, emphasizing the fact that no matter the setting, "We are still here." Locations range from a person's home, to family gatherings, to horseback riding in Oakland, California. These works are meant to remind some people that it is okay to be ourselves and to let others know that it is normal to see Black people participating in different acts or as a part of different metaphors. In today's world, living is defined by adversity, resistance, and survival, all of which are inextricably linked to digital media. Digital media is variously used as a tool for protest, remembering passing moments, entertainment, and deception. The selected videos celebrate and acknowledge artistic practices that deploy a myriad of tools, technologies, and metaphors.

Videos in order of appearance:



1. **Tiffany J. Sutton** (American, b. 1981)
Untitled 1 (Stuttgart on my mind), 2023
Digital video, 34 sec.
Courtesy of the artist



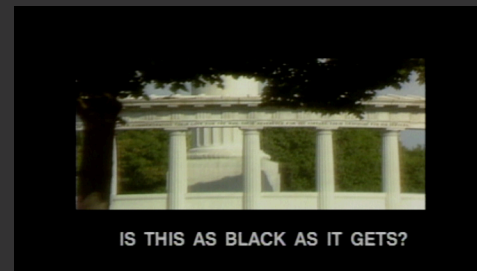
2. **Lyndon Barrois Jr. and Addoley Dzegede, with Lafayette Halla** (American, b. 1983; American b. 1983)
Capsules, 2019–23
Video, 9:41 min
Courtesy of the artists



3. **William M. Morris** (American, b. 1960)
Immediacy of Distance, 2015
Video, 22:40 min.
Courtesy of the artist



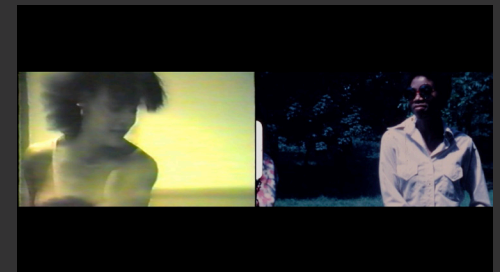
4. **Cameron Patricia Downey** (American, b. 1998)
It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God, 2023
Video, 4:30 min
Courtesy of the artist



5. **Tony Cokes** (American, b. 1956)
The Book of Love, 1992
Color video with sound, 59:37 min.
Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles; Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna; and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York



6. **Charles Lee** (American, b. 1983)
Been here!, 2023
Video, 7:52 min.
Courtesy of the artist



7. **Jefferson Pinder** (American, b. 1970)
Transcendance, 2022
Video, 8:54 min.
Courtesy of the artist

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum

kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu

Hours

11 am–5 pm Mon, Wed–Sun
Closed Tuesdays

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Kahlil Robert Irving: Archaeology of the Present is organized by the Walker Art Center. The exhibition is curated by William Hernández Luege, curatorial associate, painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and former curatorial assistant, visual arts, Walker Art Center. The presentation at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum is curated by Meredith Malone, curator.

The exhibition is made possible by the leadership support of the William T. Kemper Foundation. All exhibitions at the Kemper Art Museum are supported by members of the Director's Circle, with major annual support provided by Emily and Teddy Greenspan and additional generous annual support from Michael Forman and Jennifer Rice, Julie Kemper Foyer, Joanne Gold and Andrew Stern, David and Dorothy Kemper, Ron and Pamela Mass, and Kim and Bruce Olson. Further support is provided by the Hortense Lewin Art Fund, the Ken and Nancy Kranzberg Fund, and members of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.

The artist would like to thank Ernestine Irving, Build Clay Products, Sam Slone, Martin Lammert, Reilly Dickens-Hoffman, Rick Griggs, and the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

Cover photo: courtesy of the artist
Portrait of the artist: Whitney Curtis, Washington University