Art and revolution converge at Portland’s biennial

See the two exhibitions, ‘A Question of Hu’ and ‘We Are the Revolution,’ presented by the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation, at the Converge 45 biennial this fall.

By Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

"The exhibition We Are the Revolution features many of the most important artists of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s with the best of the current art superstars: Mickalene Thomas, Hank Willis Thomas and Vanessa German! It's brilliant to put the best of the best from different generations together," said art collector Jordan D. Schnitzer.

Social Forms: Art as Global Citizenship

is a city-wide exhibition that invites regional and international artists to examine historical and contemporary social issues. Organized by the arts nonprofit Converge 45 and guest curator Christian Viveros-Fauné with over 50 artists and 17 venues in the biennial, the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation is proud to present two powerful exhibitions from its collection:

A Question of Hu: The Narrative Art of Hung Liu from the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation, which opens at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University on Thursday Aug. 24th.

We Are the Revolution: From the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation, which opens at The Schnitzer Collection gallery on Saturday Aug. 26th.

"The exhibition of the late artist Hung Liu portrays individuals drive to not only survive, but to thrive amid brutal circumstances" said Schnitzer, "She attended an elite girls high school when Mao started the Cultural Revolution. She was taken to the country and worked as a farm laborer for several years. Her images are powerful yet inspiring!

From the first grade, Schnitzer was introduced to art collecting by his late mother, philanthropist Arlene Schnitzer. In the 70s, he came across Hung Liu's work in San Francisco. Since then, his collection has expanded into the largest collection of Hung Liu's work spanning 50 years.

Born in Changchun, China, in 1948, Hung Liu’s portraiture often centers refugees, women, children, soldiers and sex workers – celebrating the various lives that became collateral damage under an inhumane and oppressive regime. Having lived without a great deal of cultural, social and political agency, Liu’s paintings give power to her subjects, including herself, as heroes and heroines.

“Art as Global Citizenship, in many ways, is inspired and fleshed out by her work," said Converge 45’s guest curator, Christian Viveros-Fauné, who worked collaboratively on A Question of Hu with William Morrow, Director of Exhibitions at the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation.

The Chilean-born curator is no stranger to embracing political and social resistance. As the author of Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art (2018) and co-founder of the independent art publication The Brooklyn Rail, Viveros-Fauné admires Hung Liu – especially her courage and resilience.

“She was somebody who was very eloquent about portraying the outsider,” he said.

In 2021, Hung Liu became the first Asian woman in history to have a solo show at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.; a significant achievement, especially at a time where there is a rise in hate crimes against people of Asian descent. Sadly, Liu passed away three weeks before the exhibition.

“Artists are mirroring what’s going on in the world,” said Elizabeth Leach, founder of Converge 45. “Some of it’s historical narrative, some of it’s a political narrative, but each artist is telling a story.”

Converge 45 is a non-profit arts organization that produces a contemporary arts biennial in Portland, Oregon. Every two years, the arts organization hosts a city-wide exhibition and invites a guest curator to engage with Portland’s art ecosystem.

“It’s largely about access,” said Viveros-Fauné.

When asked how Social Forms might have significant social impact on the city, he noted the region’s rich cultural identity and just some of the internationally recognized artists who have started here: Carrie Mae Weems, Mickalene Thomas, and Mark Rothko – to name a few.

However, Viveros-Fauné was transparent about why Portland is an especially important location for art today: “In spite of its progressive and liberal bona fides, Portland is an imperfect city with something of a heavy past. It was founded as white utopia, and that’s not something that everyone knows.”

We Are the Revolution is an exhibition designed to explore social transformation and how the art of the past meets and affects the art of the present.

By bridging histories and timelines, the exhibition includes over 100 works by 32 artists from the collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation. Legendary artists such as Jasper Johns, Bruce Nauman and Robert Rauschenberg are paired with contemporary artists such as Derrick Adams, Dinh Q. Lê, Hank Willis Thomas and Kara Walker in ways that establish conversations across history.

Working alongside William Morrow, Director of Exhibitions at the Jordan Schnitzer Foundation, Viveros-Fauné wanted to show contemporary artists working alongside their historical predecessors. Schnitzer noted that by comparing “the contemporaries” to “the big giants,” the co-curators are building on the legacy of the artists that came before them.

The show displays some of the most political works of the last century, such as Jasper John’s Flags (1973). The exhibition also includes Hank Willis Thomas’s work At the twilight’s last gleaming? (2021), a quilt-like work made of various flags that represent a wide spectrum of political opinion and populist messaging.

Titled after Joseph Beuys’s 1972 print La rivoluzione siamo Noi, which translates to “We Are the Revolution,” the exhibition carries the energy of rebelliousness and transformation.

Opening on August 24th, Social Forms: Art as Global Citizenship is a city-wide exhibition that aims to address social transformation through the power of artists. The exhibition is organized by Converge 45, a group whose moniker makes reference to the 45th parallel; in its mission statement suggests, to bring together arts loving communities around the globe.

“Converge 45 offers the public, artists, students, collectors, curators and gallery owners the opportunity to see work that they might never get to see,” said Leach.

Like A Question of Hu and We Are the Revolution, a many more artists will exhibit artwork under the thematic banners of Social Forms.

2022 MacArthur Fellow Tavares Strachan will present his large-scale neon sculpture One Hundred More Fires (2023) at Oregon Contemporary, bringing the slain Cuban revolutionary Camilo Cienfuegos and his largely forgotten story back to metaphorical life.

Amanda Ross-Ho introduces ICE TIME, a solo exhibition at ILY2, and an off-site performance at the Lloyd Center Ice Rink.

Be sure to also visit Assembly, a group exhibition hosted by three art venues across the Pearl District: Pacific Northwest College of Art, Parallax Art Center and Stelo Arts. Through a multitude of media that includes painting, drawing, photography, video, sculpture, installation, ceramics, and found objects, Portland-based and global artists will explore ideas around identity, representation, inclusion, citizenship, labor, landscape, cityscape, ecology, trade, regionalism and globalization.

With over 50 artists and 17 venues, one thing is for sure: Portland has art-as-a-social-form down to a fine art.

Learn more at converge45.org.