

Interview, photos & video: Wheat's world - Summer Wheat brings home art based on classic Vermeer painting in Oklahoma City exhibit



by [Brandy McDonnell](#) Published: May 15, 2016 8:55 AM CDT Updated: May 15, 2016 9:35 AM CDT



Artist Summer Wheat, an Oklahoma City native based in New York, poses for a photo near her faux stained-glass work "Rainbow Arcade," at the entrance to her installation "Pry the Lid Off" at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center. Photo by Nate Billings, The Oklahoman



Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer's famed painting "The Milkmaid," painted around 1660, is the inspiration for Oklahoma City native Summer Wheat's exhibit "Pry the Lid Off," on view through Aug. 12 at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center. Image provided



A detail shot of "Rainbow Arcade," part of the "Pry the Lid Off" installation by Summer Wheat at the Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center. Wheat created the faux stained-glass panels out of Mylar painted with enamel and resin. Photo by Nate Billings, The Oklahoman

An abbreviated version of this story appears in the Sunday Life section of *The Oklahoman*.

Wheat harvest

New York artist and OKC native brings installations inspired by Vermeer to Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center

From a white wall in a classic Dutch masterwork to a white piece of paper in an elementary-school classroom, Summer Wheat sometimes finds inspiration in the seemingly plain.

“Part of the original interest in this work was the white wall that you see here behind her. I was always entranced by it because it’s like basically a webbing of all different colors, but it creates a white space,” Wheat said, pointing to a reproduction of Johannes Vermeer’s famed portrait “The Milkmaid.”

“This white wall was always like a source of meditation for me, and that’s where all this began was thinking about what was on the other side of this wall.”

With her new exhibit “Pry the Lid Off,” the Oklahoma City native transformed Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center into an alternate world for Vermeer’s “Milkmaid,” depicting four rooms of the woman’s personal chambers, which store belongings ranging from dishes and tapestries to boots and hair bows.

“Part of the concept of working with this painting is trying to recontextualize this female servant. She’s this domestic woman who I’m looking to retell her story as if she was actually a queen,” Wheat said.

“I feel like we live in a material world, and there’s nothing we can do to escape it. So, I want to build another version of that for my viewers so that they have a faux world to come into.”

The nonprofit gallery will add extra life to “The Milkmaid’s” rooms Wednesday during an immersive interdisciplinary fundraising event featuring Oklahoma City Ballet dancers, storytellers and docents.

“She conceived each of these paintings as components of a room, so immediately that conjures the idea of a scenographic environment ... and that’s really an invitation for performance,” said Oklahoma Contemporary Artistic Director Jeremiah Matthew Davis. “This kind of event that we’re doing with Summer represents where we’re going in terms of being a home for all of the arts under one roof. ... We’re breaking down these sort of somewhat artificial silos that have been erected in the art world over the 20th century and allowing all the artists and audiences, spectators, to appreciate things across boundaries.”





Oklahoma City native Summer Wheat's "Pry the Lid Off" installation is on view through Aug. 12 at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center. Photo by Nate Billings, The Oklahoman



Oklahoma City native and New York-based artist Summer Wheat created the painting "Bows" for her "Pry the Lid Off" installation at the Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center. Photo by Nate Billings, The Oklahoman

Finding the magic

Although she grew up in Oklahoma, “Pry the Lid Off” is the first home-state exhibit Wheat has participated in since an emerging artist show when she was in her 20s. Since Wheat’s installations are site-specific, the University of Central Oklahoma alumna said many of the artworks are inspired by her childhood memories growing up here.

“When I was in first grade ... there was an animation artist that came to my school. He just had a white piece of paper and a pencil and he was drawing these bunny rabbits on the page and he was animating them. I literally was like elbowing people out of the way so that I could get as close to him as I possibly could. I was like captivated by it because I thought he was performing some kind of magic. I just was in love with art after that,” Wheat recalled.

“I’ve had a great time because it’s definitely a homecoming and wonderful to share my work with so many friends and family that I grew up with and haven’t seen in a long time. It was just really lovely to reconnect with people that I hold dear in my heart.”

Born in Oklahoma City in 1977, Wheat earned her master of fine arts from Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia after finishing her undergraduate degree at UCO. She has lived and worked in New York City for seven years, and last week, she received the 2016 Artadia Award, a \$5,000

merit-based prize given to one artist exhibiting at the New Art Dealers Alliance's New York art fair.

“This is a huge moment for her in her career. She’s moving, I think, to the next level, from an emerging artist to an established artist. Her work has been increasingly popular, she’s represented in international collections, she’s in museums all over the world,” Davis said. “It’s really an awesome opportunity for us to work with someone of her caliber who has Oklahoma roots, grew up in Oklahoma City, has gone out into the world and really made a name for herself. And then she’s willing to come back and work with local artists and be a total collaborative partner, and that speaks volumes about her integrity and her commitment to Oklahoma.”



Summer Wheat talks about her painting "Valley of Life With Alligators," part of her installation "Pry the Lid Off," at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center. Photo by Nate Billings, The Oklahoman



New York-based artist and Oklahoma City native Summer Wheat works on "Rainbow Arcade," an installation of faux stained-glass panels that cover the windows and doors of Oklahoma Contemporary Art Center's entryway. The collection of panels, which are Mylar painted with enamel and resin, are part of Wheat's exhibit "Pry the Lid Off" at Oklahoma Contemporary. Photo provided



Oklahoma City native Summer Wheat's new exhibit "Pry the Lid Off," on view through Aug. 12 at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center, is inspired by Johannes Vermeer's classic painting "The Milkmaid" and depicts the four rooms of the maid's personal chambers. Her "Inheritance" offers a peek inside a milkmaid's cupboard, revealing silhouetted dishes cut out of wood. Image provided

Building a world

The faux world Wheat created for “The Milkmaid” starts at the front door and windows of Oklahoma Contemporary, which she turned into faux stained glass panels made from colorful Mylar transparencies painted with shoes, vases and jewelry.

“I took into consideration this entire space being a (storage) container, and this is a piece that can be viewed from the inside and the outside,” she said. “I was only able to plan so much for the piece. I could only see four of them (the panels) at a time in my studio. So, it was really exciting to be able to get this install put together because it’s the first time I’d actually been able to see the whole work.”

Because of the expansive size of the OKC gallery, Wheat said she had to rebuild her studio after designing each of the four installations, and she often couldn’t see the results until after the work was done. For “Inheritance,” which gives a silhouette view of the dishes inside “The Milkmaid’s” cupboards, she worked with an OKC source to have it fabricated from fiberboard with a plasma cutter.

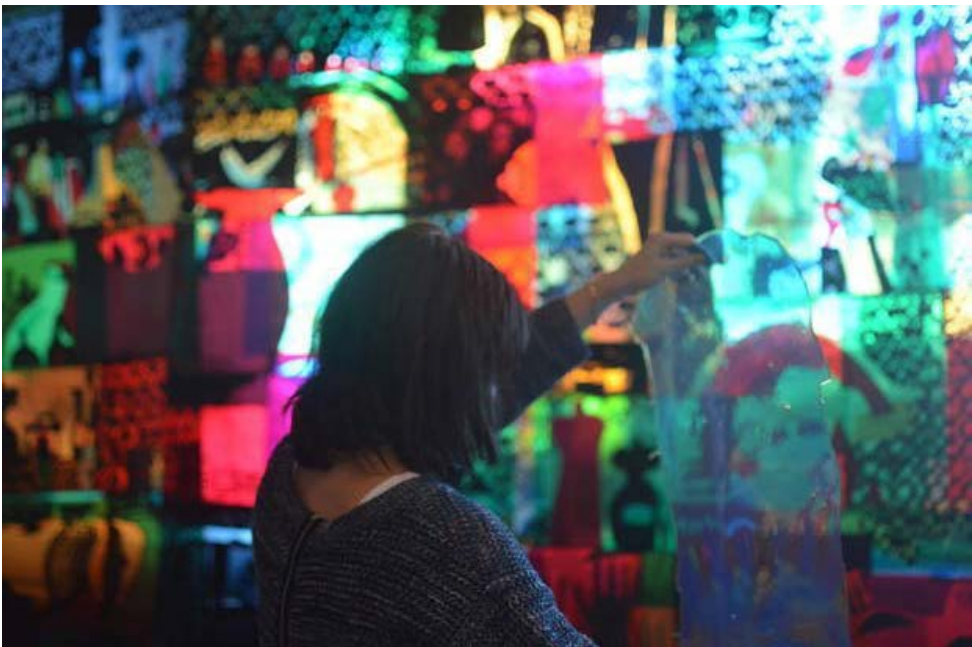
“I’m in conversation with the white of the wall from the painting,” she said. “I wanted to turn the white of the wall into dishes.”

To create a series of faux tapestries stowed in the maid’s third room, she painted aluminum window screens to create a kind of textile texture. The innovative technique required her to stand behind the screens and push the paint through the mesh, so she was essentially painting blind.

“Especially with her screen paintings, she’s doing something that I haven’t really seen before in contemporary art,” Davis said.

The stories of the vivid tapestries are based on memories of her Oklahoma upbringing, especially the fanciful tales her father, Bill Wheat, used to tell about turtles, rabbits and alligators. Her mother, Diane, influenced what went into the paintings in the final room, “Wardrobe.”

“I was considering the essential nature of every girl’s closet in Oklahoma, and I thought of boots and bows,” Wheat said. “That’s where she comes into play.”



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For her exhibit "Pry the Lid Off" at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center, Oklahoma City native Summer Wheat created "tapestries," including "Nightshade," by pushing acrylic paint through aluminum mesh. Photo by Nate Billings, The Oklahoman

Sharing the inspiration

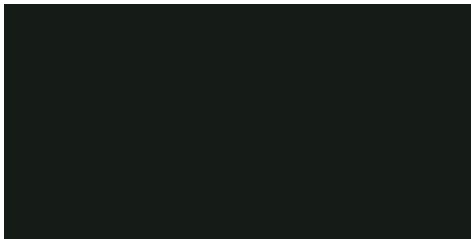
Along with attending Wednesday's immersive event, Wheat will share stories behind her exhibit at two brunches Saturday at Oklahoma Contemporary

"I feel like I'm bringing home a gift. To me, it feels like a love letter or like a gift to bring to my homeland. Like I've been traveling away and then these are the stories I'm bring back in this new way," she said.

Plus, she will spend much of June in her hometown, teaching classes for teen and adult artists related to her exhibit, which is on view through Aug. 12.

"I like the education component to this space. That's really important to me. I feel like art education is like the most important, crucial thing that you can have in a community. I really hope to see more of it here," she said. "I think there's going to be a lot of fun projects that come out of this show."

Even if it did start with a white wall.



GOING ON

Summer Wheat's "Pry the Lid Off"

When: Through Aug. 12.

Where: Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center, 3000 General Pershing Blvd.

Immersive performance experience: 6 p.m. Wednesday.

Artist's brunches: 11 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Saturday.

Information: www.oklahomaccontemporary.org.