



## AMOA exhibit showcases new Austin-area art

By [Jeanne Claire van Ryzin](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN ARTS WRITER

Updated: 11:18 a.m. Wednesday, March 30, 2011

Published: 10:40 a.m. Wednesday, March 30, 2011

Biennial and triennial exhibits are the ubiquitous conundrum of the art scene. Are they definitive arbiters of what's best? Or are they just subjective snapshots of a particular place and moment?

One of the first institutions to take a formalized snapshot of Austin's emerging art scene was the Austin Museum of Art when in 2002 it started "New Art in Austin," a triennial show. Then, 22 artists were selected from a pool of 70 who had submitted their portfolios for review.

For the fourth and current iteration of "New Art in Austin," 15 artists were selected from an applicant pool of 350. That five times as many artists threw their hats into the "New Art" ring this time around, compared to the first, makes for solid evidence of the growth — and congealing — of Austin's visual art landscape in the past decade.

Of course, AMOA was hardly the only catalyst for Austin's art explosion. Both the Blanton Museum of Art and Arthouse delivered the institutional bricks and mortar needed to gird any true and lasting growth. And since the Blanton opened its major new museum buildings in 2002 and Arthouse's Congress Avenue venue underwent a significant remodel and expansion earlier this year, both institutions have not only exponentially increased their offerings, but also upped the sophistication in town. And with UT's opening of its new Visual Arts Center this season, student and faculty artists and curators finally have an expansive public art laboratory in which to test their imaginations.

To boot, artists did the heavy lifting when it came to establishing a lively event-filled scene, starting myriad galleries and project spaces (Okay Mountain, Big Medium, Co-Lab, Pump Project) and launching the annual East Austin Studio Tour and the ever-expanding Austin-based Texas Biennial. It's an awkward time for AMOA, and it's impossible to view "New Art in Austin" — or anything that happens at the museum — and remain ignorant of recent events.

In December, the museum sold its downtown lot on which it had planned to build a new museum, ending nearly three decades of plans to have a major downtown building of its own. Longtime director Dana Friis-Hansen resigned in January. Then the museum's board announced it would not renew its lease at its current downtown at 823 Congress Ave., the "temporary" gallery AMOA has operated for the past 16 years, and that the institution would refocus its energy on its historic 12-acre Laguna Gloria site.

Where AMOA might show another triennial in 2015 is unknown now.

A jury of three did the culling for "New Art in Austin": Kate Bonansinga, gallery director of the Rubin Center for the Visual Arts Center at the University of Texas-El Paso; Toby Kamps, senior curator of modern and contemporary art at Houston's Menil Collection; and Andrea Mallard, interim curator at AMOA. The trio made studio visits to 35 artists before making the final selection.

The 15 chosen — Miguel Aragón, the team of Jesus Benavente and Jennifer Remenchik, Ben Brandt, Debra Broz, Elizabeth Chiles, Santiago Forero, Nathan Green, Ian Ingram, Anna Krachey, Robert Melton,

Leslie Mutchler, Ben Ruggiero, Adam Schreiber, Barry Stone and J. Parker Valentine — might surprise, even to those entrenched in Austin's art scene.

For better or worse, Austin visual artists have of late picked up on the performance trend that's percolated with the wider art scene. And so has "New Art in Austin," with its inclusion of Benavente and Remenchik's "Parallel" performance installation. The artists take turns occupying either the top or bottom level of a two-tiered stage set. One of them spends time on the comfortably appointed top-level lounges, watches television and is served by the other person down below, who responds to every directive, but also has the freedom to step out of the project or talk to gallery visitors.

Like so much performance art by younger visual artists, "Parallel" feels derivative and not fully realized. But that the "New Work" curators had the gumption to try to represent the performance trend is something. Perhaps most surprising of this fourth AMOA triennial is that of the artists chosen, six — or more than one-third — are photographers.

Kamps offers an explanation for the curatorial choice: "The photography scene in Austin is hands down the most interesting and active in the state."

The reason for that? Kamps speculates it's a combination of several factors. There's UT's mighty historical photography collection at the Ransom Center with 5 million images ready to inspire. Generationally, today's emerging artists, raised in a digital image-saturated world, find traditional film photography an inspiring medium. And finally, a cluster of emerging fine art photographers in Austin had the wherewithal to start a critics group, Lakes Were Rivers, that regularly engages in mutual critiquing and other efforts, a means to challenge each other's progress. (Five of the six photographers in the current exhibit are Lakes Were Rivers members.) Peer pressure can be a good thing when it pushes everyone to excellence.

Whatever the reason for photography's preeminence in "New Art in Austin," some of it is indeed very good.

Krachey's still-life photographs are luridly colored in neon hues, to disquieting — and intriguing — effect.

Irreverence reigns in Forero's self-portrait series "The Olympic Games." Standing at just around four feet tall, Forero costumes himself in athletic outfits and poses as a discus thrower, a gymnast, a shot-putter. Not the prevalent example of idealized masculine form, Forero forces the viewer to confront his or her own prejudices and how they are shaped by a media world rife with images of idealized beauty.

Exercising another kind of irreverence, Ruggiero slyly packs an impressive amount of art history into his photographs. Raised in New York state's Hudson River Valley, Ruggiero taps into an artistic predecessor of the same area: American romantic painter Frederic Church. Only, in modern opposition to Church's idealized and grandiose landscape paintings, Ruggiero trains his lens on a more urban, personal and idiosyncractic landscape. Especially arresting are his blue-tinted cyanotypes (an early form of photography not-so-ironically available in Church's day). And whereas Church painted grandiose icebergs, Ruggiero photographs broken glass — a contemporary cyanotype that captures a vision of the sublime that's particularly 21st century.

Another surprise lurking in "New Art in Austin"? Several welcome Austin debuts. Ingram and Valentine both live and work here but are represented by galleries in New York and haven't shown in Austin before. And Brandt is an MFA candidate at UT and making his premiere.

Ingram draws oversized, hyper-detailed self-portraits by gazing at himself in a magnifying mirror. And the detail — the pores, the facial hairs, the skin creases — are far from idealized. But neither are they deliberately or cynically grotesque. They are simply big and exquisitely detailed and full of self-awareness.

Brandt startles with his sculptures. They're the opposite of the gorgeous art object — vague, messy, even like something left over from art-making. A rumpled dropcloth splattered with paints lies on the gallery floor. Nearby, an assemblage of rods is sprayed with liquid concrete that's dried into a fuzzy-looking patina, the whole structure resembling some mold-covered remnant of a thing much nicer.

In her untitled installation, Valentine offers a nice coda to the AMOA triennial. Fervid, abstract drawings on big pieces of paper spill over tables hastily made out of saw horses. More frenzied drawings on board are propped against the wall. Bits of erasers still linger on the drawings and the floor.

It's as if the artist just walked out of her studio after an impassioned, productive drawing session.

And it's as if to say, whatever happens with the institutions that are charged with recognizing their efforts, in the end, the artists will out.

jvanryzin@statesman.com; 445-3699

**"New Art in Austin: 15 to Watch"**

**When:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, (Thursdays until 8 p.m.) 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays, noon to 5 p.m. Sundays through May.

**Where:** Austin Museum of Art, 823 Congress Ave.

**Cost:** \$4-\$5

**Information:** 495-9224, [www.amoa.org](http://www.amoa.org)

**Artists' talks**

**7 p.m. March 31:** Elizabeth Chiles, Anna Krachey, Ben Ruggiero, Adam Schreiber and Barry Stone  
**7 p.m. April 7:** Jesus Benavente/Jennifer Remenchik, Santiago Forero, Ian Ingram, Robert Melton and J. Parker Valentine

Cost: Free with museum admission (\$4-\$5)