



*Foragers*, created by contemporary artist Summer Wheat, fills the four-story windows in Mint Museum Uptown's Robert Heywood Morrison Atrium.

# TRANSFORMED BY COLOR

Summer Wheat's soaring four-story Robert Haywood Morrison Atrium installation electrifies grand public space at Mint Museum Uptown.

BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER

Contemporary American expressionist artist Summer Wheat first experienced Mint Museum Uptown's Robert Haywood Morrison Atrium in the same fashion most museumgoers do—as a curious visitor excited to explore the museum's notable collection. One year after her initial visit, Wheat completed her largest project to date: a monumental 96-panel “stained glass” installation, *Foragers*. The jewel-toned work celebrates traditions of women craft-makers and providers throughout history.

There's no small irony in the backstory of the project, where the friendship and collaboration of three strong women in the arts ultimately led to the Mint's hosting one of the most significant transformational public works of art ever showcased in Charlotte.

It was early 2019, when then-independent curator, now Mint Museum Chief Curator & Curator of Contemporary

ABOVE: Summer Wheat (American, 1977-). *Foragers*, 2020, colored vinyl on mylar, 805.5 x 738.5 inches. T0263.1a-qqqq. Photo credit: Chris Edwards

Art, Jennifer Sudul Edwards, PhD, included Wheat's work as part of *Faces in the Crowd*, a special gallery exhibition at Charlotte's SOCO Gallery. SOCO, of course, was founded by tastemaker, art-lover, and Mint patron Chandra Johnson. “Chandra, being from my home state of Oklahoma, and having established roots there, is one of the few people in the art community who understands where I've come from and how it influences my work,” Wheat says.

Sudul Edwards, Wheat, and Johnson have a connection fueling their interactions, creating a synergy around art that is energizing. When Jay Everette, Wells Fargo's senior vice president of philanthropy and corporate social responsibility, visited the SOCO exhibition, he was impressed with Wheat's work and her interest in representing women on their own terms in strong productive roles. He saw an opportunity to bring her perspective to a larger audience.

“The Wells Fargo Foundation Women Artist Fund was created to help reconcile the imbalance of female representation in museum collections,” Everette says, referencing a recent Artnet study showing only 11 percent of all acquisitions at 26 prominent American museums over the past decade were by female artists. “Working with the Mint to acquire a significant work by Summer (*With Side, With Shoulder*, a large work where Wheat's technique extrudes paint through wire mesh) fit well with the foundation's goals and also led to exploring how we could make her art more accessible to as many people in the community as possible,” he says.

While Wheat was in Charlotte, Sudul Edwards brought her to Mint Museum Uptown and planted the seed of an idea for what would become *Foragers*. “One of the things that Summer and I talked about when I was first hired here as the chief curator,” Sudul Edwards says, “was how she could fill this giant airspace with color and light. Since she had already worked on doing her collage vinyl on windows before, we thought that would be a brilliant way to address the space in the middle of the atrium.”

With support from the Wells Fargo Foundation, the project came together quickly. With *Foragers*, each piece of colored vinyl is hand drawn, cut, and laboriously layered into place. Wheat worked from initial renderings, and created test panels in her Brooklyn, N. Y. studio and then tried them out in Charlotte. From there the work accelerated and culminated in a several-day installation in early September of 2020.



Artist Summer Wheat in front of *Foragers*. Photo by Chris Edwards

“One of the main challenges and what I needed to overcome with the space was connecting the top of the windows to the bottom, because it's so tall. I felt like the piece needed to speak to the viewer in a way with a connection from the top to the bottom” Wheat says.

The vibrant panels give the illusion of stained glass, and fill the atrium with the story of female makers and laborers who have been vital to society's architecture. Viewers encounter clay workers, basket makers, fishers and farmers, woodworkers, weavers, and quilters in the work.

“*Foragers* presents a tradition in which women were the original hunters, technologists, and artists,” Wheat says. “This array of women connected by geometric patterns echoes the psychological space of women supporting each other. They are marching together, connecting to creatures from land and water, demonstrating their inherent link to natural elements and to the intricate depths of the unconscious.”

The work is already becoming a must-visit destination in Charlotte. And given access to the atrium is open to the public without charge, it is certain to become enormously popular.

“It is a dynamic installation,” Sudul Edwards says. “It's exactly what a giant volumetric space needs: a piece that's animated, that is kinetic and not static. It offers people a place to come and be contemplative and find moments of peace from all the activities of our daily lives.”

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