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Meinzer, Melissa: *Explore space, place, and materials with the Pulitzer Arts Foundation's fall exhibitions*
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Explore space, place, and materials with the Pulitzer Arts Foundation's fall exhibitions

"Sarah Crowner: Around Orange" and "Urban Archaeology: Lost Buildings of St. Louis" are on display through February 4, 2024.

BY MELISSA MEINZER SEPTEMBER 11, 2023 11:43 AM



SARAH CROWNER, "UNTITLED (AROUND ORANGE)", 2023. ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, SEWN. 72 X 120 IN. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. LUHRING AUGUSTINE, NEW YORK, AND GALERIE NORDENHAKE, BERLIN, MEXICO CITY AND STOCKHOLM. PHOTO BY CHARLES BENTON.

Two exhibitions opened this past weekend at the [Pulitzer Arts Foundation](#), and while they're quite distinct, they share some common elements. Both respond to the Pulitzer's Tadao Ando-designed space, and both highlight materials that are particular to specific geographies.

Sarah Crowner: Around Orange is a collection of three commissioned pieces in conversation with the Pulitzer building itself and works by artist Ellsworth Kelly, while *Urban Archaeology: Lost Buildings of St. Louis* displays salvaged St. Louis architectural elements from between 1840 and 1950, chosen from the collection of Sauguet's [National Building Arts Center](#).

Crowner's installation "Untitled (Around Orange)" along the main gallery's east wall is in dialogue with "Blue Black," Kelly's painting that hangs permanently above the stairway at the end of the gallery. The 77-foot-long work comprises ten large canvases that react to the shifting light in the gallery and call attention to its scale. The machine-stitched canvas fragments, with unprimed and orange-painted cut sections, recall Matisse's floral collages, while their dimensions echo "Blue Black."

"For [Crowner], it was really important to see those works in natural light because they are very dynamic," says Pulitzer curator Stephanie Weissberg. "She's very interested in the physical movement of bodies throughout space. The light conditions are so dynamic in the Pulitzer."

Crowner also built a curved, stage-like raised platform in white birch that patrons walk across to encounter more of Kelly's works. Weissberg describes it as a foil to "Blue Black," sinuous and monochrome to its contrasting blocks of color.

"When people think of Ellsworth Kelly, they think of pure abstraction, but many of his works were inspired by the natural world and the built environment," Weissberg says. He refines images of built or organic scenes into abstraction. "That's similar to the way Sarah works," she says.

An exterior wall of the museum holds Crowner's "Wall (Hot red terracotta)." The red and orange tiles evoke scales, perhaps from some fantastically large creature. "In contrast with the Ando concrete, it really brings both materials into high relief," says Weissberg. "You notice the concrete more; you notice the terracotta more."

Weissberg says that each exhibition is independent and stands alone, but "there are some material and conceptual linkages between the two." Crowner is inspired to use terracotta by Mexican craftwork, and so much of St. Louis' architecture depends on another clay-based material: brick.



UNGLAZED TERRA COTTA PANELS ON DISPLAY AT THE NATIONAL BUILDING ARTS CENTER, 2021, COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL BUILDING ARTS CENTER.

Urban Archaeology fills the rest of the activated museum space. It's the largest exhibition the organization has organized outside its own space. Weissberg calls the NBAC, founded by the late Larry Giles in 1973, an "unknown gem and an incredibly rich resource."

A section of ceramic roof tiles leans against a gallery wall, and the color and material call out to Crouner's mural. Out of context like this, the tiles could be tree bark—though they are a section of the rooftop of a hospital children's ward. The ornate Rivoli Theatre was built in 1922 and its Italian Renaissance-style sign and panels were a landmark downtown until 1983 when it was demolished in favor of a parking lot—the NBAC preserved the elements beforehand, and they are a striking moment in the show.

"These buildings that, a century prior, less than a century prior, had stood for the greatest achievements and economic riches of the city were cast aside for a different vision of what the city could and should be," Weissberg says. "It felt very meaningful and important to discuss."

The NBAC works are shown in a way that makes them simultaneously approachable and legible while elevating them beyond their prosaic building purpose. A pile of bricks on a pallet, exquisite though they may be, are a familiar enough sight to most of us. A column moves from flourish to masterpiece when displayed reclining instead of standing. Ornamental and spandrel panels in terra cotta, bronze lion heads, and flourishes in cast-iron seen in an unusual close-up view, rather than atop a building, reveal much more of the artistry.

Beyond the fantastic building elements themselves, the show situates the pieces, the buildings, and the work of salvage itself within the context of rapidly evolving St. Louis history. A video addresses preservation efforts in Jeff-Vander-Lou, St. Louis Place, and Soulard. There are blueprints from the Pruitt-Igoe complex, a case study in the problems of so-called urban renewal projects and their social consequences.

Michael Allen, director of the National Building Arts Center, curated *Urban Archaeology*, and Pulitzer curator Stephanie Weissberg and curatorial assistant Molly Moog also curated both shows. They are on display through February 4, 2024.