

Rewards And Challenges To Be Found At Portland's Converge 45 Biennial

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Aerial view of Portland, Oregon take in Autumn GETTY

Portland isn't easy. Neither is its art biennial.

[Converge 45](#)—free and open to the public—confronts immigration, deforestation, racism, colonialism, genocide and homelessness as

perceived through the lens of more than 50 leading local, national and international contemporary artists across 20 locations throughout the city. A city which has found itself in the crosshairs of critics, most of whom have never been, over its handling of a large unhoused population.

There's suffering on these streets. That's not unique to Portland. The prevalence and visibility of that suffering, however, proves shocking to locals and visitors alike. Any effort to conceal this civic tragedy or minimize its impact on everyone in the community, unhoused and housed, would be foolish.

Solutions have been slow in the coming.

Can art offer a solution?

Yes.

A solution, not the solution.

Entitled "Social Forms," the third rendition of the biennial centers the idea of art as a social form, contemporary and historic artworks taking the measure of the era, responding directly to the challenges of their time.

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"The period that we're living through, that Joe Biden has called a ['cascade of crises,'](#) this is exactly the kind of period in which we

need aesthetics,” Converge 45 organizer Christian Viveros-Fauné said at an opening ceremony for the event held August 24. “We need people coming to tough, seemingly intractable socio-economic problems, political problems, with new ideas. New ideas about global warming. New takes on homelessness, to give you one example that I know is obviously an issue in the city and basically every city in this country—I live in New York, and it's no less an issue there than it is here.”

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Global warming and homelessness are problems around the world. Both are especially acute in Portland. From wildfire smoke in the sky to the tent encampments along the streets and sidewalks, Portland, unwittingly, has become something of a crucible for the 21st century’s most pressing problems. Those are, but two. There are others.

Will this city lead the way, get in the way, or be left along the way?

The Art



Hung Liu, 'Official Portraits: Citizen,' on view at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland ... [+] CHADD SCOTT

Converge 45—named for the 45th parallel north passing just south of the city, the halfway line between the equator and North Pole—takes place throughout the fall. You'd need that long to see it all. A highlights tour could be achieved over a weekend and should begin at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University where [Chinese American artist Hung Liu's \(1948–2021\)](#) paintings, tapestries and screenprints inspire the biennial's subtitle: "Art as Global Citizenship."

"Citizenship is your right to have rights," Viveros-Fauné said. "Without it, the vulnerable, the poor, the refugee don't stand a chance."

Liu was all of those things at one point in her life.

Coming of age during [Mao's murderous Cultural Revolution](#), her father was snatched from the home when the artist was a child. He endured decades of political imprisonment with his family knowing

nothing of his whereabouts. She was sent to a forced labor camp for years of Communist “reeducation.”

Miraculously, her artistic talent provided an opportunity to leave China for America and an education at the University of California, San Diego. That talent would eventually take her all the way to a retrospective show at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery opening just weeks after her death. [The exhibition was previously reviewed by Forbes.com.](#)

The finale of a three-work series of screenprinted self-portraits completed in 2006 entitled *Citizen* portrays the artist as mature, confident, resolute. A survivor and a thriver. Wife, mother. Chinese, American. A global citizen.

Liu’s smaller, fantastically vivid and detailed prints are paired in the presentation with large scale narrative paintings representative of her soon-to-be-iconic “weeping canvas” style. All of the works on view come from the personal collection of Portland native and West Coast real estate mogul Jordan D. Schnitzer.

The Schnitzer name is impossible to overlook here. Decades of major philanthropy in Portland and around the region has given the family title sponsorship to a ridiculously long list of cultural venues, not least of which, three university art museums. Schnitzer is a leading financial backer of Convergence 45 and shows off another sliver of his prodigious art holdings at [the recently opened The Schnitzer Collection.](#)

Occupying a piece of the 56,000-square-foot warehouse storing his 21,000-object collection featuring likely the world’s finest assemblage of fine art prints, The Schnitzer Collection gallery contributes “We are the Revolution” to Convergence 45. Here, visitors will find a star-studded roster of post-war and contemporary art

heavyweights Schnitzer has collected in depth, all of whose work connects with the biennial's social and political themes.

Mickalene Thomas. Hank Willis Thomas. Robert Colescott's *Homage to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People* (1976), a massive painting meeting the incredibly high standard of the masterpiece which inspired it. A scaled-down edition of [Kehinde Wiley's *Rumors of War* \(2019\) sculpture](#), perhaps the most significant public art monument to be installed in America in the past 50 years. One hundred? A Jasper Johns American flag print Schnitzer is particularly proud of.

The exhibition continues a key tenet of Schnitzer's collecting: access. His artworks have been used to stage [180 exhibits in 120 cities](#) as of mid-2023 with an uncountable number of loans supporting other presentations.

“What I'm trying to do with everything I do in the art is break down this image that so many have that (art) is for some elitist few,” Schnitzer said at a media preview for “We are the Revolution.” “Art and culture are the best of what we do in society. That's been true for millennia. It brings us joy, gives us contemplation, and it unlocks our creative sense.”

Schnitzer's collection, of course, doesn't constitute all or even a large percentage of the vast amount of art on view citywide during Converge 45. Richard Mosse's gut-wrenching film “Broken Spectre” takes deforestation, cattle ranching and resource extraction in the Amazon as its subject.



Richard Mosse 'Broken Spectre' viewing. MARIO GALLUCCI

The room-filing, multi-screen video installation intimately portrays the violence and destruction inherent in each of these practices through Mosse's witnessing of them all on the ground in Brazil. The film lasts more than an hour in totality; anyone who can make it 10 minutes will be deeply effected.

Judge not Brazil and Brazilians for these depredations lest we be judged ourselves. Portland, Oregon and the Pacific Northwest have been [similarly ravaged by deforestation](#), mining and [cattle ranching](#), North America's magnificent Amazon plundered for profit, a model for what's taking place in South America today. Also, were it not for America's voracious appetite for these products—lumber, beef, minerals—there would be no incentive for Brazilians to destroy Brazil in the exact same fashion Americans destroyed America a century prior.

The film's presentation among the fairytale forestland Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College offers further unsettling food for thought.

Converge 45 isn't easy.

Lewis and Clark.

Colonialism's tip of the spear.

They passed by what would become Portland in 1805 traveling along the Columbia River. Think not of them, but of the fortunes of the Indigenous people they met throughout their "Voyage of Discovery" from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean and back when taking in Marie Watt's (Seneca) *Chords to Other Chords (Relatives)* commissioned specifically for Converge 45 and on view at the [Center for Native Arts and Cultures](#).

Watt is both a celebrated international artist and a local artist calling Portland home. More local artists can be found at [Parallax Art Center](#) in the downtown Pearl District. Sara Siestreem's (Hanis Coos) interpretations of Indigenous weaving and Julian Gaines' *The Len Biase(ed) Laws* (2023) stand out.

Numerous art spaces throughout the Pearl District offer Converge 45 exhibitions, doubling as a walking tour of the neighborhood. Included is the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education displaying [Yishai Jusidman's "Prussian Blue,"](#) an exploration of the beautiful hue with a chilling connection to the Holocaust Jusidman discovered when researching Holocaust-denial websites.

Converge 45 isn't easy.

The Biennial



Kehinde Wiley 'Rumors of War' sculpture with Robert Colescott painting in background at The ... [+] CHADD SCOTT

Viveros-Fauné, Schnitzer and everyone else involved with Converge 45 lauds biennial founder Elizabeth Leach for continuing to serve as the event's driving force.

“I value this community and think it's got a really strong arts ecosystem and as I travel, I've seen strong arts ecosystems dissolve; cities that had gallery clusters, artists clusters, they don't (anymore), and there's a vacuum,” Leach said at a Converge 45 event opening August 26. “(Portland's art community) is strong and vibrant so putting our arms around it, doing a citywide art exhibition under the guise of a guest curator, elevates everything, challenges everybody, and makes our ecosystem stronger.”

The four-decade Portland resident's ambitions for Converge 45 extend beyond serving the arts community.

“Arts drive the economy; vibrant cities have vibrant arts and culture,” Leach said. “Economics and art are intertwined.

Businesses are attracted to a vibrant place. Who creates a vibrant place? Artists. Whether they're visual artists, musicians, performers, and Portland is so full of the creative class it's unbelievable to me. The innovation constantly amazes me so making sure the innovators have a safe place to create is super important.”

To a person, the Portland residents attending Converge 45 opening weekend events were amazed by the crowds and energy. Unlike most major American cities, Portland has yet to “bounce back” from COVID-19 and 2020’s social justice uprisings. Windows downtown are still boarded up. Some retail locations continue locking their doors during business hours. The number of vacant storefronts is alarming.

Portland isn’t easy.

But all at once, it felt like the city felt like it was ok to be proud again. To get out and have fun. To look at art.

“The larger public is excited by this. There's a tremendous support for art and culture in this region; by calling attention to the arts, we invite people who may be shy or on the periphery to come,” Leach said. “We're trying to make (Portland) a destination for people that live here as well as people who will visit us.”

For a weekend at least, it was.

The City



Bridge over pond in Japanese Garden, Portland Oregon GETTY

[The Canopy by Hilton hotel](#) in the heart of the Pearl District makes an ideal basecamp when exploring Convergence 45 as an outsider. Most of Convergence 45's participating galleries are just a couple blocks away, as is the literary wonderland and aptly named [Powell's City of Books](#). Oven and Shaker for pizza is around the corner, so is Deschutes Brewing, a highlight of the area's long-esteemed craft beer scene.

Portland has insightfully been described as “a city of restaurants” with the current star attraction being Haitian-inspired kann Restaurant. Named Best New Restaurant in America by the James Beard Foundation earlier in 2023, reservations are a must and the waiting list can be months. [Plan ahead](#).

You'll find much less fuss, no wait and memories of their own at Duck House Chinese Restaurant two blocks from the Schnitzer art museum at Portland State.

Schnitzer has a personal appeal to perspective visitors on behalf of the city.

“Look at Portland; it's not nearly as bad as has been written about,” he said. “We've had our issues. Sorry about that. [We're working on them](#). But there's a lot to celebrate here and in terms of the arts, (Converge 45) is a beacon saying, ‘let's get out. Let's be on the streets. Let's get to places and let's all talk together and see the art.’”

Observing a cascade of personal tragedies in between gallery stops isn't for everyone. At some point, visitors here will be made uncomfortable. For anyone whose primary objectives when traveling are to get drunk and tan, Portland isn't for you. But for travelers looking to challenge themselves, to think, to ask difficult questions, for seekers and art lovers, there may be no better place to visit in America right now.

Whether in Portland for Converge 45 or any other reason, conclude your visit amongst the towering Douglas firs surrounding [the Portland Japanese Garden](#). There you will find serenity and proof this city can overcome the greatest of challenges. [Upon its founding in 1963](#), less than a generation removed from Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, hate groups protested the construction site, shouting racial slurs and vandalizing the property. Today, it is a beloved community resource welcoming hundreds of thousands of visitors annually.

Things change.

Portland is banking on that fact.

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Chadd Scott

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