



Portland2016: A Biennial of Contemporary Art

Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, Portland, OR

It is old hat at this point for a critic to write another think piece about why biennials and art fairs are terrible, or, if you don't think they're terrible, what they *mean* in a globalized art context. For better or worse, however, there is no such thing as a global art world. International disparities of power do not allow for a free and seamless exchange of ideas, no matter how much art historians and critics want to convince us otherwise so that they can get funding to travel the world for the summer (on someone else's dime). The Portland Biennial requires a different kind of analysis, since it is undeniably and unabashedly unique to the Pacific Northwest. There is nothing provincial about it, however. Instead, the exhibition illustrates how a diverse team of artists and curators can deliver something refreshingly simple and introspective, without vainly aspiring to be comprehensive.

Michelle Grabner, the biennial's curator, went on more than 100 studio visits across Oregon—which in itself is a feat that should be recognized—to select the 34 artists featured. In collaboration with an array of venues across the state, these artists have been commissioned to create works that interact with the Oregonian landscape. Prioritizing community involvement in exhibitions of this scale is de rigueur these days, but what is unique about the Portland Biennial is that it takes a “grassroots” approach that actually works. Manifesta 11, for example, was pretentiously titled *What People Do for Money* and, like many other biennials before it, attempted to pair artists with community members of Zürich. For the most part, though, the resulting “Joint Ventures” retained an enormous air of exclusivity and disjointedness from the realities of the host city. (One exception was Jon Kessler's manic sculpture, installed in the luxury watch and jewelry

store Les Ambassadeurs, where it subversively juxtaposed staid high culture with the artist's chaotic signature automatons.)

Conversely, the Portland Biennial felt very much like a community effort, in which multiple parties were invested. Young artists, and young gallerists participating as venues, seemed to seize the opportunity to take unprecedented control over their work. When art made its way out of the gallery space, things got even more interesting. Avantika Bawa's installation in the derelict Astor Hotel in Astoria, for instance, was both a personal project (inasmuch as architectural forms have been central to her artistic interests) and an inventive community-building effort. Bawa filled the abandoned lobby with beautiful scaffolding reminiscent of sacred architecture, thereby extending her interest in site-specificity and mixing functional and nonfunctional space. At the same time, the intervention illustrates how a once-lively city landmark might be repurposed in a productive way—making for an impactful combination of the spiritual, the personal, and the secular. Bawa creates a space for reflection that is deeply connected to her own practice, even as it reverberates with the history of her host city.

In a similar vein of ruin and reuse, Heidi Schwegler created an extraordinary menagerie of repurposed objects within the strange, Pepto-Bismol-pink-accented showroom of the abandoned Hazen Hardware building in Clatskanie, OR. Blinds dented by shotgun pellets and tar-black faux trees mingled seamlessly with the commercial-industrial confines of a hardware store. Visiting this space was the only time I really felt legitimized invoking *Twin Peaks*; Schwegler's installation was uncannily reminiscent of the Black Lodge, minus the art deco statuary and backward-moving time. Above

all, it felt wonderful to be in a “gallery” where I could actually move around and observe without fear of stepping on somebody or something as is the case in any New York or Los Angeles venue.

I had the pleasure of seeing an off-site commission in progress when I visited Jessica Jackson Hutchins' Portland studio. Although her installation in the Christian Science Reading Room in nearby Pendleton, OR, was not yet open when I visited, what I saw in her studio suggested incredible things to come: Hutchins' work has all the analytical and historical intensity of Man Ray, Duchamp, and other members of the 20th-century avant-garde, but none of the homophobia, masculinism, or pretense. Her works are fragile and tough, sexy and aloof, conceptual and emotional; in fact, she detaches those descriptors from their roots in gendered dichotomies. Seeing Hutchins' work installed in Pendleton alone will be worth another trip.

However, anyone lacking the time to visit the satellite presentations will find a lot to check out at Portland's Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, the organizational hub of the biennial. On one wall of the charming space is a 3-D platform featuring work from Hutchins, Natalie Ball, and Renee Couture that is reminiscent of the best of Kiki Smith's or Robert Gober's work—a delightful mishmash of objects surreal and mundane. On the other side, there is a wall of artwork hung salon-style that, to my excitement, had a strong showing of paintings. Gabriel Manca's *Hyperbole is Your Friend* (2009) was a standout that combined Joan Miró-esque swirls of paint with a very precise and beautiful artist-made frame. (I'm a sucker for artist frames because of Sarah Charlesworth. Call me old-fashioned!) Also of interest was Laurie Danial's *streamer* (2016), which reminded me of an even more frenetic version of an Amy Sillman canvas.

If you require some sort of grand statement about the state of biennial culture or the relevance of such exhibitions, what I would say definitively is that I have never before seen so many women artists in one place at one time. This is not tokenism; this is, from what I saw, a truly feminist and truly egalitarian biennial. It goes without saying that any biennial will falter in some areas by nature of the area's demographics, but the Portland Biennial was very diverse, and, perhaps more importantly, shockingly inviting. Kids played amid the art on opening night; people seemed eager to talk about their work. It was a far cry from anything I've seen in New York, to be sure. This is not to position the biennial as “folksy.” What I mean to say is that it is clear that Grabner's holistic approach created something really spectacular—a fascinating cross section of the art of the Northwest, which doubtless has implications for the rest of the country as well.

—William J. Simmons

ABOVE: Heidi Schwegler, *No Social Function*, 2016, road sign, paint [photo: Mario Gallucci; courtesy of the artist and Disjecta Contemporary Art Center]