



## THE ART NEWSPAPER

Exhibitions // Review

# A biennial in Oregon explores the role of art in political and social critique

Converge 45 returns to Portland with more than 50 projects at 15 venues across the city

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Installation view of *We Are the Revolution* (2023) at the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation, Portland, Oregon  
Photo: Deann Orr, courtesy the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

The 2023 edition of the Converge 45 biennial in Portland, Oregon, *Social Forms: Art as Global Citizenship* [↗](#), is its most comprehensive iteration to date. The show (which was launched as a triennial by founder and gallerist Elizabeth Leach in 2016 before expanding to its current form) is spearheaded by artistic director Derek Franklin and guest curator Christian Viveros-Fauné, who extracted this year's theme from his book *Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art* (2018). The exhibition aims to boost Portland's art landscape, as well as that of the greater Pacific Northwest, featuring around 50 presentations across 15 venues that explore the role of art in political and social critique from the 1960s to today.

The biennial has an overarching focus on Indigenous histories, specifically as these relate to land and water rights and the ecological impact of imperialism and colonisation. Marie Watt's installation *Chords to Other Chords (Relative)* [↗](#) (2023) at the Center for Native Arts and Cultures (NACF) (until 13 October) comprises a large-scale sculpture with the words "Turtle Island And" spelled out in neon, with the letters mounted on a plywood structure that has been pasted with photographs and documents related to Indigenous communities, from treaties to theatrical imaginings and images of Indigenous people. "Turtle Island" is the Haudenosaunee name for North America, which comes from the Haudenosaunee creation story. The neon "and" denotes the existence of an abundance of other Indigenous place names and origin stories.

Watt's work aims to spark and deepen conversations around Indigenous people's reclamation of the land, and the venue where it is presented tells an interesting story about Portland's progressive, grassroots efforts to advance the Land Back movement through the donation of infrastructure and funds to support Indigenous-led organisations. The NACF site previously housed Yale Union, a contemporary-art space that transferred the building to the NACF in 2020 to recognise "the value of Native ownership", Lulani Arquette, president and chief executive of the NACF, said at the time. As Converge 45 opened, other successful Land Back transfers were made in the city, such as the ten acres that house the Native American Youth and Family Center [↗](#).



Installation view of Richard Mosse's *Broken Spectre* (2018-22)

Photo: Mario Gallucci



### Podcasts

## Climate disaster: photographer Richard Mosse on environmental crime in the Amazon

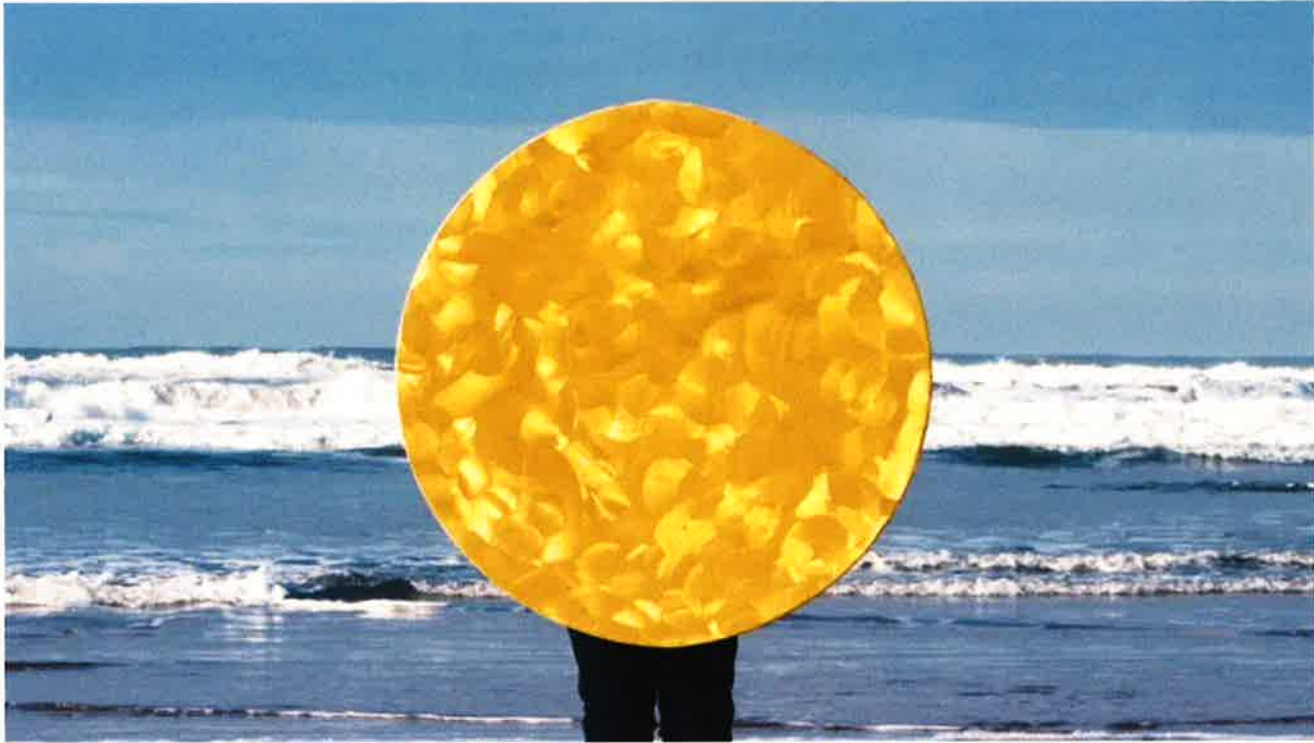
Hosted by **Ben Luke**. Produced by **Julia Michalska**, **David Clack**, **Aimee Dawson** and **Henrietta Bentall**

Sponsored by **Christie's**

Elsewhere at the biennial, the consequences of resource extraction are explored in two presentations by the Irish artist Richard Mosse. In the multi-channel film [Broken Spectre](#) (2018-22) at the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College (until 15 December), Mosse documents the state of the Brazilian Amazon under former president Jair Bolsonaro's administration, which promoted ending the demarcation of Indigenous territories and overwhelmingly failed to respond to deforestation alerts. The second Mosse project, a photographic series titled [Occidental](#) at Blue Sky Gallery (until 22 October), explores other environmental catastrophes in Amazon, from oil spills to mining.

Powerful works at Converge 45 included the 26 August performance of the Chilean artist Seba Calfuqueo's [Flowing Like Waterfalls](#) (2022-23) at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, where Calfuqueo evoked the flow of rivers through a choreographed presentation in conjunction with their video [Alka domo](#) (2017) (until 24 September)—reflecting on the sociopolitical and cultural status of the Mapuche people in present-day Chile. Meanwhile, the Portland-based artist

Sam Tam Ham (Sam Hamilton) presents a visceral five-channel video opera, *Te Moana Meridian* [↗](#) (2022), at Oregon Contemporary (until 7 October), poetically considering the history of the British Empire and what it would mean to relocate the prime meridian, the “centre of the world”, from Greenwich to Polynesia.



Sam Tam Ham (Sam Hamilton), still from *Te Moana Meridian* (2022)  
Photo: Mario Gallucci

Several Converge 45 exhibitions are funded by Jordan D. Schnitzer, a philanthropist, real-estate magnate and collector whose name is ubiquitously emblazoned across cultural institutions in Oregon. His collection spans over 20,000 pieces, loaned to institutions worldwide or otherwise stored in his warehouse in Portland (where, last month, one of the latest pieces to come out of David Hockney’s studio was being prepared to be boxed for a forthcoming show).

Schnitzer makes a concerted effort to acquire complete series or career-spanning collections of particular artists’ work, and he has an eclectic range of post-war and contemporary art that is especially rich in prints. His collection includes a vast trove of works by the late Chinese American artist Hung Liu, some of which are displayed in the exhibition *A Question of Hu: The Narrative Art of Hung Liu* [↗](#) at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University (until 2 December).

The exhibition comes after Liu’s *2021 retrospective* [↗](#) at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in Washington, DC—the first solo exhibition by an Asian American woman in the NPG’s history.

Overlooked until recent years, Liu was a prolific painter, weaver and printmaker who spent her formative years living under the Maoist regime, where she developed a signature twist on the Social Realist traditions in which she was trained before emigrating to the US in the 1980s. Her work melds Chinese and Western artistic traditions to foreground stories related to immigration, exile, imprisonment and war.



Hung Liu, *S-wan Quan Lake, Red Detachment of Women* (1995)  
Courtesy Converge 45

Elsewhere in Portland, the Jordan Schnitzer Japanese Arts Learning Center at Portland Japanese Garden screened the fittingly meditative film [Baku](#) (2012) by the Mexican artist Bosco Sodi (closed 11 September). The film shows a Japanese temple gardener erasing and remaking a gravel garden, a metaphor for resilience and growth. And at the nonprofit Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation, the exhibition [We Are the Revolution](#) (until 1 December), organised in collaboration with Viveros-Fauné, features works by more than 100 artists and is loosely themed around social critique. A maquette of Hank Willis Thomas's *The Embrace* (2023)—an homage to Martin Luther King Jr. that was famously met with mixed reviews—serves as one of its centrepieces.



#### Public art

### **‘We’re looking at the past as a gateway to the future’: Hank Willis Thomas on his new Martin Luther King Jr monument**

Claire Voon

Another notable work from Schnitzer’s collection at *We Are the Revolution* is Robert Colescott’s satirical masterwork *Homage to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People* (1976). It was acquired by Schnitzer’s mother, the art dealer Arlene Schnitzer, who founded Portland’s Fountain Gallery in 1961, when no comparable spaces existed in the region. She was one of the first to see the enormous talent of Colescott, who was then an unknown artist, as well as to believe in Portland’s potential as an arts hub—a vision that is just now gaining momentum with projects like Converge 45.

- [Converge 45](#), various closing dates, multiple venues in Portland, Oregon

Exhibitions

Converge 45

Biennial

Oregon

Marie Watt

Richard Mosse

Bosco Sodi

Hank Willis Thomas

Robert Colescott

Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation