

ST. LOUIS

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The Great Rivers Biennial is back. And bigger.

Three diverse artists make for one tremendous show.

By Malcolm Gay

January 30, 2008

One created an international relief agency modeled in no small part on the United Nations. Another produced a mnemonic landscape of expanding and receding subjects, inviting the viewer to navigate the amorphous waters of memory. Still a third illustrated two profoundly violent scenes from Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, playing with the relationship between viewer and viewed.



Corey Escoto (Photo: Jennifer Silverberg)

But no matter how great the thematic differences between the winners of the **Great Rivers Biennial 2008**, Corey Escoto, Michelle Oosterbaan and Juan William Chávez share one thing in common: Each is profoundly rooted in drawing.

"Their practices are so varied. They're each interested in very different issues and their relationship to drawing is very different as well," says Laura Fried, the new assistant curator at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. "But all three are serious draftsmen. Hopefully visitors will draw their own connections."

Jointly sponsored by the Contemporary and the Gateway Foundation, the Great Rivers Biennial was formed in 2004 with the hope of exposing promising local artists to the broader art world, and, by the same token, exposing the broader art world to the promising artists of St. Louis. Now in its third exhibition, the biennial — this year judged by Cheryl Brutvan (curator of contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston), Lilian Tone (an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York) and Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson (director and chief curator of the Aspen Art Museum) — has quickly become the region's

most important juried exhibition. With increased importance has come deeper pockets: This year's winners will receive \$20,000 apiece, up from \$15,000 in 2006.

"The best thing a contemporary art museum can do for its local artists is to show them and give them money," says Paul Ha, the Contemporary's director. "Our goal is to get [the prize money] to where an artist can actually leave their job for a year."

In years past the biennial has featured everything from a speaker-studded Chevy Blazer to oil paintings to installations, and while this year's artists all call upon their shared foundation of drawing, they've each placed draftsmanship in the service of another medium.

Corey Escoto

A recent graduate of Washington University's graduate program, Corey Escoto is presenting an exhibition of drawings that is as much a display of artwork as it is the presentation of a unified cultural critique. Deeply influenced by the comic-book aesthetic of Los Angeles artist Raymond Pettibon, Escoto here imagines the "Global Repair Service," a fictional international relief agency that draws heavily on the iconography and animating spirit of the United Nations.

Although Escoto's agency gets rough treatment at the hands of its creator, who portrays it as a culturally naive organization given to well-intentioned half measures, many of the drawings — of boats, Humvees and other quasi-military vehicles — are meticulously rendered and caringly fleshed out with watercolor.

It's this tension — between Escoto's seemingly flippant critique of rosy idealism foundering upon thorny reality and the great care with which he presents it — that informs much of his show. One suite of drawings, which includes a crudely rendered picture of a male student demanding that his professor "inspire" him, is contained in a finely crafted hexagonal display case.

<http://www.riverfronttimes.com/2008-01-30/culture/two-year-itchart-agrave-la-carte/>

"A lot of the stuff that I do has this element of humor or is satirical or sarcastic," says Escoto, a Texas native. "It's important to me to let people know that I'm not just making some superficial joke, but that there's genuine concern. By having that craft element, it kind of reflects that ultimately I care. It's not just an easy joke or criticism."

Recently, though, Escoto has been moving toward sculptures that are based on his drawing practice, and he's exhibiting *The Right Tool for the Job?* The piece is a giant drill (courtesy of the Global Repair Service, of course) created in the spirit of Claes Oldenburg's iconic 1969 antiwar sculpture, *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks*.

Global in orientation with an ear tuned to hypocrisy, Escoto also displays a work titled *Global Misuse Offsets Coin Funnel*, a sculpture that pokes fun at a feel-good green culture whose members would rather buy carbon offsets than change their lifestyle.

"It's really weird how instead of changing they'll just buy their way out of the problem. I guess some good comes out of it, but it's really kind of a half step," says the artist. "I also think it's a funny idea — sort of trying to instill guilt into the viewer."

Opening Friday, February 1, from 7 to 9 p.m. A panel discussion with the artists is scheduled for the following day at 1 p.m. Free.

Great Rivers Biennial 2008

Opens February 1 and runs through April 20 at the Contemporary Art MError! **Bookmark not defined.**useum St. Louis, 3750 Washington Boulevard; 314-535-4660 (www.contemporarystl.org).

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tue.-Wed., 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thu., 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Sun.