

Biennial shows wide variety of Texas art; captures Texas



A still from "Whole" a two-channel video by the Houston-based Hillerbrand and Magsamen, the collaborative husband and wife visual artist team made up of Stephan Hillerbrand and Mary Magsamen. "Whole" is part of the "2013 Texas Biennial" currently on view at San Antonio's Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum.

A cadre of national art media descended on the Lone Star State earlier this month.

The media tour was organized by and centered on the Texas Biennial, the artist-instigated survey exhibit of contemporary art.

In its fifth iteration, the Texas Biennial isn't very much like other storied biennial exhibits, the every-other-year contemporary art showings that many international cities for decades leverage as buzz generators and cultural barometers.

The small, nonprofit Big Medium — instigators of the super-popular East Austin Studio Tour — founded the Texas Biennial in 2005.

And though based in Austin, the exhibit has never had a consistent home. Instead, the Texas Biennial has commandeered temporary exhibit spaces and indie arts venues, staged site-specific installations and included concurrent exhibits and happenings from around the state.

For most of the recent visiting art media, it was their first trip to Texas.

Interestingly, though the Texas Biennial is an Austin-based effort — and though city money for the cultural arts comes from hotel and motel bed tax — Austin's municipal cultural and tourism officials declined to offer any sponsorship for the media tour.

Instead, tourism officials in San Antonio [through the Department for Culture & Creative Development] and Houston [through the Houston Arts Alliance] helped foot the bill for the national media to see a slice of Texas' art fare. (Austin's W Hotel donated rooms for the visitors.)

The stories that have percolated as a result of the media tour offer an interesting snapshot of how a largely New York-based arts press finds contemporary art in the Lone Star State. The venerable, century-old magazine *Art in America* declared that despite the fact that "contemporary Texan art is faced with overcoming a spectrum of stereotypes," the Texas Biennial and its sheer variety nevertheless demonstrates that emerging artists here are as variable and experimental as, well, anywhere else in the world

The magazine's Jason Foubberg writes that the Texas Biennial "proved that Texas art is as mutable a category as American art."

The equally venerable London-based *Art Newspaper* acknowledged that indeed,

art is alive and well in Texas, noting that the Biennial's "ever-expanding reach is a sign of Texas' growing appetite for art and culture."

Art Newspaper also noted what is perhaps the Texas Biennial's most distinctive feature — its sprawl.

Five cities across the state play host to some part of the Texas Biennial.

The main exhibit — featuring a whopping 70 artists — is at San Antonio's Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum, on view through Nov. 9.

In Houston, indie presenter Lawndale Art Center highlights the work of four artists who were featured in biennials past.

Up in North Texas, the University of Texas-Dallas' CentralTrak program is hosting a series of performance art happenings.

And out in the West Texas town of Marfa, there's a commissioned artist project staged at nonprofit organization Ballroom Marfa.

Finally, here in Austin, the Biennial's curator-at-large Virginia Rutledge teamed up with past Biennial curator Michael Duncan, to present "New and Greatest Hits: Texas Biennial 2005-2011." Work by 26 artists gets the spotlight in a smart, rewarding exhibit on view at Big Medium's new East Austin warehouse gallery through Sept. 28.



Michael Bise, "Uncle Corky" (2011), graphite on paper, from the exhibit "2013 Texas Biennial: Group Survey Exhibition" at the Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum in San Antonio.

Austin American-Statesman



"Mirror, Mirror" a mixed media sculpture by Linda Pace. On view in "New and Greatest Hits: Texas Biennial 2005-2011," in Austin at Big Medium through Sept. 28

If some of the observations by the recently visiting national arts media charmed with their own kind of East Coast provincialism — "Nobody walks anywhere in Houston," wrote Foubenberg — others were quite perceptive.

In an article titled "Keeping the Texas Biennial Weird," writer Benjamin Sutton of the influential international art news



Trey Egan, "Zara Sequencia" (2012), oil on canvas, from the exhibit "2013 Texas Biennial: Group Survey Exhibition" at the Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum in San Antonio.

site Artinfo.com praised the Biennial's "scrappiness." And he noted that, for once, bigger was better not in the Lone Star State.

"For a state that prides itself on bigness, Texas's biennial remains relevant precisely because it has resisted the urge to go big, (its) quirks are also a evidence of its dynamism," Sutton writes.

Yes, dynamism reigns in Texas contemporary art. And the Texas Biennial offers plenty of promising appearances that should leave art viewers curious to see more.

In the San Antonio exhibit, video work by Matthew Cusick, Abinadi Meza, Seth Mittag, Carrie Schneider and the team of Robert Boland and Robert Melton stands out.

The video intrigue includes "Whole," a three-minute work by the Houston-based team of Hillerbrand and Magsamen — husband and wife collaborators Stephan Hillerbrand and Mary Magsamen. With zero irony, the pair use their own suburban lifestyle as fodder for wryly humorous takes on family dynamics in our consumer-oriented culture. Against a soundtrack of overly dramatic movie music, we see the artists and their two young children furiously cutting holes in the walls and door of their messy, stuff-filled house only to anxiously scurry through those holes to another stuff-filled

room, the family never able to actually get away from itself.

In Austin, the more than two dozen artists featured in "New and Greatest Hits" remind of the impact and importance that something like the Texas Biennial can have. Many are now regular names in the Texas emerging art mix: Justin Boyd, Susi Brister, Jason Reed, Rigoberto Gonzalez, Heyd Fontenot, Anthony Sonnenberg, for example. And some now have their work in museum collections — Peat Duggins and Jonathan Marshall, for example — a major measure of the importance of any artist's work.

Here's to the "scrappiness."



Jayne Lawrence's "Huntress" (2008) is a mixed media sculpture that is part of the "New and Greatest Hits: Texas Biennial 2005-2011" exhibit at Big Medium.