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Biennial survives -- and keeps thriving -- as new exhibits show



Laura Skelding AMERICAN-STATESMAN

By **Jeanne Claire van Ryzin**
AMERICAN-STATESMAN ARTS CRITIC

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Everything about the 2011 Texas Biennial has a singularly Lone Star spin to it: It's independent, bootstrap and has rangy legs.

It's the indie opposite of the now-ubiquitous biennial exhibits across the globe that are typically the products of major institutions and that purport to present the sine qua non of international art.

In Texas, the biennial is just about what's new in Texas art.

And the exhibit is as bootstrap as it gets. Not the creation of any major institution or the byproduct of a multimillion-dollar corporate-sponsored budget, instead, it's an artist-started Austin-based affair that has remarkably survived into its fourth iteration on a shoestring budget (this year, \$70,000 from mostly individual donors) and countless volunteer hours.

Noteworthy, then, that the Texas Biennial elongated its step all the way across the state.

The official venues are in three cities - Austin, Houston and San Antonio. And it couldn't be a more eclectic bunch of places, from the sleek new University of Texas Visual Arts Center to the free-spirited artist-run Box 13 Artspace in Houston to interesting locales such as a vacant house in East Austin and some empty office space on Congress Avenue.

And the honorary venues? Try Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, for one, and a rented moving truck for another.

Virginia Rutledge, a New York-based art historian and arts lawyer who was invited by Texas Biennial organizers to serve as curator, designated five site-specific works by internationally recognized Texas artists to join the Texas Biennial bandwagon. When Jerry Jones and family built the \$1.3 billion stadium, they commissioned 19 original pieces from big-name international artists. Rutledge roped in two - Trenton Doyle Hancock's mural "From a Legend to a Choir" and Annette Lawrence's "Coin Toss," a graceful abstraction of silver cables above the stadium's main concourse - to be counted as part of the 2011 Texas Biennial.

"It's a way to recognize some exceptional artists and a gesture toward acknowledging the great range of contemporary visual art being produced in Texas," said Rutledge.

She also lassoed more than 60 venues across the state as participating organizations. From Houston's tony Menil Collection to alt-spaces like Ballroom Marfa in West Texas to the petite Grace Museum in Abilene, it's a stampede of contemporary art out there.

The act of list-making comes with a point, highlighting the big-tent infrastructure it takes to support contemporary art. "Human capital is

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Missy Menzes tours Texas Biennial works (shown is Sam Sanford's 'Kitty Pilgrim'; at top is 'Barrio Blaster' by Bernardo Cantu) at 816 Congress Ave., one of Austin's many Biennial venues. San Antonio and Houston are also official hosts; Arlington, Marfa and other Texas sites are represented, too.

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the most important resource the arts have," Rutledge said.

That human capital was on display last weekend when several hundred people turned out for an evening of opening receptions across Austin. And earlier in the day, nearly 70 curators and arts leaders from around the state convened at an informal, information-sharing powwow.

Rutledge selected 49 artists drawn from a pool of almost 800 artists who threw in their creative hats for a chance to be included in the Texas Biennial. What did she see?

Edgy video and installation work abound in the Biennial. But the Lone Star State has powerful photography and painting percolating, too.

"The state of contemporary visual art in Texas is much like the state of contemporary art around the globe," Rutledge said. "Art made in Texas participates in the trends that the best contemporary art made anywhere does. But, at the same time, there are some highly original visions being materialized here."

At the openings last week, that originality came into view with Rigoberto Gonzalez's baroque-esque painting of drug cartel violence that shares a gallery with "Border," Jason Reed's video that combines surveillance footage of illegal border crossings with bucolic scenes of the Rio Grande.

On Rosewood Avenue in East Austin, visitors pondered T.J. Hunt's large earthwork in which she had carved up the packed grassless yard behind a vacant house to neatly spell out "The True Artist Carries the Weight of the World." Across the street, others watched as a rental truck pulled up and quickly transformed into the RJP Nomadic Gallery, the creation of artists Ryder Richards, Jonathan Whitfill and Piotr Chizinski. With their clever "gallery kit" of temporary walls, the trio can transform any rental vehicle, anywhere, any time, into a functioning gallery.

The nomadic gallery made the rounds that evening to other Texas Biennial Austin venues, an inadvertent symbol, perhaps, of the zeitgeist that created the 2011 Texas Biennial: freewheeling and willing to roll.

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2011 Texas Biennial

When: Through May 14

Where: Austin venues include 816 Congress Ave. (fifth and 14th floors); Women and Their Work (1710 Lavaca St.); Pump Project (702 Shady Lane); Big Medium (5305 Bolm Road) and 1319 Rosewood Ave.

Cost: Free

Information: www.texasbiennial.org

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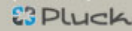
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I hope that you will run a story on the behind the scenes production of the Biennial. There has to be a lot of work involved in making this happen. No way that someone that is not even in Austin could pull this

event off without some major work from other people. Hats off to everyone involved.

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