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CONTEMPORARY VISION: Social issues at the forefront of annual Ogden show

BY JOHN D'ADDARIO | Special to The Advocate **AUG 24, 2016 - 2:00 PM**

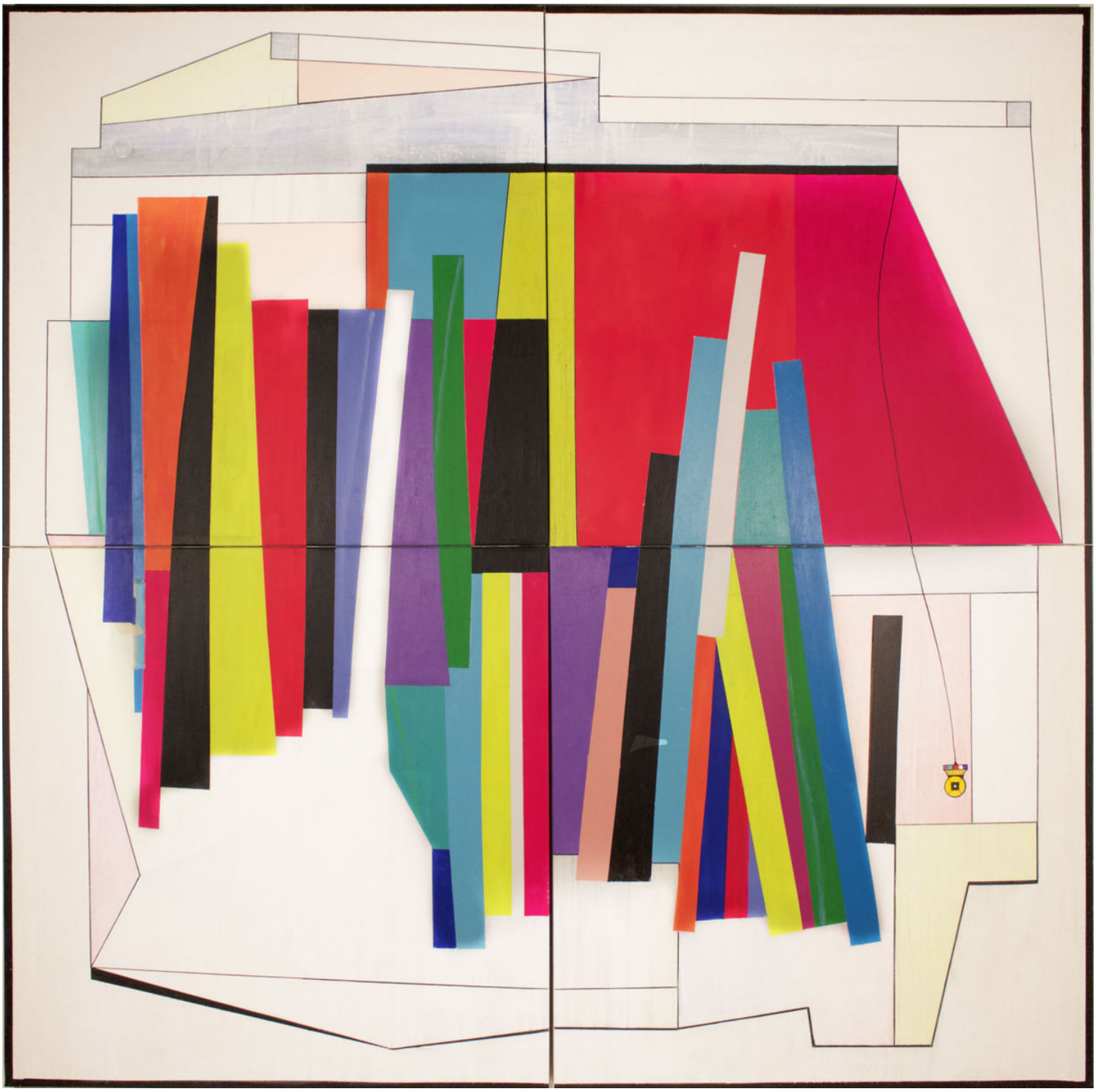
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
Peter Horjus: David, A Series of Men #1

In the half decade since its inception, the annual Louisiana Contemporary exhibition at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art has become the premier showcase for emerging artistic talent not only in New Orleans but in the state and region as a whole.

In a way, it's like the Southern-inflected version of New York City's Whitney Biennial: an opportunity to examine the currents of the regional art scene through the lens of a particular curatorial eye.

This time around, that eye belongs to Bill Arning. As director of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, Arning brings a sharp, seasoned, and highly personal curatorial vision to this year's iteration of the Ogden show – not to mention a long-standing regard for New Orleans and the broader artistic landscape of Louisiana.

Story Continued Below



Luis Cruz Azaceta: 'Heroes Tale'

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

“I’ve visited New Orleans regularly and always appreciated the artists there,” said Arning. “And I bought George Dureau photographs for myself when I could still afford them.”

The process for selecting what appears in each year's Louisiana Contemporary begins with a deadline in mid-June by which artists submit their work for consideration. Arning then had a month to sift through the entries and make his selections, and the exhibition officially opened during this year's Whitney White Linen Night festivities on Aug. 6.

Along with his own curatorial sensibilities, Arning says there were a few other factors which influenced his choices for this year's show.

"I had surgery on my foot the day before I did the jurying so I was with my laptop, in bed, on painkillers," said Arning. "So I credit the preponderance of long format film and video in the show to my being housebound and desiring to be entertained on that day."

Paul Rizzo: 29

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Chris Bernsten: Flayr in the Blue Dress

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Although there are always broad themes to be identified in each year's Louisiana Contemporary, the 2016 edition is notable for the prevalence of a few particular ones. For example, queer artists are represented in greater numbers than ever before.

"I am pretty well known for having made exhibitions on queer themes, like curating the first gay show in South America (in Buenos Aires in 1993)," said Arning "I've also written recent essays on art about AIDS for the exhibition 'Art AIDS America,' now touring the country."

Also notable is the amount of work that deals with racial and sociopolitical issues like the Black Lives Matter movement.

"It's a very political year so the amount of socially engaged works comes as no surprise at all," said Arning.

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And Arning says what he calls the “unlikely relevance of abstraction” and “obsessiveness and the power of accumulation” are two more common themes which links several of the works on display.

With dozens of works by nearly 50 artists, there’s a lot to take in. But Arning has some advice for visitors wanting to make the most of their visit to the show.

“Take the time to watch the two longish videos,” said Arning. “Both Xavier Juarez and Adrione Domino are gifted film makers and use their performers for great emotional effect.”

“(Bureau of Change's) short video comment(s) on the hope and frustrations of the Obama years, in which the president’s inspiring voice is countered by the horror of so many young black men either killed or incarcerated. On a more positive note, Paul Rizzo, Max Sizeler, Peter Horjus, Brian Barbieri, Chris Berntsen and Arthur Severio depict the joy of queer lives today and exploring so many new possibilities.“

And as for curating state-focused shows of contemporary art, Arning says he’s just getting started.

“The last one of these shows I did was for a Nebraska artist at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha,” said Arning. “If I keep doing one state a year, by the time I am 94, I will have the whole country covered.”

Arthur Severio: Hey Blue

Contributed photo by S. Downey/Pellkita Photography and courtesy of the artist