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POWER 100

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By Martin Herbert

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ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

The Biennial Questionnaire: Michelle Grabner

What does it mean to be a local artist? The curator of Portland2016 in Portland, USA on localism, gobalism, regionalism and community

By Helen Sumpter

Colin Kippen, Bracket, roofing bracket, concrete, shredded personal documents, wire mesh, acrylic pa...

Portland2016 is the fourth biennial of contemporary art presented by Disjecta Contemporary Art Center and showcasing artists from across Portland and the wider State of Oregon USA. This year's Biennial is curated by artist, writer, curator and educator Michelle Grabner. She is based between Milwaukee, WI and Chicago, IL.

ArtReview *The Portland Biennial is rooted in its location. What did you want to explore about Portland and Oregon as a place and regionalism and provincialism as concepts for your edition?*

Michelle Grabner The Portland Biennial is an exhibition format that is opportune for examining the conditions of place. Obviously in this case place means not only the State of Oregon but the Northwest. In my research the Northwest is actively engaged in regionality. Dissimilar to many other US regions, the Northwest is greater than a geographic location. It is an ethical and political construct that vigorously shapes the culture here. Questions addressing regionalism and by extension localism, globalism, and nationalism are contemporaneous given their effects on the current state of global politics.

AR *Community is an important aspect of both the biennial and your activities as an artist, writer, curator and educator, which include initiatives such as independent artist run space The Suburban and the programming of The Poor Farm. Can you tell us a bit more about these initiatives and how the idea of community will this be reflected in the biennial?*

MG My community and that of The **Poor Farm** and **The Suburban** is a community of artists hailing from all over the globe. Unlike the Upper Midwest where I am based, the Northwest's centers are destinations. Both Portland and Seattle are fast growing

cities with housing shortages. This is not the case in my neck of the woods. The Northwest possesses a kind of cultural pioneering spirit. You can get a sense of this by closely examining each of the 34 Biennial artists' dedication to art-making and their heightened attention to the culture of place.

AR *From the open submission you visited over 100 artist studios across Oregon to select the 34 main artists for the event. How clear an idea did you have of what you were looking for before you began that process, and how perhaps was that changed during the actual experience?*

MG It is true. Between the 400 Oregon artists who submitted applications and a number of artists that I tracked down at the recommendation of area critics and artists, I travelled vast miles to visit studios. My first challenge was to break down my erroneous conception that Oregon visual art was influenced solely by the natural landscape or social practice. The multiplicity of ideas and forms I encountered in studios from Ashland to Pendleton was astonishing and my task quickly became clear. I selected artists whose work was rigorous, dedicated, and impacting the cultural imagination of the contemporary Northwest.

AR *Can you tell us about some of the lesser known or unknown artists and works visitors can expect to see?*

MG **Whitney Minthorn** is a young artist based in Pendleton who has a photo studio in his garage. Here he stages fashion shoots highlighting youth, style, genre, and traditions from within the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla

Indian Reservation. His work is on view at White Box at the University of Portland along with another interesting young artist **Ryan Woodring** whose videos hauntingly manipulate the online documentation of the destruction of cultural artefacts by ISIS. In Astoria you can see **Avantika Bawa**'s installation of gold geometric scaffolding in the dilapidated grand Astor Hotel. Also in Astoria, high on the hill overlooking the mouth of the Columbia River, Jack Featherly and Julia Oldham's works are installed in the Royal Nebeker Art Gallery. Two artist-run project spaces in Portland, Cherry & Lucic and Muscle Beach will be hosting Biennial projects, as well as **Project Grow**, an arts and urban farming program for people with developmental disabilities. Project Grow will host artist Colin Kippen, a recent graduate from Oregon College of Art and Craft. Kippen's sculptures are also included at C3:Initiative in Portland's St. John neighbourhood. Needless to say there are many more compelling offerings and intriguing sites that shape this year's Portland Biennial.

AR *This fourth edition of the Biennial is the most expansive yet – both in terms of geography, venues and number of artists. How have you approached the Biennial in terms of its structure?*

MG The Portland2016 Biennial is a great experiment engaging venues and new

THE NORTHWEST IS AN ETHICAL AND POLITICAL CONSTRUCT THAT VIGOROUSLY SHAPES THE CULTURE HERE

audiences throughout the State. One of the most challenging components for me was matching artists with sites. In some cases, the work simply called for a traditional exhibition space, but in many other cases I offered artists challenging spaces such as abandoned storefronts, old factories, and community centers in small towns across the state. In all of my curatorial efforts, my first consideration is the artist, doing my best to protract exhibitions into a platform where artists are offered opportunities to consider their work anew.

AR *You were a co-curator of the 2014 Whitney Biennial. What, for you, are the main differences in the way in which a biennial like Whitney differs from Portland in terms of its relationship to the artists involved and the place in which it is located, and how different an experience was it for you as a curator?*

MG The Portland Biennial is a much more intimate curatorial undertaking. **Disjecta**, the Portland Biennial's hosting institution ever since the Portland Art Museum stopped sponsoring it in 2006 in its previous form as the Oregon Biennial, is a small not-for-profit organisation with a passionate and hardworking board of directors. This is a biennial that is not underwritten by an influential institution such as the Whitney Museum of Art but instead it is attached to a flexible and experimental organisation that can afford to adapt a biennial structure to changing times.

AR *In an increasingly global artworld what does it mean to be a local artist?*

MG As you can imagine, I have been thinking quite a lot about this. Now that my Portland Biennial work is coming to a conclusion, I fully believe that artists are obligated to undertake localist or even regionalist positions while also embracing far-reaching, global concerns. I guess I am advocating for a true cosmopolitanism.

The Portland Biennial continues in venues throughout the State of Oregon through 18 September 2016

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