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Q&A with Michelle Grabner, Artist and Curator of the Portland2016 Biennial

BY TAYLOR DAFOE | JUNE 30, 2016



Julia Calabrese's "Cosmic Serpent," 2014 (Courtesy of the artist)

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Michelle Grabner (Credit: Portland Biennial)

"Portland2016: A Biennial," a two-month-long series of exhibitions and events, opens July 9. With 34 artists showing at 25 different venues in 11 communities across the state, it will be the largest-ever survey of Oregon art.

The [Disjecta Contemporary Art Center](http://www.disjecta.org/) (http://www.disjecta.org/), the Portland-based arts organization that organizes the biennial, chose Michelle Grabner to curate this year's edition, its fourth since being established in 2010. Grabner was an apt choice, since she brings a strong sense of regional pride to her own work. Her biggest curatorial effort to date was co-curating the 2014 Whitney Biennial, a task she found not dissimilar to the one she's completing now, as Portland2016 gets set to open.

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For the first time in its history, the event will extend beyond the region's cultural capital, Portland, to all four corners of the state. For Grabner, it was important to push the boundaries of geography, theme, and medium. In

doing so, she expands our understanding of biennials in general. Though relatively small, "Portland2016" is ambitious. Perhaps most important, it taps into something that's increasingly rare in the art world: a regional art economy, operating by and for its citizens.

Grabner took time away from her exhibition prep in Portland to speak with Artinfo about the importance of regional art, her hands-on curatorial practice, and how this has experience compares to that of curating the Whitney Biennial.

Artinfo: Can you tell me a little bit about this year's biennial and how you came to the project?

Michelle Grabner: The first time I had ever been to Oregon was in 2013 — I spent a couple of days in Portland when I was doing studio visits for the Whitney Biennial. I was on a road trip from San Diego to Seattle and clearly didn't spend enough time in Oregon, specifically Portland, and regretted it. But, being in the art world, I thought it was likely that I'd be pulled back eventually. And sure enough, last summer I received a call from Disjecta asking me if I would consider curating the Portland2016 Biennial. I was actually near the other Portland [in Maine] at the time, teaching at Skowhegan. It was one of those beautiful things, being pulled back into the place I lamented not spending enough time in before. So I said yes, and I spent most of that fall in studios throughout the state. I took road trips down the I5 corridor, stopping in Corvallis, stopping in Eugene, going all the way down to Ashland. Then, on another visit, I went east, going all the way to La Grande and to Enterprise and Pendleton and a handful of other places. I spent a good portion of December in studios in Portland, as it reflects a good portion of the demographic. That's how I ended up doing my research: I did over 100 studio visits in total. From there, I chose who the 34 artists would be.

Artinfo: I know from your own work that you are interested in regional issues outside the highly institutionalized art worlds of cities like New York and LA. Is that why you signed on to curate the Portland2016 Biennial? It sounds like you agreed to do it right away.

Grabner: Absolutely. This country is pretty exceptional, especially in terms of landscape. I was interested in figuring out, in the context of the northwest, how regionalism and these conditions of culture, politics, and geography contour art making. Quite honestly, I didn't believe that regionalism was such an organizing factor. But it really is. Regionalism is alive and well out here. It's even institutionalized. The museums here, for instance, have curators of northwestern art, in addition to curators of contemporary art. Sometimes they're the same entity. I wanted to consider the different relationships artists have to context and how that evolves. It's something I identified when I was first out here in 2013. But now it's much more complicated. I can also tell you that when I first stepped foot in Portland for this process, the biennial, a lot of my expectations were thrown away. There's so much going on here. So many interesting things going on. For example, the art schools here — whether it's PMCA or the art department at Portland State or in Eugene, at the University of Oregon — there was so much more than I could imagine in terms of the diversity of artists and the practices they're engaged in.

Artinfo: To be completely honest, before this interview, I hadn't heard of many of the venues on the list of the biennial. I read about some of them, but research took me only so far —presumably because a lot of them are nontraditional places.

Grabner: Very nontraditional. Not even on Google maps!

Artinfo: How did you choose the various exhibition spaces for the project, especially those lesser-known ones? I know Disjecta helped you in finding many of the sites.

Grabner: It was a collaboration, yeah. Disjecta, being the organizing institution, is great about developing partnerships with other spaces. For instance, White Box in Portland — that's been a venue for the biennial before; c3:initiative is one I really pushed for — it's a place I became familiar with when I was last here. Same thing with Muscle Beach, which is a small, artist-run space here in Portland. When I was on the ground, I was trying to keep up with what was going on in the art world outside of doing studio visits, to bring these venues to Disjecta. But Disjecta brought many of the venues to me, especially some of the ones that are cast out a little farther.

Artinfo: Did you know, as soon as you signed on, that you wanted to expand the biennial outside of Portland?

Grabner: That was also a conversation I had with the team at Disjecta. The last biennial was held at a couple of sites in Portland, but Disjecta was the main hub. And before that, the biennial was held at the Portland Museum of Art. But even though it's called the Portland2016 Biennial, artists throughout the state are represented. So for us it quickly became a question of, How do you engage the state? That was the conversation that we had together.

Artinfo: Is there any particular Oregon or Portland flavor you picked up on? Any geographic, social, or cultural themes that come through in the artists' work?

Grabner: I would say that, though it's not necessarily reflected in the artists that I chose for the biennial, the relationship to the environment here is profound. From photographs of landscapes to engagement in the ethical relationship to the land, that's something that's quite prevalent. There's also a commercial art scene here in Portland, but it's a regional economy, it supports its own. Community is very important in Portland. And outside of Portland, landscape and the environment loom large.

Artinfo: The idea of a regional and self-sufficient art economy is refreshing. It seems as if every day I read several articles about the globalization of the art world. It's great to hear that there are still pockets throughout the country that retain their own artistic identity.

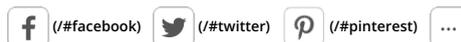
Grabner: Absolutely. And there are many artists here who can successfully articulate their relationship to that. In some cases, it's a fraught relationship; in some cases, it's a very comfortable and nurturing relationship.

Artinfo: How has this experience differed from your other curatorial efforts, especially something like the Whitney Biennial, which is incredibly institutionalized. In some ways, it seems like this couldn't be farther from that.

Grabner: Right. But there are also some similarities. Curating the Whitney Biennial, a survey of American art, I remember having a conversation with some of my fellow curators about what is America? How do you define it geographically? Can we include artists from Canada or Mesoamerica? The museum basically said, Sure, if that's how you want to define it, that would be fine. And in this case, there were parameters. It's a state biennial. But that gets interesting here too, because there are reservations, and reservation boundaries don't abide by state rules. That was really exciting for me to think about. And I was doing studio visits across the Columbia River in Washington, even though Washington artists weren't participating. It was important to stretch the boundaries a little bit to see what's going on.

For me, both experiences are based on the same thing. The curatorial process, for me, is about getting into studios and having conversations with artists. Would I say that the conversations I had with artists in preparation for the Whitney Biennial were different than conversations I had with artists here? In some cases, yes. Some of the artists' practices are more idiosyncratic and not in conversation with the bigger art world. But that was also the case to some degree with the Whitney Biennial. I would say that the process itself, how I think about it, is always based in the studio. In this case, studios were just located in a more specific place than they were for the Whitney Biennial.

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