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Engaging the State: The Portland Biennial's Sprawling Joys

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | JULY 20, 2016

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Installation view of "Salon: Portland2016, The Studio Visits" at the Disjecta Contemporary Art Center (Courtesy of Disjecta Contemporary Art Center / Photo by Beth Conyers)

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One of my first stops at the [Portland Biennial](http://portlandbiennial.org/) (<http://portlandbiennial.org/>) was a ramshackle detached garage that did not look long for this world. Inside huddled a readymade sculptural installation — including a motorcycle, a baby carriage, and a mini-fridge — so workaday that it was easily mistaken for someone's storage pile. But the site was a gallery (albeit of the very DIY, one-night pop-up variety), and the piece was, technically, a work by Merlin Carpenter. [Cherry and Lucic](http://cherryandlucic.com/index.html) (<http://cherryandlucic.com/index.html>) (named, for obscure reasons, after hockey players Don Cherry and Milan Lucic) is an upstart initiative helmed by a group of artists who live in the adjoining house. One of them was on hand to greet visitors and answer questions about the piece, "Poor Leatherette," a restaging of a previous Carpenter sculpture, whose original installation had included high-end luxury items. Cherry and Lucic purposely downgraded the concept for this iteration, including well-used items instead of box-fresh ones.

They had secured permission, of a sort, from Carpenter; their correspondence forms part of a related publication. The gallery member who greeted us flaunted a charmingly adversarial attitude — to Carpenter; to ever-gentrifying Portland and its art scene; to the biennial itself, curated this year by Michelle Grabner.

As such, Cherry and Lucic was an interesting launchpad from which to explore the larger show, which includes nearly 40 official artists. The biennial's name is something of a misnomer, since this year's exhibitions are spread out across Oregon. Seeing everything would require a surfeit of time and gasoline. My own reflections here, as a result, can't pretend



to comprehensiveness. But what I did take in attested to Grabner's sensitivity as a curator, one with a keen sense of how unique spaces can enliven how we experience works of art.

Even where the shows abide by more or less normal white-wall conventions, surprises abound. [Colin Kippen](http://www.colinkippen.com/) (<http://www.colinkippen.com/>)'s outing at [Project Grow](http://www.albertinakerr.org/DevelopmentalDisability) (<http://www.albertinakerr.org/DevelopmentalDisability>

[/CommunityInclusion/PortCity/Programs/ProjectGrow](http://www.albertinakerr.org/CommunityInclusion/PortCity/Programs/ProjectGrow)) is a good example. The institution, which runs art programs for adults with developmental disabilities, is spotlighting a series of Kippen's sculptures incorporating spray-painted concrete and found tools. But these share the space with a variety of ceramic pieces produced by Project Grow members, all of them for sale. An additional Kippen sculpture stands outside, near a small working farm inhabited by two friendly goats. (The artist, who isn't shy about citing the influence of people like Tauba Auerbach and Kaari Upson, has work all over town right now, including several additional outdoor pieces at [C3:Initiative](http://www.c3initiative.org/) (<http://www.c3initiative.org/>.)

Elsewhere in Portland proper, the biennial waxes quite eclectic. White Box, at the University of Oregon in Portland, presents three very different artists — Ryan Woodring, Anya Kivarkis, and Whitney Minthorn — working with altered ISIS propaganda videos, sculptural jewelry, and experimental fashion photography, respectively. And at large venue housing the biennial's organizing body, [Disjecta Contemporary Art Center](http://www.disjecta.org/) (<http://www.disjecta.org/>), we get pure sensory overload, with a salon-style hanging of every artist Grabner did a studio visit with during the course of her curatorial research.

Venturing outside the city limits offers additional rewards. A scenic two-hour drive away is the quaintly hip coastal town of Astoria, which one person described as the Bushwick to Portland's Manhattan — that is, the place where priced-out artists are slowly flocking. Here you'll find a two-person show of sculpture and video by Julia Oldham and abstract paintings by Jack Featherly, at the Royal Nebeker Art Gallery of Clatsop Community College, and a site-specific installation by [Avantika Bawa](http://avantikabawa.net/) (<http://avantikabawa.net/>), in the lobby of the Astor Hotel. The latter venue is an artfully decrepit raw space, yet to be redeveloped, in which Bawa has erected a gold-colored array of functionless construction scaffolding. The piece has a ghostly beauty seen against the lobby's patina of decay; a soundtrack, composed of noises made during the building of the sculpture, echoes through the cavernous room.

Similar savviness is at play in Clatskanie, halfway between Astoria and Portland, where [Heidi Schwegler](http://www.heidischwegler.com/) (<http://www.heidischwegler.com/>) has set up shop in a hulking building that formerly housed the Hazen Hardware store. The artist mingles readymades with sculptures both grotesque and imposing (a leaf blower disguised by an accretion of bubblegum-pink material; an oddly malevolent caged enclosure just inside the store's entrance). It's hard to tell where material history and intervention overlap, a confusion that Schwegler courted by using leftover paint, the rest of which was used to color parts of the hardware store's interior, to coat one of her own pieces.

Other far-flung projects promise similarly unconventional settings and experiences, including Jessica Jackson Hutchins's installation at the Christian Science Reading Room in Pendleton. "It quickly became a question of, How do you engage the state?" Grabner [told my colleague Taylor Dafoe](http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1440433/qa-with-michelle-grabner-artist-and-curator-of-the) (<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1440433/qa-with-michelle-grabner-artist-and-curator-of-the>) before the biennial's opening. By exploding its boundaries and structure, she has created an exhibition of Oregonian artists that truly takes Oregon as its stage. The result is a sprawling, scavenger-hunt-style event that is as invigorating as it is unwieldy.

The Portland Biennial (<http://portlandbiennial.org/>) remains on view through September 18.

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