'Emancipating the Past' brings contemporary artwork, social awareness to UMass

By Jordan D. Schnitzer

AMHERST - In the words of renowned art collector Jordan D. Schnitzer, visitors to the University of Massachusetts' newest art exhibition should be ready to be challenged, distressed and exhilarated all at once.

"Emancipating the Past: Kara Walker's 'Tales of Slavery and Power' will be on display at University Museum of Contemporary Art from Feb. 2 through April 30, bringing together 60 different works by artist Kara Walker designed to challenge viewers to create a dialogue around race and gender politics.

According to Schnitzer, a Portland, Oregon-based art collector whose personal collection and collection of the Jordan D. Schnitzer Family Foundation total more than 10,000 prints and multiples, Walker's work crosses various mediums - from lithography to silhouette work - painting a powerful image in the mind of the viewer regardless of their familiarity with different types of art.

"I think what's fabulous about this exhibit is that you don't need to know anything about art. You just need to walk in, open your eyes and not jump to a conclusion," said Schnitzer, adding that Walker's work was handpicked from his very own collection for the exhibit, curated by Jess Di Tillo, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon.

"The reason why this work is so universal and critical today is because although Kara Walker is using themes from a certain time period, the great divide in this country still exists. I think Walker's 'Emancipation Approximation' series is one of the most important works of art in our time. It captures your mind and you're surrounded by a presence in bigotry and stereotyping and our base instincts," he said.

Schnitzer said viewers could expect Walker's silhouette work in particular to juxtapose familiar images and themes against an undercurrent of social commentary that encourages viewers to question their own beliefs regarding race and gender equality.

"She forces you to think things you would not have thought if she didn't manipulate the work in the way she did. Aside from race relations, the issues here of gender inequality are so powerfully presented. And I think out of the exhibition, at least for me, it's inspirational," said Schnitzer.

"We can't be better unless we deal with our values. The fact is, all of us, it is easy to end up reacting and stereotyping people and coming to conclusions. It's a human issue and we all do it. It isn't great, but it's real. How do we rise above that?"

Schnitzer said he believes the exhibit, which he said traveled to six different locations before being approached by the University of Massachusetts, has become even more socially relevant due to the current political climate across the country.

"Look at what just happened this past week around this country. Irrespective of one's politics, we just had women's marches across the country, and look at what principles they talked about," said Schnitzer.

"This exhibition tragically is more relevant every day, when it should be an exhibition focusing on a time and place and attitudes that are long passed as socially reached new ideals of respect, tolerance, understanding and a realization that we're stronger together individually and collectively when we open our hearts and minds to others around us."

About the artist behind the exhibit, Schnitzer said he believes Walker to be one of the most important artists of the past half-century.

"We have about 250 artists in our collection. Artists, like many artists, tends to go in waves cosmically of people that somehow rise to the top and are unbelievably creative and leave a legacy in history," said Schnitzer, ranking Walker's cultural significance among the likes of 1960s 'pop art' guru Andy Warhol.

"I think it's demeaning to say, 'she's a woman artist.' She's an artist. She happens to be a woman, she happens to be African-American and a mother. She happens to be, maybe this goes back to what happened to this country in the 1960s, one of half of about a dozen artists on an equal plane. I think Kara Walker probably is the leader of that pack. She is that brilliant," said Schnitzer.

"Emancipating the Past: Kara Walker's 'Tales of Slavery and Power' will run at the University Museum of Contemporary Art, located at 111 Presidents Drive in Amherst, Feb. 2 through April 30."