

TOPOGRAPHIES

MAPPING BEING AND BELONGING

JUNE 13 - SEPTEMBER 20, 2026

ANNA K. MEREDITH GALLERY DES MOINES ART CENTER

CURATED BY ELIZABETH GOLLNICK



Topography (drawn from the ancient Greek words *topos*, meaning place, and *graphia*, meaning writing) is the creation of a visual system that describes both the natural and human-made features of a place. Beyond its technical definition, this term has taken on deep philosophical significance. Mapping is an act of interpretation that organizes sprawling information, draws out latent patterns, and lays bare invisible power structures. In this exhibition, artists consider mapping as a metaphor for navigating both the physical world and the societal forces that shape it.

BONEYARD

warm clocks wake the dead on judgment day
 kerseene lamps light the path to glory
 the last cup, plate and spoon used by the departed
 should be placed on the grave
 keep a child safe from a dead person's spirit
 by passing the child over the dead person's
 body or coffin

If you suspect that a person has been killed by hoodlums, put a cassava
 stick in the hand and he will punish the murderer: If he was killed by
 violence, put the stick in one hand and a knife and fork in the other.
 The spirit of the murdered one will first drive the slayer insane, and
 then kill him with great violence.

If people die wishing to see someone, they will stay long and warm
 for days. They are still waiting.

If a person dies who has not had his fling in this world, he will turn on
 his face in his grave.

I got a black cat bone
 I got a mole tooth
 I got John the Companion
 I'm gonna mess with you



As philosopher Henri Lefebvre proposed, the space we move through is not a neutral environment: “Space, which seems homogeneous, which appears given as a whole in its objectivity, in its pure form, such as we determine it, is a social product.” In a moment of great civic disruption, when the preservation of boundaries and borders has become a rallying cry for nationalism and xenophobia, these artists propose alternative understandings of space. They claim mapping as a deeply human act, rooted not just in geography but also in memory, identity, and the creative process.

Some artists in this exhibition imbue land, sea, and sky with symbolic meanings by exploring how landscape art considers questions of geography, ecology, and sociology. Through his dispassionate documentation of a dumping ground outside San Francisco, Lewis Baltz proposes a corrective to the romanticized tradition of landscape photography in the United States, which was often used to legitimize nineteenth-century territorial expansion. For Carrie Mae Weems, the Sea Islands off the coast of the southeastern United States become a site for evoking the oral history of contemporary Gullah Geechee people, linking their African lineage to the landscape they still inhabit. Mary Mattingly brings together landscape photography and the still life tradition, constructing studio scenes that expose how humans and institutions treat the natural world as a reservoir of resources to be extracted and consumed. She explains, “I build still lifes out of ‘small’ objects that carry very large geographies.” In one of Ana Mendieta’s earliest “earth-body” works, made while she was a graduate student at the University of Iowa, the artist merges her body with a grassy field, activating the land with her breath. Kiki Smith, meanwhile, considers the moon’s gravitational pull on the tides and the cycles of the body. Through digital montage and manipulation of imagery filmed during his travels, Sky Hopinka evokes the experience of a spirituality tied to the land and Ho-Chunk sacred stories. Trevor Paglen’s camera reveals systems of surveillance concealed within natural landscapes in blurry photographs of military bases and orbital satellites. By manifesting the limits of sight as a form of knowledge, he exposes how power operates in the shadows.

The concept of a map as a diagram, a symbolic evocation of space, inspires other artists to dissolve the boundaries between representation and abstraction.



Richard Long (British, born 1945) | *River Avon Mud Drawings*, 1998



“Maps and charts visualize what is abstract in nature as well as what is too immense to be seen.”

NANCY GRAVES

Nancy Graves (American, 1940 – 1995) | *Montes Apenninus Region of the Moon*, 1972



Nancy Graves transforms cartographic information gathered by a lunar satellite into a meditation on shape and color. “Maps and charts visualize what is abstract in nature as well as what is too immense to be seen,” she explains. Jack Whitten draws on his training as a pilot at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to imagine an abstract space of the mind where creativity flies free. Whitten argues that the abandonment of logical systems is essential to the artistic process: “You throw away all your navigational tools. . . . Just go by your heart, go by your feeling.” Mark Bradford builds up remnants of construction paper, old newsprint, posters, and flyers found in his neighborhood in Los Angeles and then pares away these strata to create a map of Philadelphia. He refers to his work as “social abstraction” because the materials he uses hold the residue of urban social, economic, and political life. Julie Mehretu and Guillermo Kuitica are inspired by abstract systems such as maps, architectural diagrams, and musical scores, but they untether such marks from their original meaning, considering how lines and shapes can skirt the boundaries of symbolic representation. Speaking about the process of making the print in this exhibition, Mehretu explains: “If I put too much more in it, it will become definitive. I want it to allude, suggest.”

In other works, artists use materials to represent both personal and historical narratives of place. Porcelain, tea, and lotus leaves connect Yu-Wen Wu to her story as an immigrant from Taiwan and to the broader histories of the Chinese diaspora. “Material and materiality have always been fundamental to me as metaphors to express emotion, memories, and storytelling,” she notes. For Otobong Nkanga, raku (smoke-fired) ceramics evoke the ecological devastation of forest fires as well as an artistic tradition

that can be traced back to sixteenth-century Japan. In Richard Long’s “mud drawings,” he treats the land itself as both medium and subject, depicting his relationship with the natural environment near his home in Bristol, England. For Andy Goldsworthy, a hand-built cairn, constructed from local Iowa stone and situated amid the prairie grass of Iowa, explores the tension between monumentality and ephemerality.

The artists in *Topographies* collectively propose that mapping is far more than a technical exercise — it is an act of imagination, resistance, and self-determination. Space, as these works remind us, is never simply given; it is contested and continually remade through human experience. To think topographically is to perform a political act that transforms the spaces through which we move into the places we inhabit.

NOTES

- 1 Mary Mattingly to the curator, January 6, 2026.
- 2 Nancy Graves quoted in *Nancy Graves*, exh. cat. (La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1973), 3.
- 3 Jack Whitten, oral history interview with Judith Olch Richards, December 1–3, 2009, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 4 Kathan Brown, “Julie Mehretu: Unclosed and the Residual,” *Crown Point Press Newsletter* (Spring 2008): 3.
- 5 Yu-Wen Wu, “Yutong Shi and Yu-Wen Wu,” in *Under the Same Moon = Yuè xià*, ed. Yutong Shi (Yu-Wen Wu, 2024), 24.

“I build still lifes out of ‘small’ objects that carry very large geographies.”

MARY MATTINGLY





“It is easier to photograph the depths of the solar system than it is to photograph the recesses of the military industrial complex.”





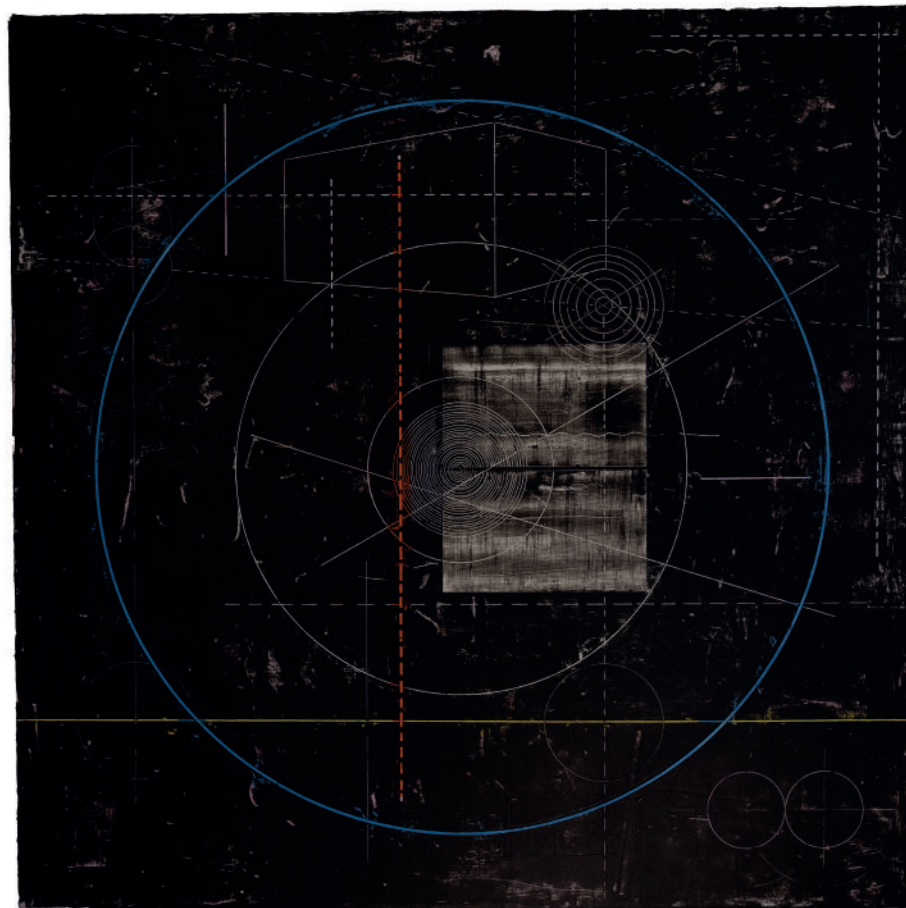
We imagined the colors were their dreams,
churning away in their memories.
Mnemonics of shape and reason,
on syncope and swaying,
as the anxieties of the gods sit heavy in the past.

SKY HOPINKA



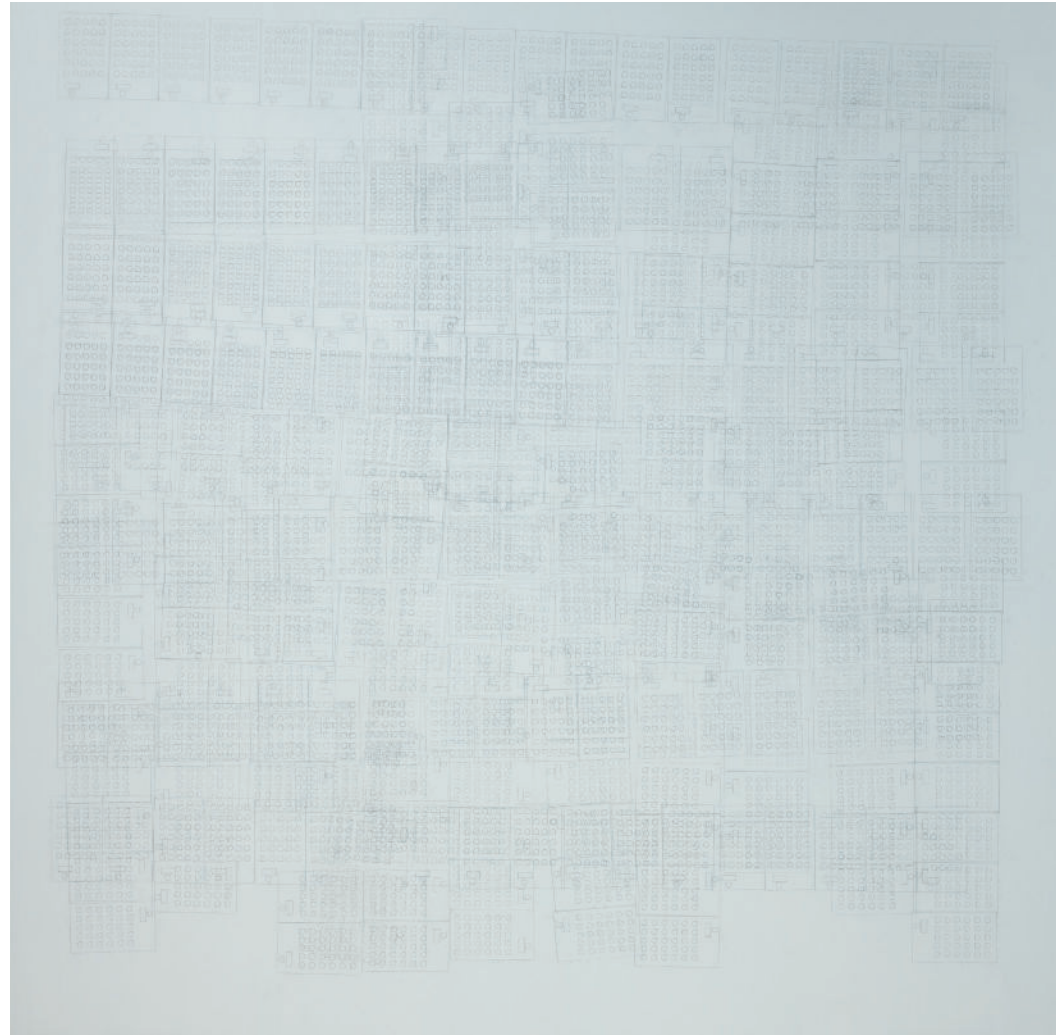
“Get rid of all your tools.
Learn to plot, to navigate,
no tools. Just go by your
heart, go by your feeling.”

JACK WHITTEN



“I want my materials to actually
have the memories—the
cultural, personal memories that
are lodged in the object.”

MARK BRADFORD



“Ultimately, it’s about finding that one thing that is connected to another, to another, to another. Life is a little bit like putting all these bits in place.”

ANDY GOLDSWORTHY

“If I put too much more in it,
it will become definitive.
I want it to allude, suggest.”

JULIE MEHRETU



“My works connect us to our shared histories, not just through land and geography, but through emotions shaped by events and encounters.”

OTOBONG NKANGA



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

[PAGE 19]

Lewis Baltz (American, 1945–2014)

Candlestick Point, 1988

Seventy-two gelatin silver prints and twelve chromogenic prints

Sheet (each): 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm)

Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;

Gift from the artist, 1989.8.a-.ffff

© Lewis Baltz Estate

Bernd Becher (German, 1931–2007)

Hilla Becher (German, 1934–2015)

Hochöfen (Blast Furnaces) Image V, from the series “Typologies”, 2007

Digital pigment print on photo paper

Sheet: 35 1/2 x 44 in. (90.2 x 111.8 cm)

Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Purchased with funds from the Gardner and Florence Call Cowles Foundation in memory of Thomas Hutchinson, 2009.68

[PAGE 15, DETAIL ON INSIDE COVERS]

Mark Bradford (American, born 1961)

My Whole Family is from Philly, 2014

Mixed media on canvas

Canvas: 102 x 144 in. (259.1 x 365.8 cm)

Courtesy of Masterworks

© Mark Bradford; Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Robbert Flick (Canadian, active United States, born 1939)

East of Lancaster, California, from the series “Sequential Views”, 1981

Vintage gelatin silver composite print

Sheet: 16 x 19 7/8 in. (40.6 x 50.5 cm)

Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;

Gift of Steven Schwartz, 2017.145

Frank Gohlke (American, born 1942)

Aerial View — Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1981–1982

Vintage gelatin silver print

Image: 6 1/8 x 18 5/8 in. (15.6 x 47.3 cm)

Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;

Gift of Steven Schwartz, 2017.146

[PAGE 17]

Andy Goldsworthy (British, born 1956)

Prairie Cairn/ For My Father/ Grinnell, Iowa, 2001–2002

Suite of cibachrome prints

Sheet (each): 22 9/16 x 68 1/4 in. (57.3 x 173.4 cm)

Purchased with funds from the Coffin Fine Arts Trust;

Nathan Emory Coffin Collection of the Des Moines

Art Center, 2002.15.k, .l, and .o

© Andy Goldsworthy

[PAGE 5]

Nancy Graves (American, 1940–1995)

Montes Apenninus Region of the Moon, 1972

Acrylic on canvas

Overall: 72 x 96 in. (182.9 x 243.8 cm)

Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Gift of the Jay H. and Beverly B. Perry Foundation, Inc., Scarsdale, New York, in Memory of Mr. A.H. Blank, 1973.2

© Nancy Graves/Artist Rights Society (ARS) New York

[PAGES 12–13]

Sky Hopinka (Ho-Chunk Nation/Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians, born 1984)

Mnemonics of Shape and Reason, 2021

HD video, stereo, color

Running Time: 4 min 12 sec

Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;

Purchased with funds from the Pamela Bass-Bookey and Harry Bookey Moving-Image and Time-Based Art Fund, 2025.1

© Sky Hopinka. Image appears courtesy of the Artist and The Green Gallery, Milwaukee

[PAGE 16]

Guillermo Kuitca (Argentinian, born 1961)

Poema Pedagógico IV, 1996

Graphite and acrylic on canvas

Canvas: 74 x 75 x 1 11/16 in. (188 x 190.5 x 4.3 cm)

Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;

Purchased with funds from the Des Moines Art Center 75th Anniversary Campaign, 2023.31

© Guillermo Kuitca

[PAGE 4]

Richard Long (British, born 1945)

River Avon Mud Drawings, 1998
Grano-lithograph on paper

Image: 17 3/4 x 12 13/16 in. (45.1 x 32.5 cm)
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of the Des Moines Art Center Print Club in honor
of Richard and Kay Ward, 1999.12.1
© Richard Long/Artist Rights Society (ARS) New York

Richard Long (British, born 1945)

River Avon Mud Drawings, 1998
Grano-lithograph on paper

Image: 17 3/4 x 12 13/16 in. (45.1 x 32.5 cm)
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of the Des Moines Art Center Print Club in honor
of Richard and Kay Ward, 1999.12.2

Richard Long (British, born 1945)

River Avon Mud Drawings, 1998
Grano-lithograph on paper

Image: 17 3/4 x 12 13/16 in. (45.1 x 32.5 cm)
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of the Des Moines Art Center Print Club in honor
of Richard and Kay Ward, 1999.12.3

[PAGE 9]

Mary Mattingly (American, born 1978)

Over and Over and, from the series "...There
is Still Poetry", 2018

Chromogenic dye coupler print
Image: 30 x 30 1/8 in. (76.2 x 76.5 cm)
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of Mary Mattingly, 2018.14
© Mary Mattingly

[PAGE 8]

Mary Mattingly (American, born 1978)

Between Bears Ears and Daneros Mine, from the series
"...There Is Still Poetry", 2018

Chromogenic dye coupler print
Image: 29 3/8 x 30 in. (74.6 x 76.2 cm)
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collection; Gift of
Laura Burkhalter in honor of Amy Jane Burkhalter, 2026.5
© Mary Mattingly

[PAGE 18, DETAIL ON BACK COVER]

Julie Mehretu (American, born Ethiopia, born 1970)

Unclosed, 2007
Color hard-ground etching with spit bite aquatint and
drypoint on paper

Plate: 35 3/4 x 44 5/8 in. (90.8 x 113.3 cm)
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of Jim and Ellen Hubbell, 2020.36
© Julie Mehretu

[PAGE 10]

Ana Mendieta (American, born Cuba, 1948 –1985)

Grass Breathing, ca. 1974
Super 8 film, color, silent; Super 8 to 2K/HD DPX/ProRes
file (2014)

Running Time: 4 min 1 sec
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Purchased with funds from the Stanley and Gail Richards
Art Acquisition Endowment; the Sharon Simmons
Art Acquisitions Fund; and the Edmundson Art Foundation,
Inc., 2025.11
© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC / Artists
Right Society (ARS), New York

[PAGE 20]

Otobong Nkanga (Nigerian, born 1974)

Beacon - Cadence, 2024
Ceramic, steel, cat's claw
Overall: 70 7/8 x 17 3/8 x 17 3/8 in. (180 x 44.1 x 44.1 cm)
Collection of Lucilo Peña and Lee Cobb
© Otobong Nkanga; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Trevor Paglen (American, born 1974)

White Sands Missile Range; Alamogordo, New Mexico;
Distance ~ 35 Miles, 2012
Chromogenic print
Image: 60 x 48 in. (152.4 x 121.9 cm)
Courtesy of the artist, Jessica Silverman, and Pace Gallery

[PAGE 11]

Trevor Paglen (American, born 1974)

Open Hangar; Cactus Flats, NV; Distance ~ 18 miles;
10:04 a.m., 2007
Chromogenic print
Sheet: 30 x 36 in. (76.2 x 91.4 cm)
Courtesy of the artist, Jessica Silverman, and Pace Gallery
© Trevor Paglen; Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman

Trevor Paglen (American, born 1974)

PAN (Unknown; USA-207), 2010
Chromogenic print
Sheet: 60 x 48 in. (152.4 x 121.9 cm)
Courtesy of the artist, Jessica Silverman, and Pace Gallery

[PAGES 6 –7]

Kiki Smith (American, born 1954)

Tidal, 1998
Photogravure, photolithography and silkscreen on paper
Overall: 14 x 112 x 18 in. (35.6 x 284.5 x 45.7 cm)
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Purchased
with funds from the Edmundson Art Foundation, Inc., 1999.3
© Kiki Smith

Carrie Mae Weems (American, born 1953)

Untitled (House), from the series "Sea Islands", 1992
Three gelatin silver prints and one text panel
Overall: 41 7/8 x 62 3/4 in. (106.4 x 159.4 cm)
Image (visual (each)): 19 3/8 x 19 3/8 in. (49.2 x 49.2 cm)
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Gift of the
Bohen Foundation, 1996.6.a-.d

[PAGE 2]

Carrie Mae Weems (American, born 1953)

Untitled (Boneyard), from the series "Sea Islands", 1992
Three gelatin silver prints and one text panel
Overall: 61 1/4 x 40 3/4 in. (155.6 x 103.5 cm)
Image (visual (each)): 19 1/8 x 19 1/8 in. (48.6 x 48.6 cm)
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of the Bohem Foundation, 1996.7.a-.d
© Carrie Mae Weems

Carrie Mae Weems (American, born 1953)

Untitled (Boone Plantation), from the series
"Sea Islands", 1992
One silver silver print and one text panel
Image (a, visual): 30 5/8 x 30 5/8 in. (77.8 x 77.8 cm)
Image (b, visual): 19 3/8 x 19 3/8 in. (49.2 x 49.2 cm)
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of the Bohem Foundation, 1996.10.a-.b

Carrie Mae Weems (American, born 1953)

Untitled (Ebo Landing), from the series "Sea Islands", 1992
Two silver prints and one text panel
Overall: 61 1/4 x 20 3/8 in. (155.6 x 51.8 cm)
Image (visual, each): 19 1/8 x 19 1/8 in. (48.6 x 48.6 cm)
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of the Bohem Foundation, 1996.11.a-.c

[PAGE 14]

Jack Whitten (American, 1939 – 2018)

Dead Reckoning, 1980
Acrylic on canvas
Canvas: 64 x 64 in. (162.6 x 162.6 cm)
Collection of Wellabe, Des Moines, IA
© Jack Whitten/Artist Rights Society (ARS) New York
Photo: Cory Doss

Yu-Wen Wu (Taiwanese, born 1958)

States of Being, 2023 – 2026
Mixed media
Overall: 14 x 12 ft. (168 1/16 x 144 1/16 in.)
Courtesy of the artist and Praise Shadows, Boston

This gallery guide is published
in conjunction with the exhibition

TOPOGRAPHIES

MAPPING BEING AND BELONGING

June 13–September 20, 2026
Anna K. Meredith Gallery
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
desmoinesartcenter.org

CURATED BY
Associate Curator Elizabeth Gollnick, Ph.D.

DESIGN
Connie Wilson

PHOTOGRAPHY
Rich Sanders, Des Moines, unless otherwise noted

SUPPORT FOR THIS EXHIBITION IS PROVIDED BY

THE
HARRIET S. AND J. LOCKE
MACOMBER
ART CENTER FUND

JACQUELINE AND MYRON BLANK
EXHIBITION FUND



SUSTAINING SUPPORT MADE POSSIBLE BY
THE ANNA K. MEREDITH ENDOWMENT TRUST

DES
MOINES
ART
CENTER

EDMUNDSON ART FOUNDATION, INC.
4700 GRAND AVENUE | DES MOINES, IOWA 50312
515.277.4405 | desmoinesartcenter.org

