

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Conrad Egyir: "The Regional' Review: The Midwest on the Move"

By Peter Plagens

December 29, 2021



Installation view of the exhibition. PHOTO: CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

A survey of contemporary art from an often neglected part of the U.S. is an important reminder that there's plenty of creativity between the coasts

This isn't your grandfather's Midwest anymore. The art that emanates from it these days seems to have little to do with grassy plains, silos, or the kind of folk in Grant Wood paintings. That's certainly not a complaint about "The Regional," a survey of new art from—as a press release puts it—"the area that stretches from the Dakotas to Ohio, and from Minnesota to Missouri," just a descriptive fact. The exhibition includes the work of 23 "emerging and midcareer" artists from 14 Midwestern cities; it's on view at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati through March 20, 2022, after which it travels to the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Mo.

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The big show of about 75 works seems to signal the almost complete triumph of sociopolitical didactics over aesthetics. A printed handout accompanying the exhibition lists, among rationales behind the work in "The Regional," "sites for challenging traditional narratives and creating space for accountability and healing as a response to violence against communities of color" and "document[ing] contemporary and historical sites of trauma, nostalgia, or alienation as a means of reclaiming personal and community power."



Lorena Molina's 'Reconciliation Garden' (2021). PHOTO: LORENA MOLINA/CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, CINCINNATI

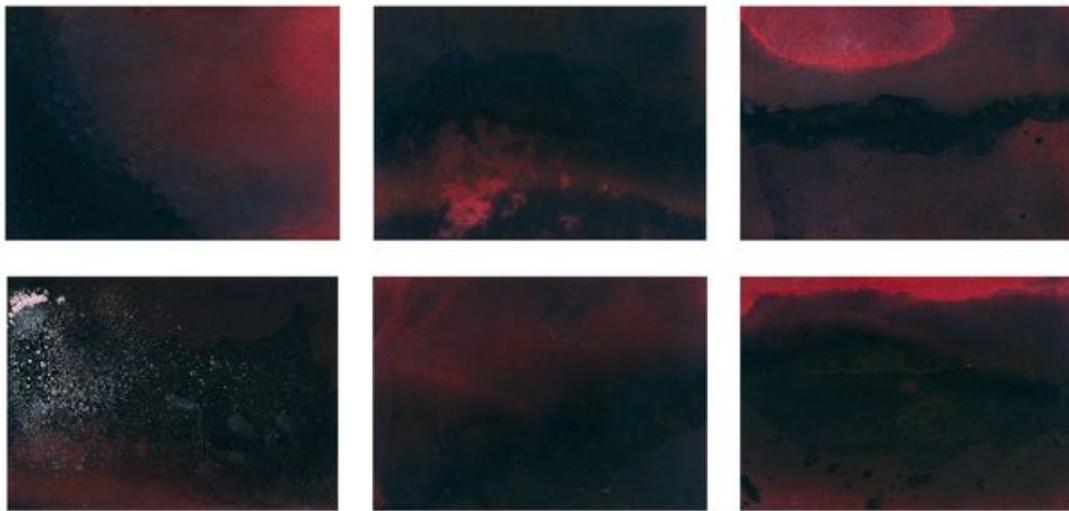
The most emblematic example of that thrust is "Reconciliation Garden" (2021), by Lorena Molina (b. 1985), a Salvadoran-born artist who came to Cincinnati (where she's an art professor) by way of Southern California. It's a physically nonaesthetic installation featuring potted plants, hanging grow lights in bulb cages, and a table, chair, laptop and headphones. One sits at the table and watches a nicely made video interview with native Salvadoran coffee producers. The piece, accompanied by a well-crafted booklet, is essentially a pitch for contributions to Ms. Molina's Reconciliation Coffee Fund, to help these farmers stay afloat. Nothing wrong with that, save that the work might have been more effective as a slide lecture.

Speaking of which, there was a quite good panel discussion—with slides—on opening night, featuring Ms. Molina and three other participants in the exhibition. Among them was Anissa Lewis

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(b. 1974), a Black artist who returned from getting an M.F.A. degree at Yale to her hometown of Covington, Ky., to document, in a movingly poetic way, her old dilapidated neighborhood. Ms. Lewis superimposes images of the ghostly faces of residents upon photographs of the poignantly modest houses in the area where she grew up. A caveat is that such works as "328 Pleasant Street (Me and Brother)," 2015, had more impact projected large at the panel discussion than they do as wall-calendar-size physical works in the show.



Dakota Mace's 'Dahodiyinii (Sacred Places)' (2021). PHOTO: DAKOTA MACE/CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, CINCINNATI

Aesthetics vs. didactics is not always, however, an either/or proposition. The large, low-lying and arresting platform grid of small reddish rectangles of cochineal-dyed cyanotypes by Dakota Mace (b. 1991) is at first glance entirely aesthetic, perhaps a bit of late Minimalist art with license to add graduated color and surface incident. According to Ms. Mace's website, however, her work has more to do with "translating the language of Diné (Navajo) weaving history and beliefs through alternative photography methods, weaving, beadwork, and papermaking." An audio accompaniment of tribal singing reinforces that. But if traditional Navajo art is the point, some visual reference to the source material would have made the work more convincing.

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Jonathan Christensen Caballero's "Envíos a Mi Hermano/Shipments to My Brother" (2021) deftly combines didactics and aesthetics by using the glue of humor. In the work by Mr. Caballero (b. 1988), two large-doll-size figures (one with actual kid's sneakers), wearing what look to be Mesoamerican headdresses, squat by a river of what the label calls "secondhand fiber." (A curator told me it comes from bluejeans.) One figure sends little tin boats downstream; the other receives them. I think I get the drift: One brother who's migrated north to the U.S. sends care packages to his brother somewhere south of the border. The piece is affectionately funny rather than preachy.

There are artists in the exhibition whose sociopolitical emphasis whispers rather than proclaims: Natalie Petrosky, b. 1989 (small abstractions made mysterious by "kiln-casted" glass frames); Conrad Egyir, b. 1989 (cleverly narrative large paintings occupying a middleground, if you will, between Jacob Lawrence and Kehinde Wiley); and Rashawn Griffin, b. 1980 (a grid of framed notebook-ish drawings somewhat negligible in the individual but intriguing as a whole).



Jonathan Christensen Caballero, 'Envíos a Mi Hermano/Shipments to My Brother' (2021). PHOTO: JONATHAN CHRISTENSEN CABALLERO/CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, CINCINNATI

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Natalie Petrosky, 'the ground is waiting' (2021). PHOTO: NATALIE PETROSKY/CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, CINCINNATI
 RIGHT: Conrad Egyir, 'Queen Above Deck' (2020). PHOTO: CONRAD EGYIR/CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, CINCINNATI



Rashawn Griffin, 'Everything that happens' (2016-21). PHOTO: RASHAWN GRIFFIN /CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, CINCINNATI

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In the event, one has to give credit to the CAC and the Kemper for daring to enter the tricky territory of regional survey exhibitions. The most significant extant others are centered on a given major city—e.g., "Made in L.A." at the Hammer Museum and "Greater New York" at the Museum of Modern Art's P.S. 1 branch. (Chicago looms as outsize in "The Regional" as New York might in a similar show featuring the Northeast.)

The huge geographic territory covered by "The Regional" likely presented all kinds of logistical and financial difficulties, which probably account for the overall thin-on-the-ground look of the show—no massive sculptures, no walled-off video and film chambers, no galloping installations, no enormous paintings. To me, it's an even bet whether "The Regional" will—as the definite article in the title implies—reoccur. It should, because the Midwest and its art will doubtless continue to change.

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