



SPENCER  
MUSEUM OF ART

BACK  
YARD  
BASH

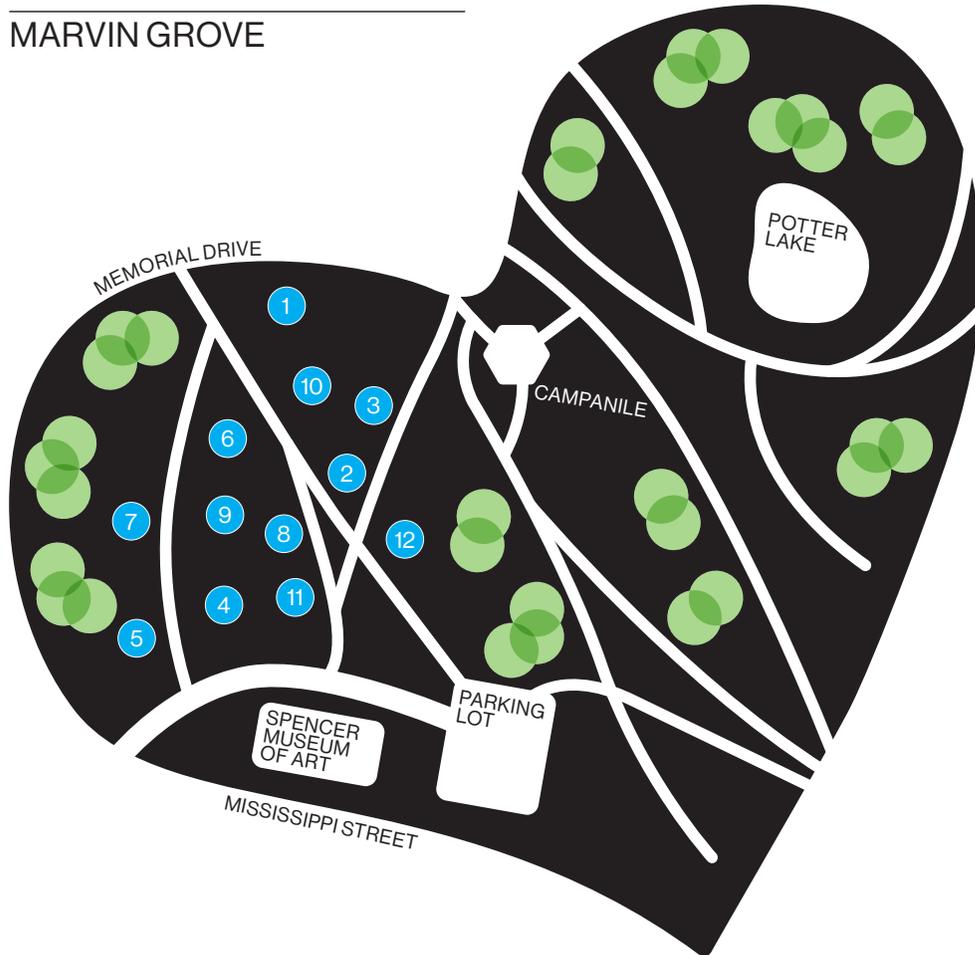
understories  
MAP & GUIDE

# BACKYARD BASH

## understories

OCTOBER 21–NOVEMBER 12, 2021

MARVIN GROVE



Backyard Bash 2021: *Understories* celebrates the interplay of nature, culture, and the character of community in Marvin Grove, the historic green space behind the Spencer Museum of Art. But whose backyard is it? What are the experiences of its Indigenous inhabitants—human and more-than-human? How do their stories intersect with those who live, work, and play here today? How do we come to understand our sense of place and how does it shape our understandings of ourselves, our environments, and one another? This year's theme—understories—explores these questions and expands on ideas in the KU Common Book *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer and the Common Work of Art *Native Hosts* by Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds.

In woodlands, the understory is the space between the canopy and forest floor where flora provides food and shelter for wildlife and promotes nutrient recycling. Its stories are written in the shadows and revealed in an acute geometry of light. It is here that humankind coexists with other lifeforms and life-sustaining features.

For Backyard Bash, *Understories* is a series of installations and activations that shine a light on stories untold and ideas about place through new creative work by students and activities facilitated by the Spencer Museum and partners. Part exhibition, part festival, Backyard Bash 2021: *Understories* is a platform for creative placemaking, place-honoring, restoration, and “re-story-ation.” The Grove becomes gallery, not by imposing traditional museum practices upon it, but by questioning, disrupting, and transforming those practices in service to the space, its systems, its collections, and collected stories. In the hands of students, *Understories* tells of lost prairies, celebrates enduring traditions, taps into childhood memories, transports us to sites of significance, and prompts us to engage with our environments in new ways.

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## 1. FUNGAL NETWORKING

Abbigail Dougherty / English

Beneath our feet, a complex network of underground filaments known as *mycelium* are transmitting messages and redistributing nutrients among the trees for the greater health of the Grove. Above ground, the mysteries of these networks sometimes manifest in the form of mushrooms. Abbigail Dougherty invites us into this network through a series of “mushroom mailboxes that act as waypoints for thought.” Seek out each mushroom to discover a hidden message and writing materials to prompt reflection and action.

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## 2. PASS ME THE MIC

Naomi Madu / Strategic Communications

A back-to-school birthday party changed the course of American music. Naomi Madu’s installation is a monument to the birth of hip hop in 1973 and what went down in the rec room—and in history—at 1520 Sedgwick Ave in the Bronx, where DJ Kool Herc played his first “breakbeat” turntable experiments at his sister’s birthday party. Nearly 50 years later, Madu’s street sign, microphone, and QR code–activated audio “restore agency to underrepresented communities to tell their own stories.” The combination of symbols and audio explore the intersections of hip-hop, Black liberation movements, Black storytelling, and issues of gentrification.

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## 3. ECHOES OF THE PRAIRIE

Morgan Siemers / Architecture

In 1878, KU Chancellor James Marvin led an effort to plant trees over this once rocky hollow punctuated with prairie grass resulting in the grove we explore today. This action destroyed indigenous ecosystems and obscured their stories. Morgan Siemers’s cabinet of echoes invites us to listen for the sounds of the prairie, restoring them to this space. Each compartment contains household materials and instructions for activation. Extending author Robin Wall Kimmerer’s ideas about plants as subjects not objects, Siemers invites you to transform common household objects into subjects of the prairie: “Listen intently to the sounds you are able to create and imagine yourself as part of the indigenous ecosystem.”

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## 4. ART IN PLACE: INDIGENOUS GAMES FOR UNDERSTANDING

Robert Hicks Jr. “Nokwsi” (Pyramid Lake Paiute) / Indigenous Studies & Behavioral Psychology

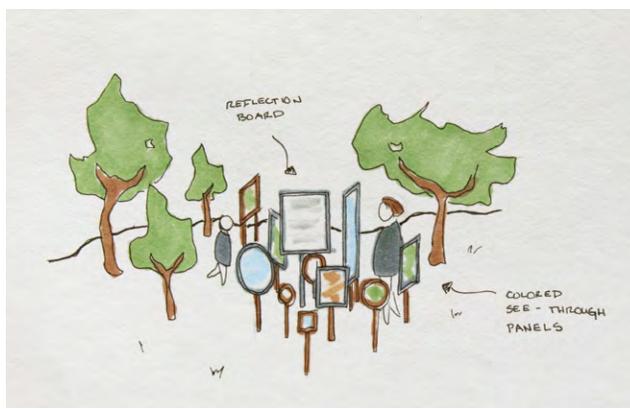
In the spirit of nomadic Paiute structures, Robert Hicks’s wigwam creates a space for sharing Indigenous games and storytelling. Meet the artist on October 22, 5–7PM, and October 23, 10AM–5PM, to learn and play Hand Games, a high energy hiding and guessing game of “sticks and bones,” immersive song, and strategic hand signals. Hicks explains “In Indigenous societies, the arts are aspects of public life and indispensable to ritual. Native people see painting as indistinct from dancing, dancing as indistinct from worship, and worship as indistinct from living.”

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## 5. SELF-REFLECTION

MacKenzie Greckel / Visual Art

MacKenzie Greckel characterizes her multimedia spheres as “organically shaped and sustainably made disco balls” created from debris collected on KU’s campus and scavenged from thrift stores, and the remains of a broken mirror. Each sphere carries the cast-off experiences of others situated among reflective shards, bringing light and color into the Grove as both fade throughout the season. Greckel asks: Are these disco balls fallen monuments to late-stage capitalism and its distortions? Are they seeds encoded with lessons for the future?



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## 6. BEYOND BIAS

Emily Almloff / Architecture

By nature, it’s difficult to recognize unconscious bias—the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understandings, actions, and feelings about people and places based on characteristics alone. Emily Almloff visualizes the phenomenon of bias through different colored lenses framing views of the Grove and other student work. By prompting us to notice subtle shifts in color, Almloff challenges us to “see through our own biases to become more receptive towards listening to others who may have different perspectives.”

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## 7. ASTERS AND GOLDENROD: DEFINING DUALITY

Ava Soteria Cully / Undecided

Ava Cully’s drift of vertical forms are a beacon in the Grove, signaling a reference to the native wildflowers aster and goldenrod and the pollinators drawn to their contrasting purple and yellow petals, as well as the chapter from *Braiding Sweetgrass* named for those flowers. Where they meet and mingle, Cully “tells the story of hidden beauty,” exploring the cross-pollination of knowledge, ideas of reciprocity between opposing forces, and the full spectrum of possibilities between them.



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## 8. THE ERASURE OF NORTH HOLLOW

Kirsten Taylor / Visual Art (Ceramics)

A clutch of native grasses bound between two curved timbers evokes the plow and yoke, which Kirsten Taylor reminds us were “the tools used to bend so much of nature to human desire.” No longer vibrant, upright, and windswept as they once stood in North Hollow—the area plowed and replanted with saplings to become Marvin Grove—Taylor’s grasses are dry, delicate, and turned sideways as reminders of the threats to the “last remaining tallgrass prairies which exist behind fences, closed in by property lines.”

**images, top and bottom:** Emily Almloff, sketch for *Beyond Bias* > Kirsten Taylor, sketch for *The Erasure of North Hollow*

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## 9. USELESS ABUSE

James Aaron Cadotte (Miniconjou Lakota) / Haskell Indian Nations University, Business Administration

James Aaron Cadotte’s painted panels assert “The Land will always persist...despite our own atrocities and beauties.” A pattern of gray cracks contrasts with colorful flora. They hint at the life forces pushing back against our sidewalks, structures, and streets and bear witness to humankind’s attacks on the land. Splattered red paint stirs up ideas of death and loss, but also of life and regeneration.

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## 10. FLOWER TELLER

Gwendolyn Joslin / Environmental Science

Flowers bring good fortune to those who tend them. Gwendolyn Joslin’s giant origami fortune teller dispenses wisdom from its “petals,” affirming plants’ capacity as teachers. Bring the *Flower Teller* to life using the syllable counts indicated to discover common, scientific, and Indigenous names of plants, and Native American knowledge and tradition drawn from the book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Joslin taps into childhood wonder and whimsy, reminding us “as we grow older, we forget to play outside, have fun, and learn. Take some time today for enjoyment and reconnection”.

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## 11. VANISHED GROWTH

Anne Rogers / Visual Art (Textiles / Fiber)

A fragment from the doorframe of a vernacular American home marks a threshold between two eras and frames of mind: Indigenous sovereignty and practices of reciprocity with the land and Euro-American settlers’ fixation on turning the Midwest into a forest to source wood and build houses. Like a parent recording the height of a growing child on the edge of a doorframe, Anne Rogers documents the height of “native prairie plants that would have been present on Mount Oread before white settlers drastically altered the landscape.” With new investigations into the traumatic and deadly experiences of Indigenous children forced into Native American boarding schools, these notations grow in meaning.

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## 12. FOOTSTEPS OF OUR ANCESTORS

Tweesna Rose Mills (Shoshone-Yakama-Umatilla Nations) / Film & Media Studies

Weaving together songs and stories before an immersive painted backdrop, Tweesna Rose Mills transmits the history of her ancestors and connections to the Lands and Waters, including the area now known as Lawrence, Kansas. “The songs and stories I plan to share were meant to live on and to be experienced. They integrate different Indigenous peoples histories, and walks of life, and how we are all connected.” This is a live performance. Check the Museum’s website for dates and times.

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**Explore other installations and activations by KU classes that coincide with Backyard Bash 2021: *Understories*:**

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### OCTOBER 21–29

Visit Potter Lake to discover research by KU Field Ecology students and join a StoryTour of green spaces on campus. Check the Museum’s website for dates and times.

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### NOVEMBER 8

You can’t miss *What Language Looks Like*, a series of giant word installations in the Grove and across campus created by first year Architecture and Design students to challenge the meaning of words and disrupt the status quo.

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**VISIT OUR WEBSITE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT  
THIS YEAR'S BACKYARD BASH AND EVENTS.**

**Backyard Bash 2021: *Understories* is generously supported by KU Student Senate, Friends of the Art Museum, Steve Sears & John Lavryssen, and the Judith M. Cooke Native American Art Fund.**

**Thanks to our programming partners: KU Natural History Museum, KU Painting Club, Field Ecology students, Museum Public Education students**

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## **EVENTS**

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### **OPEN HOUSE/OPEN GROVE**

**October 21, 5–7PM & October 22, 10AM–5PM**

Meet the artists and tour their “understories” at 2PM on Oct 22 and enjoy other activities throughout the event.

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### **KU PAINTING CLUB OPEN SESSIONS**

**October 22, 29, & November 5, 4–6PM**

Enjoy plein air painting as a spectator or bring supplies to sketch or paint with the club.

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### **HALLOWEEN IN THE WOODS**

**October 30, 2–4PM**

Trick-or-treat among the trees with KU's two museums and enjoy art and science activities and take home kits while supplies last.

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**[WWW.SPENCERART.KU.EDU](http://WWW.SPENCERART.KU.EDU)**