



REVIEWS

CONVERGE 45: ART AND POLITICS ALONG PORTLAND'S PARALLEL

BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT | OCT 25, 2023



Amanda Ross-Ho, ICE TIME, Installation view, ILY2, 2023. Photo: Mario Gallucci. Courtesy of the artist and ILY2, Portland.

The Converge 45 biennial initiative exists to forge a regional, national, and international artistic discourse, and to intentionally center certain aspects of those conversations within the Pacific Northwest arts ecosystem. Showcasing some 50 local, national, and international artists at 15 official venues and dozens more locations, projects, and group shows, the idea is that the art world should make a point of coming to Portland—but the deeper idea is that the world is already there.

The 2023 edition has been guest-curated by renowned critic Christian Viveros-Fauné, an art historical-minded writer and adventurous curator with a penchant for the politically salient in visual culture. Under the rubric Viveros-Fauné's book *Social Forms: Art as Global Citizenship*, the biennial proceeds outward like the spokes of a wheel from its core—a substantial group exhibition that deals directly and poetically with the dynamics that shape contemporary political art in personal and global contexts.

A further suite of official satellite exhibitions aligned with the vision partnered with Converge 45 to produce integral shows at area galleries, museums, college campuses, nonprofits, and famous gardens; plus, a broader range of affiliated pop-ups, bookshops, design studios, and more signed on—all pulling together to increase the visibility, curatorial scope, and diversity of contributions to the discourse by local stakeholders. Being spread out across Portland, the treasure map aspect of the experience also offers a great way to see the city.

Centered in the rapidly hipster-fying but historic, beautiful, bustling, and walkable Pearl District—where the city's highest concentration of galleries and art centers can be found—the foundational three-part core show "Assembly" filled three locations: the nonprofits Parallax Art Center and Stelo Arts, and the galleries at the Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA). Work included ranged from narrative and autobiographically-grounded mixed media paintings by Narsiso Martinez, merging humble materials with gorgeously rendered portraiture and art historical signifiers in a Courbet-like bid to tell history from an underrepresented socioeconomic point of view; to Judith Wyss' intimate, lovingly crafted dioramas of shabby but lived-in architectures that speak to the potential for the poetry of everyday day life to flourish anywhere; to Vo Vo's regal yet folksy, comfortable yet unattainable woven textiles that contain slogans of exhaustion and resistance; and to Sara Siestrem (Hanis Coos) who elicits contemporary sentiments from the language of traditional, ancestral, ceremonial materials and idiomatic, medicinal crafts.

Throughout the scope of gathered works, across monumental and ephemeral, abstract and Pop-inflected, and assertively analog voices, *Assembly* set a tone for the fuller biennial, of shying away from neither beauty nor confrontation, and of reaching for something more than headlines, selfies, and palliative progressive gestures—opting instead for the kind of spark in soul and psyche that could prompt real action.

From the mountaintop view to the intimate deep-dive, but no less engaged with various kinds of contested histories and their intersections with capital, social constructs, and personal memory, comes the Portland Pearl District gallery ILY2 (I Love You Too) with an independent but interrelated solo exhibition and extremely site-specific performance by Los Angeles artist Amanda Ross-Ho. Ross-Ho used to be a figure skater, and a pretty dedicated one at that, in competitions and everything. Think sequined flesh-toned body stockings and all the hairspray the law allows. Think about a young woman becoming increasingly unconvinced by that lifestyle and all that it entails and implies, ending up at art school, and decades later returning to the subject via the sculptural mediums she now favors. And because it's Portland, also think about Tonya Harding.



Amanda Ross-Ho, *Untitled Figure (the center of it all)*, performance view, Lloyd Center, Portland, 2023. Photo: Simone Fischer. Courtesy of the artist and ILY2, Portland.

As a personal exercise in memory, Ross-Ho filled the gallery with soft-sculptures, found objects, and personal possessions both embodying and interpreting the precise equipment, aesthetic appeal, and choreographed energies involved in professionalized skating. Hard steel blades, soft custom slipcovers, rhinestones and soft mats, lycra, zippers and vintage Capezio. Around a secret nook, the performance costume of her youth was laid out in a body bag. Metaphor abounds, for gender roles and commercial spectacle, for dreams achieved and dashed, for memory and childhood, for the exertions of the body and the body as it changes. Nearby sits Portland's famous Lloyd Center Ice Rink—a public rink, very much still in use, located inside a derelict but rather iconic shopping mall with a Crystal Palace-worthy atrium and a snow machine—best known as the place Harding was forced to practice for lack of funds to score time at the fancy sports center.

It was there that Ross-Ho staged a one-time performance in which she donned her old costume and performed a routine. As of that morning, she had not taken the ice in years, and aside from the emotion and nostalgia of the “reenactment” scheme, this made the real subject of the piece the question of whether she still knew how. Relying on muscle memory as much as biographical memory, she was just as curious to see how it would go as anyone. A secondary but salient effect of the piece was to prompt about 65 fancy international art-world people to gather, breathless, and watch a skating show in a somewhat derelict mall a few miles from downtown—to be forced by heartfelt emotion out of their erudite, analytical stances and into the kitsch and crafted presence of the experience. It was brilliant.