

THINGS TO DO • Review

Can these artists reshape our concept of nature?

At Space Gallery, three thought-provoking solo shows are updating Western Art along the way



Space Gallery presented new pieces by artist Nikki Pike who uses bark found in Colorado forests to make her work. Photo by Ray Mark Rinaldi

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Nikki Pike is one of Colorado's busiest artists, and easily one of its most intriguing (and entertaining), so it is not uncommon to encounter her objects in outdoor settings here.

Pike makes work from various materials and with different aims, but she is best known for her oversized, public sculptures created out of tree bark. You might have passed by one or two while strolling through a park or hiking along a mountain trail. Or maybe you know her bronze piece — the giant sphere titled "Rondure" — that sits on the front lawn of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. It's a crowd-pleaser.

Pike's latest endeavor changes the backdrop a bit, and offers a whole new perspective on this bark-based work. It's an indoor solo show, titled "Echoes from the Forest" at Space Gallery, a traditional white cube exhibition space in the Santa Fe arts district.

Her three-dimensional pieces are paired with concurrent solo shows by painters Susan M. Gibbons and Jeff Juhlin, and all three artists present something of an updated version of traditional Western art landscapes. It's a high-level combo of regional artists who ask us to see the local landscape, a place we think we know so well, in deeper ways.



A detail of Nikki Pike's work.
(Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special
to The Denver Post)

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Pike's work stands out here because it is not the usual stuff of formal art galleries. For one thing, it can be rather large. One piece in this show, titled "Ovum," which is shaped like a giant seed and sits in the middle of the gallery floor, is 11 feet long and just under 6 feet tall.

But it is the material that is jarring for viewers. Pike's work comes off as organic when it is viewed outdoors, among trees that are also made of bark, almost like an extension of nature itself. But here, removed and isolated from that obvious natural habitat, we are invited to look at them from a more intellectual perspective. To see them as high-end art commodities we might acquire for our personal spaces rather than whimsical public art projects intended to please the masses.

The setting is a revelation and, perhaps, a better way to understand Pike's goal of inviting "the viewer to consider the human connection to and impact on the natural world," as she says in her artist's statement. Because we get a better grasp on her process.

I understand it like this:

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Humans like things arranged in neat rows. We like the clean right angles of a square and perfect circles. We make sense of our world by putting it in order, making it symmetrical when we can, controlling things. Otherwise, we see chaos.

Nature does not place such constrictions upon itself. Animals roam freely without the need for paved paths. Seeds fall wherever they might and trees sprout up randomly. They drop their leaves in the autumn without caring if someone rakes them up or not. Chaos is the natural order

Pike's work bridges that gap. Her raw material — rough bark that has been neither hewed nor polished — is gathered together and then arranged in perfect geometrical shapes that appeal to the human eye.

Her "Nova," for example, is a neatly arranged circle measuring nearly 5 feet in diameter. Her "Totem" is a diamond-shaped object made from triangles. The pieces are three-dimensional, though flat on the back so they hang on a wall. They are sculptures, though they have the personalities of reliefs.



With her paintings, Susan M. Gibbons aims to uncover the "sublime, overlooked and misunderstood beauty of the plains and hills," according to her artist's statement. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)

But her trick in all of these exacting arrangements is to let the bark remain natural, splintery and papery, and to let its personality come through. And by doing this, we get a real sense of both the possibilities and limits of how humans and nature can co-exist.

Humans do have considerable power to bend nature to their wishes — especially if they apply the brute force required to make these sculptures. But when we respect the natural properties of the material we are shaping, the relationship can actually be quite beautiful, and logical, and work in every entity's best interest.

It's an inspirational lesson on co-existence that is not so easily read in a park, where there are so many visual and audio distractions, but which becomes fundamentally clear in a gallery. It's a meaningful elevation of Pike's work and one that deserves to be seen.

Gibbons has her own way of collaborating with nature, and it gives her landscapes on display here considerable depth. She makes her own paint out of the dirt and rocks she finds in Colorado and New Mexico and applies it in a watercolor-like way to Japanese paper.

Graphite marks etch out the details of the terrain above ground and below it, so we see both rolling hills on the Earth's surface and the layers of sedimentary rock beneath it. She likens her landscapes to portraiture where an artist attempts to capture the facts of a person's face, but also to reveal the character underneath.

It is deeply spiritual work that suggests the planet has more to offer than what we give it credit for. There is a soul, and we can tap into it, commune with it, if we acknowledge and embrace that things that are not obvious.

Gibbons fits in neatly here with his own rich landscapes that combine the breadth of traditional oil-paint landscapes of the West with the sharp lines and visual divisions you might see in a classic collage. The works are colorful and chunky.



Jeff Juhlin's uses a combination of paint, wax and paper and applies it to wood panels. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)

He starts by using oil or acrylic paint to depict the wide-open skies he sees around him in the rocky plains of Wyoming and Utah. Then he adds to the surface "Asian papers that are stained and somewhat translucent," as he says in his artist's statement. The papers come together to depict the land.

The paper is arranged in long, narrow horizontal strips that mirror the layers of rock and soil that make up the Earth's outer surface. His work asks us to look at the planet's present form as well as its history of growing and evolving over time, and to consider our personal relationships with this cycle.

The same is true of the work presented here by Pike and Gibbons. They all want to bring us closer to nature, to help us respect it, but also to partner with it in ways that make sense — and while giving all due respect to both the planet's ecological needs and our human desires to understand and control our surroundings.

THINGS TO DO • News, Review

The best Denver art exhibits of 2025 (including four you can still see)

Painters Kent Monkman and Pissarro, forest-inspired works, photography and more highlights



The Denver Art Museum presented the first major museum solo show by painter Kent Monkman. (Provided by the Denver Art Museum)



By **RAY MARK RINALDI** | media@rayrinaldi.com | The Denver Post

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Front Range galleries and museums gave us plenty to consider in 2025, offering up fresh takes on familiar names and introducing new talents to the scene. Here is a recap of the most memorable moments produced by some of the region's top visual art presenters. The good news: Several exhibits are still up and waiting to be seen.

“History is Painted by the Victors,” by Kent Monkman, Denver Art Museum, May

Without a doubt, this retrospective of work by painter Kent Monkman was the flashiest show of the year in this region. It was also a flashpoint, as visitors argued over whether Monkman is a talented artist with serious things to say or a sensationalist out to raise pulses with his revisionist takes on the history of the American West. The answer was both. The paintings, some of them large, offered a new viewpoint on Westward expansion, emphasizing the very (very) bad treatment of Indigenous people, while their over-the-top nature — colorful, overly-dramatic, and full of super-sized, queer sensibilities — made them almost too comical to be credible. There was plenty of

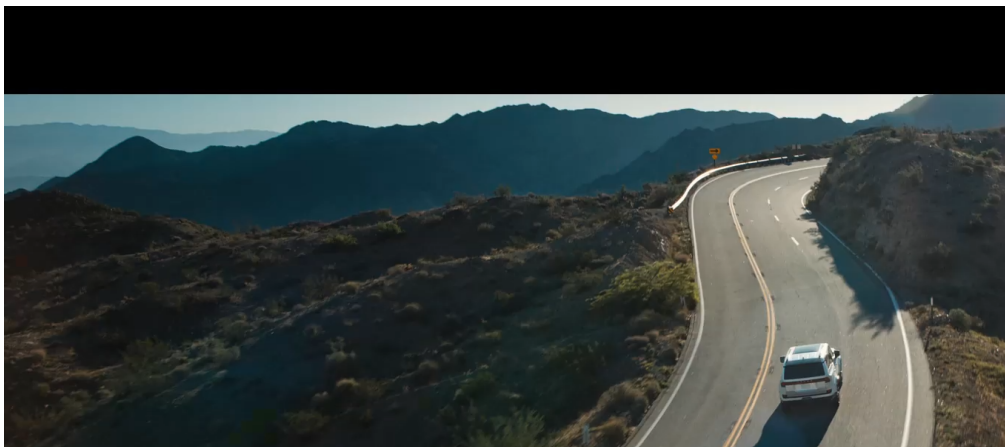
thinking (and chuckling) going on at this event, co-curated by DAM's John P. Lukavic and Léuli Eshrāghi of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

“Harmonious Dissonance,” by Bruce Price, at Redline Art Center through Jan. 11



The textile art show “Rosas y Revelaciones” continues through Jan. 11 at Denver’s Museo de las Américas. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)

This exhaustive assemblage of work by veteran Denver painter Bruce Price does everything a retrospective is supposed to do: showing visitors Price’s smart, complicated paintings but also the thinking process behind his various career moves. Curator Dean Sobel understood Price’s evolution but also the art world context that made space for his uneven, geometric paintings to come about. Price did pioneering work in this small corner of the painting scene, and “Harmonious Dissonance” gives him his due while giving the rest of us a reminder that Price, who was also a long-time teacher and mentor at art schools here, has had a serious impact on Colorado art history.



“What We Hold On To,” Black Cube Nomadic Museum, October

Black Cube has been a serious force on the regional visual arts scene for 10 years now, and this exhibit was meant to celebrate a decade of success. Curator Cortney Lane Stell made it a showcase for all of the artists who this wandering producer of installations and community-based projects has supported over time. More interesting, it introduced Black Cube Headquarters, a new, permanent exhibition space located in Englewood, a Denver suburb that could use a little more visual arts culture. It was a solid show that brought with it big hopes for the future.

“Rosas y Revelaciones,” Denver’s Museo de las Américas, continues through Jan. 11

This wide-ranging group show feels timeless, featuring contemporary textile makers who are inspired by the long-held tradition of incorporating images of the Virgin of Guadalupe into their work. The show is part fine art making and part religious devotion; the combo comes together into deeply meaningful objects. The show was curated by Maruca Salazar, who tapped the holdings of collector Linda Hanna for this array of shoes, dresses, smocks, wraps and other traditional items of clothing. The show needed more info to fully appreciate, but it was full of insight into parts of Mexico that many U.S. tourists never see.

“Embedded,” Melissa Furness, Arvada Center, July

While the region’s other important galleries have been ignoring serious shows by Colorado artists, the Arvada Center has stepped in with gusto. This solo exhibit by Melissa Furness showed how to do it right. It was an exhaustive retrospective — and, in a sense, a tribute to one of Denver’s most talented and prolific painters. This show got into the weeds in a good way, detailing Furness’s residencies, experiments, land works and other aspects of her career that fly under the radar. But the real thrill was just looking at this talented painter’s large canvases and watching how they evolved.

I was skeptical going into this exhaustive retrospective of work by Camille Pissarro. Of course he was a pioneer of Impressionism, one of the most famous painters ever to live, and pals with icons like Monet and Degas. But his work is less flashy, less iconic than that of his peers, and I wondered if it would hold up for a show this big in 2025. It did. The paintings are captivating, top-to-bottom. The reason: Curators Clarisse Fava-Piz and Claire Durand-Ruel put their show together with a relentless drive, organizing, explaining, contextualizing, so that viewers really got to understand the valuable contribution Pissarro made to his own time. Even if he is not your favorite Impressionist, this exhibit will help you appreciate his genius, and make you grateful for being able to visit a room full of his timeless work.



The Arvada Center produced a major mid-career retrospective by artist Melissa Furness in July. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)



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Nikki Rife "Fishes from the Forest" Open Gallery



Space Gallery presented new pieces by artist Nikki Pike who uses bark found in Colorado forests to make her work. Photo by Ray Mark Rinaldi

As a critic in this part of the country, I am always on the lookout for how artists are updating the tradition of Western art. Pike does that here in the most contemporary way. Her sculptures and wall-mounted works are made entirely from bark she found in Colorado forests, which she then shaped into geometric objects that hung frameless on the wall and filled the gallery floor. It was a rustic-meets-modern-art move that felt a lot like progress. Pike is always unpredictable; it will be interesting to see what she makes next.

“Biyáál,” Jaycee, Randall and Wayne Beyale, Union Hall, continues through Jan. 31 (extended)

This exhibit, curated by Esther Hernandez, is a revelation, introducing visitors to the work of a trio of related artists, all contributing their own voice to the canon of Indigenous art in the region. There is a sentimental vibe, of course; it is rare to see a show by a family of creative object-makers in any contemporary gallery these days. But it is not stuck there: The sculptures, paintings, projections and installations by these three each have their own personality and format, and all connect in their own ways to the shared sense of

Biennial of the Americas Festival 2025, downtown Denver, October

The biennial's 2025 fest was kind of an art show, kind of a shopping opportunity and kind of a party. Oh, and there was plenty of tequila, so it all added up to some high-quality fun while still feeling quite serious in its mission. We tend to think of biennials as massive, city-wide events that put art at the center of the action, but staging a celebration on that scale was not in the cards this year. Instead, organizers reinvented the form, creating a cross-cultural celebration that was intimate and community-minded while still feeling a little risky and experimental. The event, which took over empty storefronts in the struggling-but-earnest Writers Square shopping center, was the best reason to go back downtown in the post-pandemic era.



"The Honest Eye: Camille Pissarro's Impressionism" will be on display at the Denver Art Museum until Feb. 6. (Provided by the Denver Art Museum)

"Outside Influence: Photography in Colorado 1945-1995, Vicki Myhren Gallery, April

Curator Rupert Jenkins spent years researching the history of photography in Colorado, and this surprising show was the fruit of his labor in exhibition form. The work reminded locals who the important voices were over time, some of whom got plenty of credit for their work and others who were overlooked. The show was important because it documented how this art form evolved in both attitude and materials — not easy research to accomplish. But it also gave us a way of understanding the state of Colorado itself and how it matured over the past century as people emigrated here from other places in the rest of the country and contributed to regional identity. Jenkins is publishing a book on this topic soon. Keep an eye out for it.

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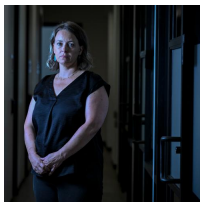
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