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New Triennial Offers Artists the Canvas of Ohio

by Hilarie M. Sheets
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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.

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.

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." Credit Field Studio

Ms. Bloom, who was born in Los Angeles and works in New York City, often designs conceptual installations within museum collections that draw attention to relationships between objects. After her first visit to the museum at Oberlin she was struck by both its treasures and the wing designed by Robert Venturi. "It is one of those enormously difficult gallery spaces that screams 'architecture' with a capital A," Ms. Bloom said. To highlight the weird angles, curves and windows of the room, she's installed on its walls about 30 prints and paintings that depict architecture in some form. From five of these two-dimensional works, including an overhead perspective of an Indian courtyard garden, she has built three-dimensional projections of their bridges, teahouses and walkways coming off the walls and out into the gallery at exaggerated scale and painted an austere gray. On another wall she's covered the paintings with gray boxes with cutouts that reveal just the architectural feature in the works. "The whole thing is about the strangeness of the architecture," she said.

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