

ArtSeen

Converge 45 Biennial: *Social Forms: Art as Global Citizenship*



By [Tess Bilhartz](#)



(L-R) Narsiso Martinez, Lisa Jarrett, and Julian Gaines, *Assembly*, Converge 45, Parallax Art Center, Portland, OR, 2023.

For *Social Forms: Art as Global Citizenship*, the third iteration of the Converge 45 Biennial, curator Christian Viveros-Fauné sought out art that engages with the pressing questions of its time and that might intervene, somehow, in a reimagining of Portland and other places. Many of the biennial artists seek to give a place form and direction, either as a witness to devastation and change or a conjurer of sometimes hopeful visions.

Peter Gronquist floats a new mark, a simple line, a gesture, up into Portland's skyline with his billboard above the Eastbank Commerce Center. The polished steel backing disappears into a reflection that blurs with the sky, and Gronquist's neon flourish hovers weightlessly. Places are marked by signs and billboards and also subtle imprints like wind on dirt; they are marked by animals and plants who may leave bones or fossils behind; they are marked by climate disasters and industry. In Richard Mosse's immersive video, *Broken Spectre*, the mark is a scar as mercury stains the Amazon River where miners extract gold, and deforestation brutally gouges the rainforest, devastating Indigenous communities along the river.

Jorge Tacla also considers marks of damage in his panoramic painting of the destroyed Syrian city Homs, *Sign of Abandonment/Señal de abandono 34* (2018). Tacla paints primarily in black and white with an oil and cold wax mixture that allows him to make shapes and lines shiver. The architecture jitters, and every so often, rhythmically across the canvas, the jittery forms are rubbed out and dissolve into formless gray clouds. In rare moments the smearing and shakiness crystallize into clear lines, only to devastate with the contours of rubble. Above the city, the clouds hang heavy and corporeal, wrong in scale and density. They hover, briefly holding the dust and remains of the city.



Installation view: Sara Siestream: *Assembly*, Converge 45, Parallax Art Center, Portland, OR, 2023.

Some marks are ephemeral, like the lines left by skates on an ice rink or the brief and often imperceptible impact of a runner's shoe on the ground. There are also the invisible imprints of fragrance or breath that mark a place at the molecular level. In *Assembly* at Parallax Art Space, Sara Siestream's (Hanis Coos) basket weaving materials hang, ready, at the entrance

in *cache eleven: straight to heaven*. As I walk around the gallery, I might inhale scents and bits of intentionally placed olfactory and medicinal plants that reciprocally absorb particles of my own skin, hair, or breath. We all take something with us, and we all leave something behind. I'm reminded of Malcolm Peacock's potent installation that also considers breath and the invisible comingling of molecules.

Peacock's own recorded voice narrates the exhibition, and he begins with a passage about a future when people literally struggle to understand where one person ends and another begins. What follows is an account of distance runners who "rub elbows," exchange breath, and share stories. As Peacock tells it, on a run through the Portland landscape he encounters Edward Gardner (1898–1966), a fellow Black distance runner whose own story structures the exhibition *next in line at the peak of the valley, his spine bent forward as he surrendered to his choices*, at SE Cooper Contemporary.

Peacock records this story as he runs, and his runner's breath is the ever-present rhythm of the piece, sometimes fast and shallow, sometimes slow and deep. As I listen, I'm lying next to another visitor on a large, braided, circular bed, its coils shifting from brown to deep green to gold. We follow Gardner on a 3,000-mile cross-continental marathon as he tackles the profound endurance of the race, harassed by two white men on horseback. Peacock mentions a desire to integrate into the landscape of the Pacific Northwest, but the landscape can be threatening. He finds a companion, though, in Gardner's story, his legend or his ghost, and a kind of fusion takes place between the two runners as their strides connect and they listen to each other's breath. My breath is in that room, too, as is my companion's. Throughout, Peacock substitutes the word "travel" for "run," and "traveler" for "runner", and he guides us on a kind of hero's journey, one that he has been on before and one that Gardner traveled before him.

Marks left on the ice by Amanda Ross-Ho's skates, like Peacock's breath, are a testament to physical demand and commitment. The wobbly lines where she falters and pulls herself back on track tell the story of her performance, *Untitled Figure, (THE CENTER OF IT ALL)* at the mostly vacant Lloyd Center mall. She guides her movements through muscle memory from that bygone era, the era of the American mall and the era when she skated competitively. Her skates repetitively draw a figure-eight, emphasizing its parameters and blurring them as she wobbles, catches herself, and re-finds the circle in this tongue-in-cheek embodiment of nostalgia and dreams.



Installation view: *Malcolm Peacock: next in line at the peak of the valley, his spine bent forward as he surrendered to his choices*, Converge 45, SE Cooper Contemporary, Portland, OR, 2023.

Local galleries and arts organizations have taken up residence in some abandoned sections of the Lloyd Center mall. It straddles past and, maybe, some kind of future. Another transfer of intent and ownership occurs when, driven by conversations around Land Back, the Center for Native Arts and Culture acquires a turn-of-the-century red brick building that houses Marie Watt's monumental *Chords to Other Chords (Relative)*. Watt had extended an open call to Native artists, asking for fliers, slogans, and poster materials. She plasters their words to a panoramic wooden backing that runs the length of the room, and enormous red neon text: "Turtle Island And", glows over the collected ephemera. The small notes demand that I step up close to read them, and the large neon text, no longer legible as words, instead lights the notes. I step back to read the large words, and I step forward to read the small ones, the scale shift making apparent the cacophony of voices participating in this "Turtle Island And."

The chorus of personal notes in Watt's piece is reminiscent of the breath and intimacies exchanged in Peacock's, these small voices over time chip away at the contours of a place and reshape it. Jesse Murry's quiet and moving suite of small paintings shape an internal world. These are paintings about paint and the placement of the hand, abstract but with a disappearing horizon. Corporeality departs, and for a moment, we levitate.

Contributor

Tess Bilhartz

Tess Bilhartz is an artist and writer who grew up in Dallas, Texas and is currently based in New York City. Recent solo shows include *Follow Me Down* at Rubber Factory in 2022 and *What On Earth* at Super Dutchess in 2020. Residencies include the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2017) and the Sharpe Walentas Space Program (2013). She teaches art at Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York.