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Nebraska Life

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McCook gallery paints global picture

BY LAURYN HIGGINS

McCook was founded in 1882 to serve as a railroad center halfway between Denver and Omaha, connecting communities near and far. And though time has certainly passed, one local couple is keeping that spirit of connection alive and well through contemporary art.

Nestled inside the top floor of the Keystone Business Center is the 6th Floor Project, a gallery filled with just a fraction of Chad Graff and his wife, Joann Falkenburg's, 1,000-piece art collection.

The raw-concrete and open-beamed space is covered in paintings, sculptures,



Lucas Kotschwar

The 6th Floor Project gallery offers global artistic views, like this piece by Ike E. Morgan.

An advertisement for an art exhibition. On the left, a graphic features a large, colorful stained-glass butterfly with the text "Alex Heveri's" above it and "Glass in Flight 2" below it. The background is a light blue. On the right, a photograph shows two young boys, one in a blue shirt and the other in a light blue shirt, interacting with a large, colorful stained-glass sculpture of a butterfly and flower in a garden setting. The overall theme is the exhibition of large-scale glass art in an outdoor garden environment.

photography, hand-woven baskets and art collected throughout the couple's life. It's a kaleidoscope of colors, designs and materials. It's filled with benches pounded out of metal, abstract and realistic paintings of life in Nebraska, felt creations and faces carved into scrap pieces of wood.

"We've collected work we love, visually and narratively, and from artists we've often had the privilege to meet and to learn and appreciate where their work comes from," Graff said. "Art moves us; it informs our understanding of people and the world. It sounds like a cliche, but it's true: We can't imagine our lives without art."

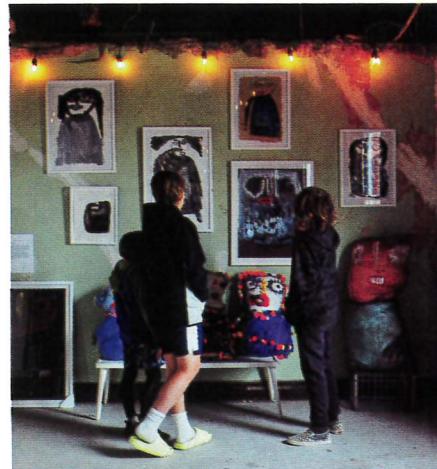
The pair, both natives of Nebraska (he from McCook and she from Harrison), began collecting in the early 1990s, when they lived on the Navajo Nation reservation in Arizona. There Graff worked as a high school teacher and Falkenburg worked for the Indian Health

Service. The couple later moved to Oakland, California.

Together they renovated their West Coast home and an apartment in Paris, and traveled the world meeting local artisans and collecting along the way. But in 2018, when Graff's nephew, Jared, showed them the empty sixth floor space, their goal became clear. It was time to bring their collection home to McCook and share it with others.

After a quick hit of some Nebraska elbow grease, the gallery was open. It now serves as a place for locals, students, educators and visitors to explore a small slice of the world of art and what it has to offer. And that's the way Graff and Falkenburg intended it to be.

"The opportunity to bring art from unexpected, under-appreciated creators to a rural space feels like a perfect fit," Graff said. "We've always been humbled by artists we've met, and it's an honor and an amazing experience to share their work with new audiences."



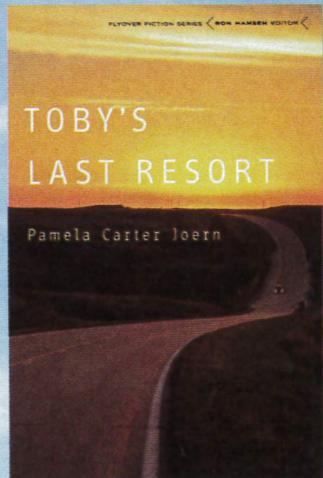
Lucas Kotschwar

These human-like sculptures by Latefa Noorzai delight guests with whimsy.

The 6th Floor Project is open by appointment, as well as Thursday evenings and Saturday afternoons this summer. Call or text (308) 340-7854, or e-mail 6thfloormccook@gmail.com.

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