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The Art Forecast: A conversation about the known, the unknown at 2015 Portland Museum of Art Biennial

By Edgar Allen Beem on October 12, 2015

"You Can't Get There from Here: The 2015 Portland Museum of Art Biennial" is a rather corny title for a very provocative exhibition (Oct. 8 to Jan. 3, 2016), the title of which is meant to invoke, in the words of guest curator Alison Ferris, "the many ways that these artists have embraced the unknown."

Ferris, formerly a curator at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art and now a curator at the Kohler Arts Center in Wisconsin, selected 32 artists for the 2015 biennial. The Union of Maine Visual Artists has objected to the PMA scrapping the open juried exhibition format in favor of a curated show, but the fact that Ferris was not restricted to applicants has led to an exhibition that is full of artists who probably never would have submitted to a juried show.

In general, open juried biennials tend to attract young, emerging and mid-career artists in search of recognition and an audience. Older, more established artists tend not to compete. The 2015 biennial features a great many seasoned artists as well as a handful of relative newcomers.

Of the 32 artists in the show, 18 qualify for membership in AARP (50-plus) and 10 qualify for Social Security (62-plus). Only five are still too young to run for President (under 35). But one of the primary functions of a biennial exhibition is discovery and, in addition to some of the best-known artists in the state, Ferris presents the work of close to a dozen artists with whom I was not familiar, including two of the four Wabanaki basket makers she has included.

The art elders include Lois Dodd, Ken Greenleaf, Susan Hartnett, Emily Nelligan, Noriko Sakanishi, Warren Seelig, Richard Van Buren and John Walker, all artists well known to the Maine art scene, most equally well-known in New York and elsewhere.

Midcareer artists familiar to most Maine art audiences include Brett Bigbee, John Bisbee, Anna Hepler, George Mason, Dennis Pinette and Randy Regier.

Among the younger are Meghan Brady, Bradley Borthwick, Jeff Clancy, Jeremy DePrez, Miles Spadone and Emilie Stark-Menneg, as well as Passamaquoddy basket maker George Neptune and Penobscot basket maker Sarah Sockbeson.

Group exhibitions that are not organized around a coherent theme, style or medium tend to be free-for-alls. Asked what holds the biennial together, Alison Ferris said, "Excellence. All of the art in the show is by artists completely committed and dedicated to their work. It's all excellent."

Though there is no particular point of view in the 2015 PMA biennial, Ferris and museum curator Jessica May both spoke at the opening about the "conversations" and "chatter" created by more than 100 works by 32 artists in one gallery. One of the "conversational" strains I picked up concerns painstaking attention to detail, the sheer careful manual labor required to transform raw elements into fine art.

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The exquisite ash, bark and sweet grass baskets by Jeremy Frey, George Neptune, Therese Secord and Sarah Sockbeson start a quiet conversation about elegant handwork, a theme of detail and delicacy also whispered nearby by Emily Nelligan's sublime charcoal landscapes and Brett Bigbee's preternatural oil portrait of a girl, a painting four years in the making.

Photographer Michael Kolster's time-consuming landscape ambrotypes carry on the conversation about craft in their darkened alcove. And Jeff Clancy's enigmatic pewter cups and photos of pewter cups, exhibited with the antique pewter cups that inspired them in an easily overlooked cul de sac, speak not only of orders of attention but also of ontology – "real" cups, replica cups and images of cups.

Then the most commanding voices in the exhibition – Anna Hepler's hanging steel mesh abstraction "Reveille" and John Bisbee's hammered and welded nail blossom "Hearsay" – visually trumpet the virtues of obsessive and repetitive acts of creation.

"You Can't Get There from Here" is a must-see exhibition. Go to 7 Congress Square in Portland and see what you hear.