

Biennial keeps expanding to showcase Texas art

What's that tourism marketing slogan for the Lone Star State? Something about how Texas is like a whole other country?

It's true, Texans tend not to do things like others.

So it's no surprise that as the Texas Biennial — a survey exhibit of contemporary art — gears up for its 2013 edition, it's not at all the same shape as more traditional, storied art expos.

The Texas Biennial is up-from-the-bootstraps born, not institutionally imagined from the ivory tower.

In its fifth iteration this year, the biennial is artist-started, the product of the once-scrappy still-indie Austin collective Big Medium who are also the founders and purveyors of the wildly popular East Austin Studio Tour.

Rather than take place at one mighty museum or even in one major city, this year's Texas Biennial exhibits and events instead will be spread out among several midsize non-mainstream arts venues in cities from Dallas to San Antonio to Marfa.

The Texas Biennial is also culled from a totally open call for entries: Any artist living and working in the Lone Star State can throw his or her hat into the ring.

Elsewhere, historically high profile biannual shows (the Venice Biennale and the Whitney Biennial, for example) manifest from the inside out. No applicants need apply. The roster of the chosen are presented de facto as a yardstick of what's best right now. And those rosters are then dithered to death by art world insiders.

Virginia Rutledge, a New York-based art adviser and attorney with deep Texas ties, served as curator for the 2011 Texas Biennial. Two years ago, Rutledge spread the biennial main exhibit among myriad Austin independent

venues as well as those in San Antonio and Houston. Parts of the Austin exhibit also popped up in nontraditional exhibit space like a sprawling empty office suite in a downtown building with a stunning view of the State Capitol. Other biennial happenings and events popped up elsewhere in the state.

Rutledge remains allied with the nonprofit organization as curator-at-large. "Texas is big, and there are very distinct art scenes around the state," she says. "A biennial can't be done here as elsewhere."

Toward that end, Rutledge and other biennial leaders opted for a "more is more" approach when it came to deciding who would do the deciding.

Some 13 arts professionals or teams of professional will select from the open call for entries.

Curators included René Paul Barilleaux of San Antonio's McNay Art Museum, Christian Gerstheimer of the El Paso Museum of Art, Christina Rees of the Texas Christian University galleries and Noah Simblist from Southern Methodist University's Meadows School of the Arts.

Several museum directors will participate: Bill Arning from Houston's Contemporary Art Museum, Jeremy Strick from the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas and Clint Willour of the Galveston Arts Center.

Outsiders with a keen sense of Lone Star State art include Los Angeles Times art critic David Pagel and Mexico City-based curator Bárbara Perea.

And there are nationally noted artists who will curate: Dario Robleto from Houston, Annette Lawrence from Dallas, New York-based K8 Hardy and the Austin-based husband and wife collaborators Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler.

If the roster of curators seems exhaustively inclusive, so is the list venues.

The principal exhibit runs Sept. 5 through Nov. 9 at San Antonio's Blue Star Art Space.

Performance art will be showcased at the University of Texas at Dallas' CentralTrak. In the tiny but mighty West Texas art destination of Marfa, a commissioned project will be debuted at Ballroom Marfa. And a retrospective exhibit featuring new work by artists included in the first four biennials will be split between Houston's Lawndale Art Center and Austin's Big Medium gallery.

More events and auxiliary projects are in development.

Why even attempt a biennial when the contemporary art landscape is



Among the temporary exhibits of the 2011 Texas Biennial was the roving RJP Nomadic Gallery. Created by Lubbock-based artists Ryder Richards, Jonathan Whitfill and Piotr Chizinsk, the project uses a rented 40-foot Ryder moving truck to transport a "gallery kit" which enables the artists to transform the vehicle into a functioning art venue.

already filled with opportunities to discover new art?

"I think the biennial model works simply because it focuses public attention for a finite period, and it does work toward looking across the vastness of our state and understanding that there is a collective art culture that it is worth taking time to appreciate," says Arning of Houston's noted Contemporary Art Museum.

Out in West Texas, Gerstheimer, of the El Paso Museum of Art, concurs, and is delighted to be included.

"El Paso is the only major city along the United States/Mexico border, and although there is not a large art-buying community here there is a continual commerce of culture, people and assorted legal and illegal commodities between the U.S. and Mexico like nowhere else," he says, though he adds he won't at all be looking only at artists from West Texas.

"Hearing new voices of artists that I'm unfamiliar with is one of the best parts of being a curator," he says.

And if the literally sprawling nature of the 2013 Texas Biennial defies traditional models, Gerstheimer notes that spreading the exhibition around the state will likely only increase visibility and reach more visitors who may then be motivated to travel throughout the state to see other portions of the exhibition.

"It only seems to make sense then to make the Texas Biennial bigger," says Gerstheimer. "Texas is such a big state."



Among the nontraditional exhibit spaces for the 2011 Texas Biennial was a sprawling empty office suite in 816 Congress, a downtown office building. Volunteers Katherine Scull, Kate Donegan and Kelly Chambliss check out the exhibit.