

New Triennial Offers Artists the Canvas of Ohio

By **Hilarie M. Sheets**

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CLEVELAND — The art world loves to flock to exotic locales for shows and fairs. Will it come to Cleveland?

Fred Bidwell, a collector and philanthropist here, is betting it will, to the tune of \$5 million — his money and that of other donors. “We’re at the front line of a lot of the changes, conflict and currents in the air today,” he said. “Cleveland is a blue city surrounded by an ocean of red. Artists have really been interested in creating new art within this context.”

On July 14, “Front International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art” opens with work by more than 110 artists at 28 venues across Cleveland and in nearby Akron and Oberlin. Mr. Bidwell, who conceived and orchestrated the event, graduated from Oberlin College and ran an advertising agency in Akron before opening a museum for his photography collection in a renovated transformer station here in 2013.

The museum, Transformer Station, has been a catalyst for dynamic change in a once-seedy neighborhood on the West Side of Cleveland, and was one inspiration for the triennial. Mr. Bidwell was also motivated by his stint as interim director of the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2014. There he discovered firsthand the world-class collections of an institution that doesn’t bring in nearly as many visitors as its coastal counterparts.

For Front, Mr. Bidwell has brought these two museums together with six other institutions — the Akron Art Museum, Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland Institute of Art, MOCA Cleveland and SPACES, also in Cleveland. Each has renovated in the last several years, a total investment of almost \$500 million that helps counter the image of Cleveland from the 1970s and 1980s as a city in the depths of recession.



The Transformer Station in Cleveland, a museum that houses Mr. Bidwell's photography collection and is one of the staging sites for the triennial. Andrew Spear for The New York Times

Getting local audiences to buy into the triennial may be more important than luring the globe-trotters, some suggest. “The perception that this would become part of the city’s future and regrowth I think is going to be a key to its success,” said Timothy Rub, director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and a former director of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Michelle Grabner, Front’s artistic director, said some artists needed a little convincing. “I know Cleveland’s charms and I had to lay that out there,” said Ms. Grabner, an artist, curator and native Midwesterner. She took artists on tours of the museums and less conventional sites for staging work, including the Cleveland Clinic. (She had collaborated on the list of artists with Jens Hoffmann, who stepped down in November as the other artistic director of the show, and then was terminated from the Jewish Museum in New York City after allegations of sexual harassment.)

The lavish lobby of the Federal Reserve Bank enticed Philip Vanderhyden, a New York City-based artist, to create a 24-channel video animation expressing his financial anxieties.

Investing in the underserved neighborhood of Glenville, Front leased and renovated two abandoned buildings as a public programming space and housing for visiting artists. Juan Capistrán, an artist based in Los Angeles, made a word installation on the window of the residence’s storefront, which now houses a cafe run by local African-American entrepreneurs.

“I don’t want to do an elitist international art fair that has no impact on the community,” Mr. Bidwell said. “Front is really about redefining the city to the world and to itself.”

Here is an overview of six Front artists, and where to find their projects.

Marlon de Azambuja

At the Cleveland Museum of Art



Marlon de Azambuja's cityscape "Brutalismo — Cleveland" at the Cleveland Museum of Art.
Howard Agriesti/Cleveland Museum

Mr. de Azambuja, who was born in Pôrto Alegre, Brazil, and works in Madrid, uses industrial steel clamps and construction materials in their raw form to build sculptures evocative of Brutalist architecture. On a visit to Cleveland, his first, he scouted its landmarks and sourced its primary building blocks at local brick yards and quarries. “It’s a type of archaeology, extracting and showing the bones of the city,” he said. In a glass-walled gallery at the intersection of the Cleveland Museum’s 1916 Beaux-Arts building and its 1971 Brutalist-style addition designed by Marcel Breuer, the artist has raised a crowded village of some 70 structures that appear slightly anthropomorphic and directly echo the skyline outside the window. “The connection is immediate — you see the city and the work at the same time,” Mr. de Azambuja said.

Candice Breitz

At Playhouse Square, Helen Theater, Cleveland



Candice Breitz’s “Love Story” features Alec Baldwin and Julianne Moore telling first-person versions of refugees’ stories in a video installation. In the next room, videos show the refugees sharing their own narratives. Die Arge Lola

Known for her video installations exploring our cultural obsession with celebrities, Ms. Breitz, who was born in Johannesburg and works in Berlin, enlisted the star power of Alec Baldwin and Julianne Moore to retell the real-life testimonies of six refugees in her piece “Love Story.” She was motivated to make this seven-channel video installation because she thought the news media were covering the thousands of displaced people arriving in Berlin as mere statistics. Visitors to the black box theater will encounter a large single-screen projection, with the actors alternating first-person accounts of harrowing experiences escaping Syria or fighting as a child soldier in Angola. In a space behind the first room are six smaller screens with the actual refugees sharing the same narratives without the Hollywood charisma.

“What kinds of subjects are we willing to hear stories from?” asked Ms. Breitz, who hopes that the double presentation prompts people to measure the two experiences and consider where they’re inclined to invest their attention and empathy.

Barbara Bloom

At Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College



Barbara Bloom’s conceptual installation “The Rendering (H X W X D =)” at the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, is about “the strangeness of the architecture.” Field Studio