

# Disjecta's third go at a biennial, Portland2014

The [Portland2014](#) biennial is in full swing. Headquartered at Disjecta, and dispersed throughout the city in other galleries and on the streets, this third iteration distances itself from previous ones with the intervention of a curator from outside the region. Amanda Hunt is based in Los Angeles and selected 15 artists from 300-plus applicants.

The artists who emerged are not entirely a PDX who's-who (nor are all from Portland proper) but they come close: Most of the names are very familiar in the visual art community. Although some may level the criticism of "same-ol' same-ol'" or even suggest a degree of cliquish nepotism, outside eyes made the selection this year. In fact Hunt's selections may force critics of the biennial to consider the possibility that these artists might fit into another, larger context, one neither regional nor the product of a personality cult. Instead, we are afforded a look at how these artists have chosen to represent the progression of their art making for this special occasion.

This does not mean I didn't hope for a few surprises.

I was initially quite taken with Abra Ancliffe's "Personal Libraries Library" installation at The Best Art Gallery In Portland (the name of the gallery, not my proclamation), and I suppose anyone with a yen for literature or art history might be. The walls of the space are lined with shelves and vitrines, the former with books and signage, and the latter with various items of the artist's creation or from her collection efforts. There is also a little office space set up. The shelves on one wall represented books that artist Robert Smithson owned. Many of the books I wouldn't mind having —some I do own or have in the past — which is sort of the point of this work. I get a little thrill knowing that Smithson and I may have read the same things. But is this in itself enough?

However interesting this collection may be (Ancliffe is also searching out titles owned by Maria Mitchell, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino and Anne Spencer), I found the treatments for the arrangement of the books, bound together in small groupings with twine or ribbon, more intriguing. And the labels on the shelves more so:

1. The Library is a coordinate geometry that is initiated within and between booksets.
2. The books within each set may not be disassociated and circulate as a singularity.
3. Each book is zero dimensional unless activated by its faction.
4. Reference materials are considered an empty set and may not be removed from the Library.

These rules of engagement remind us that as staid as reading can be, it is directed as well as performative, and without the labels as a corollary intervention, I might have left the gallery thinking only

about a book fetish couched as art.

Speaking of couches, and as a quick aside, there was a noticeable absence of her near-signature sofas or the like in Jessica Jackson Hutchin's work at Disjecta. Not that that is a bad thing, nor do I mean to dismiss her art, for it is worthy of a greater word count. I mention her only to suggest that both her and Blair Saxon-Hill's art could have benefitted from more distance. While those who hung the show might have wanted to create a conversation between the two bodies of work, such a decision was likely based on materiality, which is secondary to the fact that both artists are pushing their work into new territories. Additionally, consideration of each artist's work on her own might fit the overall format of the exhibit as it is otherwise structured at Disjecta.

The Biennial artists who have exhibits at galleries other than Disjecta are at a distinct advantage. I have a very hard time trying to imagine Ellen Lesperance's luscious and elegiac installation at Upfor Gallery in a group setting, for example. The same can be said for Ancliffe's work. Yet, at the fourth venue for this biennial, the University of Oregon's White Box Gallery, the three artists exhibiting are hand-in-glove. No surprise, really, as Zachary Davis, Alex Mackin Dolan, Travis Fitzgerald were all co-directors of the former Appendix Project Space on Alberta. I believe all of these artists have flown the coop, so to speak, and now reside in Brooklyn, so in some ways, this might be seen as a final Portland gathering.

I am hesitant to single out one artist from this group as all have fine submissions. Alex Macklin Dolan's "particle accelerator for angels" (listed in all lower case), comprised of a printed cotton panel and etched water glasses is more mysterious than his other pieces on display but all seem intent on bringing the socio-political into the domestic space. Travis Fitzgerald's densely woven blankets, "Object of Permanence I" and "Object of Permanence II" are both mysterious and stunning. Yet, it is Zachary Davis' "Baby Nils" that steals the show for me. Laced with many darkened spider webs, two white orbs are affixed to each other like two worlds colliding in space. I describe them as "worlds" because the webs are arranged in a manner that recall longitude and latitude lines on a globe, except there are so many webs that each has multiple poles. Worlds of beautiful chaos on the brink of unbecoming.

This year's Biennial also featured public works. Admittedly, I am short-sighted in my appreciation of most public art, primarily because I see a lot of it as too straight-forward (pedantically or aesthetically aiming for the lowest common denominator) or just out-and-out garish (no, I'm not a fan of those four "Nepenthes" by Dan Corson in the Pearl District). Mind you, not all public art, but the majority. Yet, art in slightly unexpected places is always nice even if it isn't particularly guerilla. Christopher Michlig and John Zerzan cube-like sculptures "Kiosk Kiosk Kiosk" are placed in the central part of the city, as are billboards by Modou Dieng and Devon VanHouten-Maldonado (in a collaborative effort), and Ralph Pugay and Richard Thompson individually. While having artists put their work on billboards is nothing new, commandeering that commercial space is an opportunity to shake things up a bit. And in that respect, Pugay's billboard at SE Grand and Morrison, "Baby Coughing Politely" wins the biennial's award

(if there was one) for the most perversely humorous piece.

Ralph Pugay, "Baby Coughing Politely"/Disjecta

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