

# From road trip to exhibit: Finding what Texas' artists have to offer

## Curator traveled 11,000 miles over seven weeks to select works for the Texas Biennial

**LIFE** By Luke Quinton - Special to the American-Statesman



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Catherine Allen, "Building 3" (2016). Contributed

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The plan for the Texas Biennial was that it would be, you know ... biennial. But whether it was funding and logistics, or just a crisis of purpose, it has been four years since the last undertaking of the statewide survey of visual art.

Independent curator Leslie Moody Castro says art critics and cultural mavens in various pockets of Texas suspected out loud that maybe this was for the best.

They had thoughts: “That the biennial in the past was too centered on the cities and didn’t reach out into the smaller centers. It wasn’t transparent, it didn’t prioritize (its own) open call to artists, and there wasn’t a great gesture to understand the whole state’s arts communities.”

This, says Castro, was the basic critique being leveled at the biennial from people such as Lubbock artist Jon Whitfill.

Ouch.

Surprisingly, though, Castro actually agreed.

“Totally! I did, and I had my own criticisms, too. Why was it in so many venues? Why were there so many curators? It was just stuck in this antiquated vision of what a biennial should be,” she says. “I was grateful to hear it. I needed to hear it.”

There are hundreds of biennials, from Istanbul to Havana. When Austin’s Big Medium arts organization made the first Texas Biennial in 2005, aspiring to make a Texas version of a provocative, meaningful survey of art — a la original Venice Biennale — it was unquestionably worth a try to stake out the state as a place where art is made.

So when a decision was made to restart the Texas Biennial once again, Castro, who splits her time between Austin and Mexico City, got to work rethinking things. After consulting with the event’s critics, it seemed to her that, as the first post-hiatus curator, she needed to respond by shaping an event that was less about appealing to bourgeois tastemakers and more accessible to artists. Because, she says, “that’s who we’re serving.”





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Max Manning, "Untitled (PPR43)" (2016). Contributed

To do that, over the summer she fired up her 15-year-old Mitsubishi Galant and hit the road for a

seven-week tour of the art communities of Texas.

“I think we did more than 11,000 miles,” Castro says. She, along with friends and fellow curators, visited 26 towns and connected with 200 artists and arts partner organizations. It would bring her through Corpus Christi, Brownsville, Huntsville, Lubbock, Tyler — and, because they had expanded the call for artists to include 10 miles outside the Texas border, Castro also made stops in Juarez and Matamoros.





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It was seven weeks of motels and family and friends' houses, with just a couple of days' break at home in Austin. A road-weary Texan might ask, what was she thinking?

"I ask myself that every day," Moody says with a laugh.

Instead of picking which studios to visit, Castro tapped into the Biennial's network of partner organizations and visited studios that invited her, a subtle gesture of relinquishing control.

Castro documented her experiences on the Biennial's website, and it's a rich document of the scope of who's making art in Texas. Joe Peña's story stands out. As Castro tells it, Peña, a Corpus Christi painter and teacher, was at something of a creative standstill. "He almost had writer's block," she says.

Peña was eating menudo at his family's home when he was struck with a thought.

"He saw the texture of the meat, and it was so visceral and raw," Castro says. "So he decided to buy a bunch of raw meat, take it home, and paint it."

Peña, a realist painter, took his brush to his own surroundings, the Mexican-American community in Corpus.

Along with his textural paintings of meat, Peña painted taco trucks in a style Castro calls Caravaggio-esque, after the great Italian painter. In one, the truck glows with a soft light. A cook has her back to us. The rest of the scene is dark. It's almost religious.

"They're so classical and so meticulous," Castro says.

Castro's road trip took a cue from another event called the People's Biennial, where artists come to the curators. "They basically set out a folding table and invited people to come show their work," she says.

The results of this journey — living in the moment, planning the next studio visit and finally reflecting on the visits for the blog — sound both exhilarating and exhausting.

"I stayed in friends' homes, I stayed in really bad motels, I stayed in a museum," Castro says.

"I was in past, present, future at once," she says. "I was telling people to have a good weekend on a Tuesday."

She visited Marfa for the first time (which seems incredible, given that town's pull and Castro's résumé as a curator) and connected with cities and towns in ways she did not expect.

"We got lost everywhere in Edinburg," she says, because her hometown's roads were under construction. "We missed every single exit we had to take in Dallas."

"I really fell in love with Lubbock and Laredo," she says, an odd couple if ever there was one.

In Lubbock she saw a tightly knit art community, where 5,000 people come out for the First Friday art walk.

"Laredo, it's a border town, but it's seamless. I spoke more Spanish there than anywhere else," she says. Her hotel room window stared directly over the border bridge.

Her trips to the border towns revealed the other side of the immigration debate. In Juarez, she says, "there is a militancy there that's quite profound," a sort of existential dread of the future, in a town that was once joined to its American sister city by a simple trolley.





Erin Stafford, "Sentimental Offerings of Trade and Commerce" (2015). Contributed

The result of all this is a single show of work by the 33 artists Castro selected. And few will be surprised to hear that after a selection process that rejected the thinking of a white-walled art gallery, the show is located in a warehouse space behind a working furniture store just off South Congress Avenue.

In Biennials of the past, Castro says, "there were a lot of repeated names, and I wanted to avoid that."

How, she asks, "do you represent equity, not only geographically, but culturally?"

Of the artists she's chosen, some like San Antonio's Cruz Ortiz seem familiar, while some don't even have websites.

But even Ortiz, she points out, has never been in the Biennial before.

Castro's picks for the Biennial are a mix of formal, ironic sculptors, like Dallas' Erin Stafford, and scruffier artists like Ortiz, whose work is less of an intellectual pursuit, hung on a wall, and more an interaction with a community.

Castro's road trip finally hit a wall in her family's home. "I actually got to eat a homemade meal," she says. "Something about the comfort about just being home that makes you really not want to work."

She sums up her art-finding mission with a picture of a state that tends to be hard to frame.

"I got a tattoo in San Antonio, which my mom hated," she says. "I had Salvadoran food in Huntsville, Mexican in Amarillo, Venezuelan food in Midland, and Cuban food in Laredo.

"I had the entire state taking care of me."

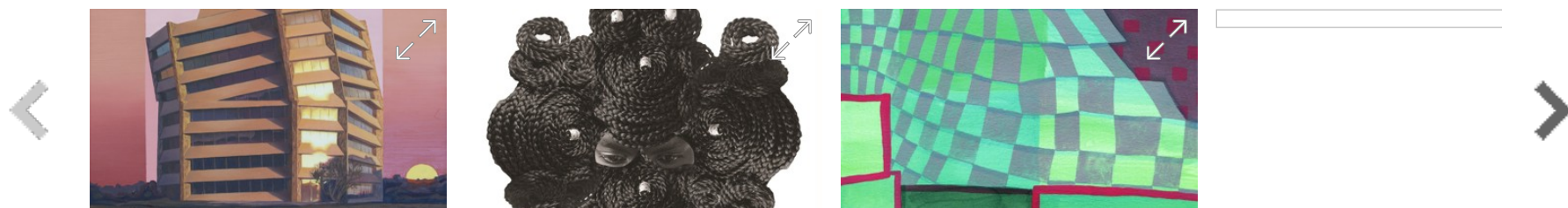
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**When:** Opening 7-10 p.m. Sept. 30; exhibit hours noon to 6 p.m. Thursday-Saturday through Nov. 11

**Where:** 211 E. Alpine Road in Austin

**Information:** [texasbiennial.org](http://texasbiennial.org)



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