

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Spectacular Geography and Studios in the Kitchen: Michelle Grabner on Curating the Portland Biennial

by [Devon Van Houten Maldonado](#) on July 29, 2016



Colin Kippen, "Pitch" (2016), cement, perlite, wheel barrow, wire mesh, binding wire, acrylic paint, 35 x 25 x 71 in; Portland2016, Project Grow, Portland (photo by Evan La Londe, courtesy of the artist and Disjecta Contemporary Art Center)

This year's iteration of the [Portland Biennial](#), organized by the [Disjecta Contemporary Art Center](#) and curated by artist [Michelle Grabner](#), claims to be the most complete survey of contemporary art in Oregon ever, with 34 artists exhibiting across 25 venues spread throughout the state. The biennial envisions regionalism as an important force in contemporary art, Grabner says, albeit without being isolationist. Part of the emphasis of regionalism is on creativity moving beyond

centers of production, and embracing faraway places as viable stages for contemporary art. In the biennial, Oregon artists prove themselves to be pluralistic in their processes, subject matter, and the communities they take part in, while still embracing an attachment to the Northwest.



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Jessica Jackson Hutchins, "Sea Man" (2016), iron, glazed ceramic, fabric, enamel paint; 'Salon: Portland2016,' Disjecta, Portland (courtesy of the artist and Disjecta Contemporary Art Center) (click to enlarge)

From the thriving contemporary art scene in liberal **Portland** to conservative small towns in Eastern Oregon, the biennial asks devoted viewers to embark on a serious road trip if they want to appreciate it in its entirety. Many of the venues — which **include** a former hardware store and a Christian Science reading room — are hours apart by car. The extension of the Portland Biennial beyond the city and into corners of the state typically untouched by contemporary art furthers the notion of breaking down the false binary of center and margin. It also makes space itself — the lush and dramatic geography of the Northwest — part of the show.

The biennial's artists manifest the grandeur of their home state in many unique ways. **Brenna Murphy** reimagines Oregon's misty sequoia forests in vibrant digital mandalas and techno-mystic installations, which are at once coldly computerized and organic. **Jessica Jackson Hutchins** challenges Northwestern traditions of ceramics, painting, and homemaking by combining the practices in grotesque sculptures. **David Eckard** creates performance objects, monologues, and sculptures, always with a wink toward the theater of futility. For Grabner, such cross-disciplinary and critically engaged projects are essential to the vitality of the Portland Biennial, and Northwestern regionalism in general.

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Devon Van Houten Maldonado: *Beyond a major survey of Oregon artists, what was your vision approaching this project and what were some of your goals?*

Michelle Grabner: Coming to understand the region and to look carefully at art making, not only in Portland, but also in the state of Oregon, which is part of the Northwest. The Northwest has a very strong identity. So that was interesting to me and it was also a blind spot, in terms of art making throughout the US and North America. Doing research in other cities and regions, I hadn't spent much time in the Northwest. I was curious about regionalism and how it has an impact on art making. Regionalism is embraced by institutions here, which is an interesting conversation.

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Charlene Liu, "Shadow Palace" (2016), cardboard, wood, lightbulbs, dimensions variable; Portland2016, Rivoli Theatre, Pendelton, Oregon (courtesy of the artist and Disjecta Contemporary Art Center)

DVHM: *Can you give some examples of how you saw that regionalism manifest?*

MG: For example, the Portland Art Museum has a curator of contemporary art and a **Northwest curator**. So the curator of Northwest art is looking at contemporary art coming out of the region, whether that is from indigenous peoples who are in the area or contemporary artists who are dealing with the idea of region. There is a kind of interesting overlap where, I think, in other institutions it could be considered redundant. But here, the way the culture breaks down, there is a need and a relationship to identity, and how culture thinks of itself out here as regional. Regional ideas are part of contemporary thinking.

Another example is the spectacular geography of the Northwest. They have their own landscape and it's far away from centers of production: New York, even San Francisco, let alone Southern California. You can't just get into your car and drive there. It kind of hangs out up here at the edge of the world, so I think its distance has a lot to do with this regionalism. Location is important for allowing a place to think as a region, or allowing a contour around a region. It's political too. Regionalism is a political construct, as well as a social construct.

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DVHM: *How do you see your role, coming from outside? How does your curatorial eye affect or add to that idea of regionalism?*

MG: I can only approach it as an interloper with questions. I can only point to evidence of regionalism in art practices and institutions. I can only put a spotlight on it and maybe put a question around it. I'm not going to make any claim. For example, regional politics, like in Portland where I spent the majority of my time — Portland is a complicated city and it **lacks diversity**. I'm not going to come in and use the biennial to solve some of these political issues, whether it's representation or its fraught relationship with the African American community. That's not what I can do. What I can do is select artists who are dedicated to their practice.

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Lisa Radon, "The sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere" (2016), mixed media, dimensions variable to infinity; Portland2016, Muscle Beach, Portland (photo by Chase Allgood; courtesy of the artist and Disjecta Contemporary Art Center) (click to enlarge)

I'm casting a big net and it's going to propose questions. There is a big emphasis on lifestyle here. People move to this place because of its beauty, because of the relationship to an ethic. So I'm looking at artists here who are not engaged in their practice as a lifestyle, but really engaged in a language or a relationship to abstraction, or expression, or social practice. That conversation transcends the Northwest.

DVHM: *Can you talk about the contrast between artists who are part of an established scene or market and others who are very local?*

MG: A few artists I did studio visits with had never heard of the Portland Biennial, but they had been working away in rural Eastern Oregon or in Eugene. Or maybe in the photography world and had never thought about participating in contemporary art. It shows the depth, diversity, and multiplicity of relationships to art making. Some people are happy to work out in the middle of the forest painting landscapes their whole life. Throughout the state there were a lot of kitchens that had been transformed into studio spaces and young artists who were also starting families, but wanted to continue their practices. That's not unusual. You could go to Minnesota and have the same experience.

There is a lot going on in Portland in terms of community, artist spaces, and the collapsing between a studio practice and lifestyle. Artists from the big art schools aren't necessarily moving to Bushwick like they were a few years ago. Now they are looking to farther-out areas.



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Still from Julia Calabrese and Emily Bernstein, "The Cosmic Serpent" (2015), single channel video; Portland2016, Public Access TV, Portland and the Liberty Theatre, La Grande, Oregon (courtesy of the artists and Disjecta Contemporary Art Center)

Portland2016 is on view at 25 venues across Oregon through September 18.

Brenna MurphyDavid EckardDisjectaJessica Jackson HutchinsMichelle GrabnerPortlandPortland Biennial