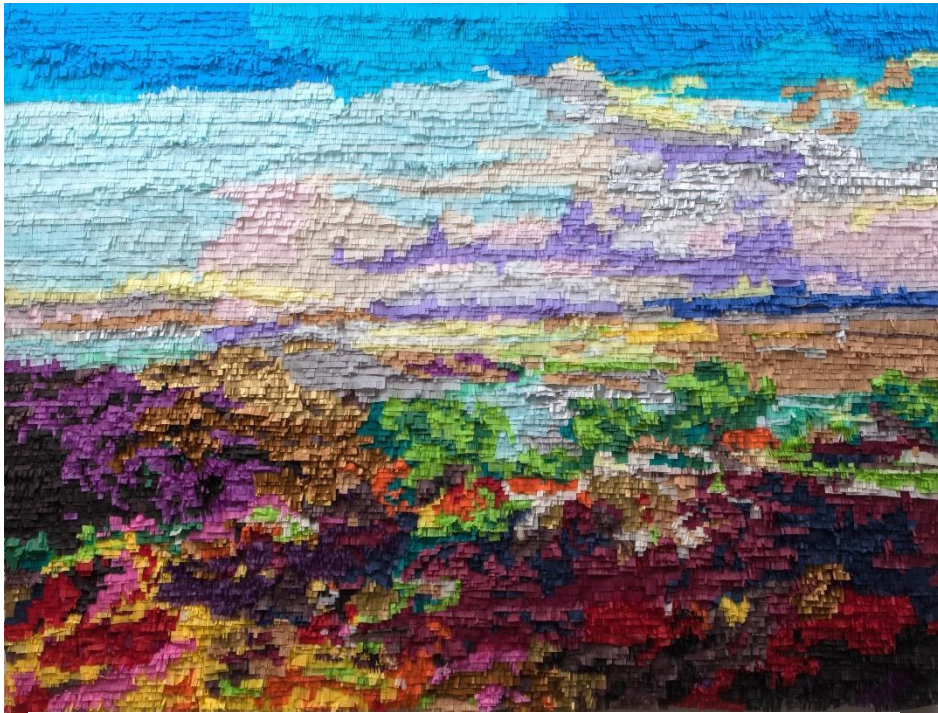


Art of the State: Downtown exhibit shines light on broad range of Nevada's contemporary artists

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The Valley of Mexico from the Santa Isabel Mountain Range, Justin Favela

One of the powerful qualities of art is its ability to refract the culture that inspires it; bending views to create new perspectives that inform and sometimes drive the evolution of that culture. Art speaks broadly, and at its best, insightfully, to the identity of a place and time, a fragmented truth obtained through distillation.

What does the work of our art communities say about contemporary life in Nevada? That is a central question underpinning the new exhibition *Tilting the Basin* presented by the Nevada Art Museum and the nonprofit organization Art Museum at Symphony Park on display through May 14 in downtown Las Vegas.

Reno, Nevada-based NMA art curatorial director Joanne Northrup and Las Vegas art adviser Michele C Quinn co-curated the show. They conducted more than 50 studio visits in the Las Vegas area and in Reno and Carson City, Nevada, to identify the artists who would be included in the exhibition, explained Amanda Horn, NMA director of communications.

Tilting the Basin features about 90 works representing a broad range of themes and media from 34 selected artists. The exhibit ran for 10 weeks at NMA in Reno this past year and opened locally on March 17.

“There was no overarching theme that was intended to connect to the show,” said Horn. “As (the curators) visit these folks, they started to see the work is informed by popular culture, by their environment: the natural environment, the urban environment, religion, politics.

“One of the requirements was that they were living and working in Nevada, because we really wanted to look at artists working here and ask, ‘How does that impact what you produce?’ ”

According to Horn, this is the first comprehensive show spotlighting contemporary artists working collectively in Northern and Southern Nevada, a project that took about two years from conception to opening.

“Nevada has an emerging pool of gifted contemporary artists,” said Northrup. “The problem is that there is not a lot of financial support for their work, so they must struggle. Often artists wind up moving to another state for economic reasons. The artists that remain in Nevada really want to be here and make it work – and they really have to hustle to do that.”

Wendy Kveck said her work is influenced by Las Vegas imagery that commodifies women.

“The hyper-sexualization of women ... is really ever-present in visual culture in Las Vegas, so that influences my work,” said Kveck at the August show opening at NMA in Reno. “And I feel that my work then tries to push back against those kind of images and the way that women are represented.”

Las Vegas-based Rachel Stiff draws on the city’s urban and natural landscape to create abstracted vistas.

“The quality of air, the quality of light, the interchange between the desert and the city: it is the spaces in between that I find really engaging and really interesting,” she said at the Reno opening. “It is the neon that you cannot see; it is the dry air; it is the clouds creeping in on all sides.”

“(The curators) were looking for a diversity of work and also for artists who have not been prominently displayed at the museum in the past,” Horn explained. “That was very important. These artists are being recognized in various ways, and certainly this exhibition has already impacted some of their careers in very positive ways, even since last August.”

A 14,000-square-foot warehouse at 920 S. Commerce St., on the periphery of the Las Vegas Arts District, is hosting the exhibition.



What's up with the sky?, Rachel Stiff

“It is a raw space,” said Horn. “You have this very European contemporary art gallery feel. It is perfect. We were just thrilled when we saw it.”

Horn said the museum continues to search for ways to be inclusive and accessible in order to spread interest in visual arts to a broader population. Featuring both Spanish and English labels, the show offers free admission through its duration as a result of the help of financial underwriting from MGM Resorts International.

“That will also break down barriers and allow more people to come experience something they have not experienced before,” said Horn. “You have to approach it in a way that says, ‘Hey, this is an experience that is for everyone. You don’t have to have an art degree to understand how this relates to you. You do not have to bring anything but yourself and come as you are to experience whatever it is that the art gives to you -- sadness, or joy, or fear, or whatever kind of reaction that causes, or not at all.’”

“Not every kind of art is going to appeal to every person,” she added. “It is very subjective and what people relate to. But it is truly the first barrier that you have to break it down.”

Two exhibiting artists are hosting a community day family-oriented arts workshop on April 15 and May 13. The gallery also will have extended hours for an open house during First Friday on April 7 and May 5.

“Arts education is an enormous, gaping need in the state,” said Northrup. “Investing in arts education would gradually pay dividends in terms of creating a more substantial population of art lovers.”

She said the museum has been working hard to bring together the arts communities in opposite ends of the state. Part of those efforts has been to support the initiative to create a permanent art museum in Las Vegas, potentially in downtown’s Symphony Park.

“We are working to create a dialogue around the museum,” explained Horn. “The Art Museum at Symphony Park has really made some strong headway into moving this idea forward, and (we’re) working with the city of Las Vegas to do that.”

“We absolutely are committed, and we are on track,” said Alex Epstein, AMSP board member. “We envision that we could open doors as soon as five years from now. Selecting an architect, the plans, developing our community partnerships – we think that is realistic.”

Efforts to create a new art museum have faded before, however, and both Epstein and Horn temper their optimism with caution.

“It is a hurdle for any creative or cultural nonprofit,” noted Epstein. “It’s up to us to prove ourselves to critics and meet all the obstacles that we have been given. We are trying to be very smart about this. We’re trying to take our time and not jump into this too quickly.”

“There is still a long way to go,” Horn said. “We are by no means saying this is the beginning of an art museum, but we want to bring attention and awareness to what an art museum is, and what it can do for a community. Every time I spend time in Las Vegas, I am always personally gratified and excited by the amount of enthusiasm and support that I have witnessed for the visual arts.”

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Tilting the Basin on view March 16 through May 14 at a pop up facility, located at 920 S. Commerce Street, Las Vegas.
Wednesday –Sunday, 10 am to 6 pm, Fridays until 9pm

Photos courtesy of Nevada Museum of Art Reno