

Seventh Heaven
GLASGOW 04.20.16



Left: Glasgow Sculpture Studio director Kyla McDonald with artists Liz Magor and Alisa Baremboym

NO VIP TOUR. You picked up your map and your program on your own time and devised your own hunt for treasure among the ninety exhibitions and events taking place in the seventh Glasgow International. In her second outing as director, former Frieze Projects curator Sarah McCrory worked with a staff of six to construct a bootstrapping, urban exposition in seventy-five sites around this hilly, Charles Rennie Mackintosh–appointed city on the River Clyde. No frills. No usual suspects.

The biennial revealed itself slowly—not just in art spaces like the Common Guild and the Kelvingrove or Hunterian galleries but in shop windows, the ruin of a church, a public library, a graveyard, a roller rink, in drafty warehouses, storage units, bars, schools, theaters, and even in private apartments. In fact, this sprawling festival of visual art may be the homiest biennial ever to hit the world stage—through almost entirely local means. Actually, it was more like a referendum on biennials. And why they matter to small cities like this.

Most of the free-admission show's two hundred artists come from the UK, evidently a requirement of its civic and arts council funders. That left it to galleries and to exhibitions that McCrory organized for her Director's Program to bring in the foreign nationals.

Mostly, this GI was about giving someone else a chance. No matter where they came from, that someone usually was a woman.

Quite literally, in the days following the April 7th professional preview, I could have counted the male artists selected to show on one hand. McCrory insisted that her biennial was not estrogen-heavy by design. "But," she said, "I'm not against it."

Nor was anyone else who came for the opening weekend that followed. Collectors and dealers were a small minority. Mainly, visitors were curators— from Europe, Africa, and the US as well as the UK—or artists. That kept the general conversation focused on the subjects at hand—art, Glasgow, biennials—rather than the market. For Americans like me, the experience came with a bonus: For the first time in many months, I did not hear Donald Trump's name mentioned once.

In the magnificent central hall of the Mitchell Library, the Canadian-born nomad Tamara Henderson had erected a garden of tall scarecrows to represent the seasons and phases of the moon. Each was

sprouting plants and was costumed in hand-sewn, embroidered, and collaged fabrics that Henderson accumulated at residencies from Istanbul to Hospitalfields in Arbroath, Scotland. “You use what’s around,” she said, ducking into a hut with canvas walls that she painted to look like scratched negatives and that she made into a darkroom for developing images taken on site by a pinhole camera hidden in a pail. Her show quickly became a popular social arena, no drinks allowed. There was a coffee bar, at least, at the festival hub, where several galleries were clustered. A new, dystopian sculpture by Monika Sosnowska—the black steel bones of a collapsed house by the utopian Polish architect Oskar Hansen filled the Modern Institute space on Aird’s Lane with constructivist melancholy.

On a street corner in front of the gallery was an Instagram-ready road sign planted by Jeremy Deller. It read, BRIAN EPSTEIN DIED FOR YOU. That got a nod of recognition from Mary Zlot, the San Francisco-based collector and art advisor, who was visiting Glasgow for the first time in thirty years, accompanied by Gagolian director Robin Vousden.

It’s a wonder more people don’t come this way more often. Glasgow may be off the beaten track, but that’s one of its attractions, along with hundreds of artists—many of them graduates of the storied Glasgow School of Art—and occasional sunshine.

At the Glasgow Print Studio, Nicolas Party had painted the walls not in his customary bright colors but with gray and black designs to offset his first-ever show of mezzotints. Down the hall was Project Ability, a nonprofit for adults with mental or physical disabilities equivalent to San Francisco’s Creative Growth and New York’s Healing Arts Initiative.

From the latter, White Columns director Matthew Higgs brought portraits of bearded men by Derrick Alexis Coard to a show designed by Jim Lambie, who set colored balls into the walls to echo the drawings. But it was the affable Project Ability artist Cameron Morgan who took the cake with paintings of television shows like *Tarzan*, *The A-Team*, and *Teletubbies*. There was a show for each decade since the 1930s, each depicted on TVs that Morgan painted on wallpaper patterns he adapted from the style of each period. “I’m obsessed with television,” said the artist, who also makes ceramics and obviously has a feel for décor.

At Mary Mary, where dealer Hannah Robinson was showing popish paintings by New Yorker Emily Mae Smith, I ran into dealer Curt Marcus and Marrakech Biennial founder Vanessa Branson before moving next door to Matthew Smith’s debut with Koppe-Astner.

Across a pedestrian bridge that would suit any cold-war spy movie was, by all accounts, the festival’s biggest surprise: a galvanizing loan show of paintings and books by the early twentieth-century eccentric, Louis Michel Eilshemius.

What was this doing *here*? Well, said artist Merlin James, who took it upon himself to bring the show to the house he shares with the unjustly underrecognized painter Carol Rhodes, “I think of Eilshemius as our eternal contemporary.”

Rhodes was also in the International. Andrew Mummery presented her paintings (aerial views of construction sites), in a former courthouse undergoing inevitable conversion to gentrified apartments. It was right across the road from a forbidding, Brutalist jail. Talk about human intervention in nature. After hitting a two-man show of sculpture and video by Toby Christian and Duncan Marquiss that took up an unheated townhouse, we reached the Glasgow Sculpture Studios in time for the cocktail opening of “You Be Frank and I’ll Be Earnest,” an ingenious pairing (by the nonprofit’s director, Kyla McDonald) of two women in residence, the veteran Liz Magor (another Canadian) and a young New Yorker, Alisa Barenboym. “It’s all about permeability and leakage,” Barenboym said of her vaguely feminine, steel, resin, and shrink-wrapped sculpture. “Can you guess which is Frank and which is Earnest?” McDonald quipped.

I hustled through an April shower to the Gallery of Modern Art, where McCrory was opening a mini-retrospective of deep sea-themed sculpture by Cosima von Bonin. The artist, in a hot pink fright wig, was recording a performance by a dance company called HotNuts on her iPhone, while Jamie Crewe (aka Poisonous Relationship) serenaded the large crowd while strolling through it.

An impromptu cocktail party was soon underway at Regano, a nearby pub that reminded me somehow of Harry's Bar in Venice. It must have been the crowd—the Modern Institute's Toby Webster and Andrew Hamilton, dealers Sylvia Kouvali and Nicky Verber, Nottingham Contemporary curator Sam Thorne, *The Gentlewoman* editor-in-chief Penny Martin. Most would be among the thirty guests (including artists Alexandra Bircken, Sosnowska, and Deller) whom Webster and Hamilton invited to an informal dinner at an Indian restaurant that served long, thin tubes of the biggest papadums I've ever seen.

This was more like an art-fair social. At 10 PM, we peeled off for the GI's opening party, a blowout at the School of Art that featured a psychedelic performance by Mega Hammer. Choreographed and designed by Marvin Gaye Chetwynd, it suggested an evening at Burning Man crossed with the Exploding Plastic Inevitable.

Next morning, a Friday, I woke up just in time for the lunch that Verber was giving at Gandolfi Fish for Bircken, whom McCrory had included in the group show opening that evening at Tramway. We arrived there in the silent hour before the opening, so we had the vast central hall of the former rail hub more or less to ourselves.

As the exhibition's designer, artist Martin Boyce had divided the space into a generous maze of corrugated fiberglass screens. At one end were Bircken's "trolleys"—shelving systems of reclaimed steel rods, tree branches, nets, and wood planks set on the old tracks. They lead to a floor-to-ceiling, primary colored "chandelier" of gathered wool by Sheila Hicks, who also filled the old rails with red, yellow, and blue threads and sandbagged a wall with thick mounds of the wool. Pretty great.

An animation by Lawrence Lek that was playing in an alcove told the story of a fictional voyage of the QE2 cruise ship from the Suez Canal, past boatloads of Syrian refugees, and back to Glasgow, where it was built, and replaces the School of Art's Mackintosh building, which nearly burned down in a 2014 fire. (It's now undergoing restoration.) Videos by Amie Siegel and Mika Rottenberg round out the show. Previously seen in New York, they were a revelation to fresh eyes here.

The evening brought openings curated by Lambie for two storage spaces beneath the arches of a railroad bridge in Finnieston, an industrial wasteland. For one, he contributed cut-up pieces of furniture and a silver foil couch to photographs by Royal Trux vocalist Jennifer Herrema, who also sent a scatter of wigs and doll parts. Every picture had a sculpture extending from it like the choo-choo flying out of the fireplace in René Magritte's painting.

After Sosnowska's opening at the Modern Institute, the gallery hosted the biggest dinner of the week in a decommissioned church designed by Mackintosh. Need I say it was gorgeous? I'll say it anyway. It was gorgeous. And the farm-to-table food by a local caterer was delicious. Anyone not too drunk to go on made off for Lambie's Poetry Club, a double-height nightclub in another arch down the street from his gallery, the Voidoid.

The rest of the weekend was about flaneuring through neighborhoods east (where Sol Calero outfitted David Dale Gallery with a set for a telenovela serial) and west, where Crabshakk emerged as the best seafood lunch counter on earth.

Saturday morning found me in Asprey's company at Kelvin Hall, where the sound of a fife-and-drum parade on the street outside elevated our visit to a sculptural installation by Claire Barclay and a show of suspended paintings on unstretched canvas by Helen Johnson that—with Henderson's exhibition, the one at Tramway, and a group of ceramics by Aaron Angell in a botanic garden—won the consensus as the top draws of the biennial.

My own favorite moments came with under-the-radar biennial projects that summed up the whole experience: Young artists unaffiliated with any galleries doing it for themselves.

First, I stumbled on *'Scape*, a startling installation of painting, photography, and sculpture in a townhouse near the University of Glasgow, where three young women (former schoolmates Ruth Switalski, Marion Ferguson and Belinda Gilbert Scott) had established a nonprofit exhibition space to show the work of other emergent talents as well as their own. I thought it was fabulous.

Even more fun was Sam Venables, a young woman with a mop of yellow hair who calls herself a “visual merchandiser.” She was launching a new company, It’s Friday, by inviting four young collectives from around the UK to make work for the windows of vacant, street-level storefronts below a parking garage next to a McDonald’s.

“This one got me into so much trouble with the tabloids,” Venables said of a storefront full of cardboard boxes by Littlewhitehead of Glasgow. Flopped between them were the bodies of four men in jeans and hoodies, either passed out or dead. (They were actually dummies, but they looked mighty real.) “Kids love it,” Venables told me, “but the neighbors called the police and tried to put up barriers.”

This is a good kind of trouble. “I think the biennial gives you a feeling of optimism,” said Sylvia Kouvali on Sunday afternoon, when curator John Heffernan drove us to Jupiter Art Land, a sculpture park outside of Edinburgh on the 120-acre estate of collectors Nicky and Robert Wilson. Stedelijk Museum curator Bart van der Heide rode shotgun.

The idea, Heffernan said, was to commission site-specific work from artists who have never made work for outdoors or are new to the scene. They didn’t all fit that bill, but it didn’t matter. Among the park’s works was a cemetery (by Nathan Coley) that van der Heide deemed “creepy,” a Temple of Apollo by Ian Hamilton Finlay, and an earthwork by Charles Jencks. Our hands-down favorites were the stones Andy Goldsworthy set into coppiced trees, and a ravishing cave of amethyst crystals topped with obsidian rocks by Anya Gallaccio.

After a rapid tour of the once-every-five-year British Art Show in Edinburgh, I raced back to Koppe-Astner in Glasgow to join Hammer Museum curator Aram Moshayedi for the final performance of *The French*, a three-character musical play directed and designed by the Berlin-based American, Leila Hekmat. It owed a considerable debt to the camp of Jack Smith, but what the hell. I’m all for keeping transgression alive and well.

That evening, McCrory invited visiting curators and artists to a farewell dinner with local dealers at Drygate Brewery. It felt like a meeting of great minds dedicated to a common purpose—advancing contemporary art over beer and burgers.

“The point isn’t just to shake things up,” McCrory said of her youthful show. “The point is to show what’s already here.”