Portland’s downtown is about to get an elixir, a jumpstart, a jolt that some believe will recharge both its economic and creative juices.

Put yet another way, the Contemporary Arts Biennial, “will give Portland a big booster shot,” said Elizabeth Leach, the noted gallery owner and founder of the Converge 45 cultural advocacy group that’s putting on the citywide arts festival.

The program runs between Aug. 24 and, for some exhibits, the end of December at 30 venues throughout the city.

“This will bring people to all parts of the city and make them feel like it’s safe again, and it will call attention to well-established and less-known venues so that they can get support,” Leach explained. “We’re also going to garner a lot of national, and some international press.

"These are the kinds of things that Portland needs badly right now. This is one of many ways we can touch Portlanders’ everyday lives and make them feel like we have something to celebrate and be proud of about our city.”

The Contemporary Arts Biennial, which also goes by its theme name "Social Forms," gathers artists, galleries and alternative venues. Christian Viveros Faune, who’s a global arts author and an East Coast art scene fixture, is the guest curator.

The program launches Aug. 24 at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at PSU, with “A Question of Hu,” which features works from the Chinese American artist Hung Lui. The art at the venue comes from Jordan Schnitzer, a rabid arts patron and collector as well as an Arts Biennial supporter.
"Loess Plateau," part of a stunning collection of work by the Chinese-American artist Hung Liu, will be shown during Converge 45's Contemporary Arts Biennial, which launches Thursday.

Courtesy of Converge 45

The festivities will include “Te Moana Meridian,” an experimental opera from Portland-based, New Zealand-born Sam Hamilton. The work, presented as a five-channel video installation at Oregon Contemporary, examines the world effects if the Prime Meridian existed in the South Pacific Ocean, as opposed to Greenwich, London. The scenario would change "our experience of time, as well as the structure of the world," according to Biennial organizers.
An image from "Te Moana Meridian," which will be shown during the Contemporary Arts Biennial.

Courtesy of Converge 45

Another powerful piece presented during the Biennial, Richard Mosse’s “Broken Spectre,” is an immersive film that examines deforestation in the Amazon. It’s on view at Lewis & Clark College’s Hoffman Gallery.

While the art takes the Biennial’s spotlight, the two months of events could also help restore Portland’s vibrancy should the city build on the energy generated by combining of business and culture.

“What’s really exciting about this project is the ability to activate an urban terrain around the notion of art,” explained Faune. “And it’s also a big celebration.”

So big, noted Leach, that this year’s Biennial version is the largest such arts program ever in Portland. The venues include sites east of 82nd Avenue, in North Kenton and in Beaverton.

Leach said part of the inspiration for founding Converge 45 is that Portland is the only West Coast city with more than 10 arts venues within walking distance of each other in the Pearl District.
Elizabeth Leach founded Converge 45, which is putting on the Contemporary Arts Biennial.

Cathy Cheney

“We’re celebrating every neighborhood and that’s absolutely critical,” Leach said. “This is a region that values culture and art. So it’s absolutely on a scale that’s seen in the largest and most ambitious cities.”

Along with support from Schnitzer Properties, the event has merited backing from such companies as PGE, Nike Inc. and First Republic Bank. About $1 million will be spent for programming and other operational costs.

Such money is expected to come back to the city in the form of hotel and restaurant visitors.

“We’ve created cultural tourism here. This is both an economic and cultural driver for Portland,” said Leach.

Schnitzer also hopes the program is an image restorer.
“The problems we have, with the homeless, the grab and go’s... It’s going to take a lot of hands climbing the ladder towards the quality of life we had here one rung at a time,” he said. "This event could solve a host of issues. It could bring a positive image about downtown again, it’s an event that helps incentivize people to come downtown and celebrate our community. And it involves art, which is a big part of my life.”

WHERE THE ART IS

Here are the 17 galleries hosting Contemporary Arts Biennial exhibitions, showings and events (another 13 will host affiliated events).

- Blue Sky Gallery, 122 N.W. 8th Ave., Portland
- ILY2, 925 N.W. Flanders St., Portland
- Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education, 724 N.W. Davis St., Portland
- Pacific Northwest College of Art, 511 N.W. Broadway, Portland
- Parallax Art Center, 516 N.W. 14th Ave., Portland
- Stelo Arts, 412 N.W. 8th Ave., Portland,
- The Schnitzer Collection, 3033 N.W. Yeon Ave., Portland (Check Schnitzercollection.org website for public hours)
- Oregon Contemporary, 8371 N. Interstate Ave., Portland
- Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, 15 N.E. Hancock St, Portland
- Hoffman Gallery at Lewis & Clark College, 615 S.W. Palatine Hill Road, Portland
- Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University, 1855 S.W. Broadway, Portland
- Portland Japanese Garden, 611 S.W. Kingston Ave., Portland
- Patricia Reser Center for the Arts, 12625 S.W. Crescent St., Beaverton
- Cooley Gallery at Reed College, 3203 S.E. Woodstock Blvd., Portland
- Center for Native Arts and Cultures, 800 S.E. 10th Ave., Portland
- SE Cooper Contemporary, 6901 S.E. 110th Ave., Portland
- Billboard, Eastbank Commerce Center, 1001 S.E. Water Ave., Portland

A WEST COAST (AND BEYOND) HAPPENING

Portland’s Contemporary Arts Biennial takes place in the Rose City but has ties to several other cities. Here are a few of those links.

Seattle

Curators and museum groups including assemblages from the Seattle Art Museum, the Henry Art Gallery and the Frye Museum will visit Portland to take in the Converge 45 Biennial. Also, several artists displaying work are originally from the Seattle area, including
Marie Watt, who will "unveil a monumental sculpture fabricated in neon that serves as an affirmation of the land and the Indigenous people who are ephemeral monuments to this territory," organizers said.

**San Francisco and Sacramento**

Curators from the cities, as well as a representative from Stanford University, will hit Portland along with several gallery owners who'll participate in "cultural tourism" as they hit town to patronize the Biennial.

**Tampa**

Guest curator Christian Viveros-Faune works in Tampa and is curator-at-large at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum.