

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

The three winners of a biennial area contest are diverse

David Bonetti - *POST-DISPATCH VISUAL ARTS CRITIC*
02/03/2008

The "Great Rivers Biennial" is the Oscars, or at least the Whitney Biennial, for the local art world. Held every other year, the winners, chosen by jurors from outside the region to ensure fairness, are given cash — \$20,000 this year, up from \$15,000 — and the opportunity to show their work at the Contemporary Art Museum in one of the most widely anticipated exhibitions of the year. Funded by the Gateway Foundation, it aims to raise the profile of local visual artists.

This year's edition is only the third since the program was initiated, but already the biennial has a history.

From the start, a distinguished trio of jurors has chosen dark horses, or at least artists whom local pundits have not anointed beforehand as likely winners. The jurors for this edition kept to the pattern. None of the three winners — Juan William Chavez, Corey Escoto and Michelle Oosterbaan — was a predictable choice. Although Chavez and Oosterbaan had lived here earlier, the longest any has been working in St. Louis as an artist has been three years.

Contemporary assistant curator Laura Fried oversaw the installation and notes a common thread among the winners. "Although their individual practices are incredibly diverse and they have completely different agendas and aims," she said, "it is immediately apparent that they are connected by the fact that their work is rooted in drawing."

Only 24, **Corey Escoto** has had exhibition experiences artists twice his age might envy. He received his master of fine arts only last year at Washington University's School of Art, and already he is a Great Rivers Biennial winner.

Escoto has shown extensively in his native Texas, and he was part of a group exhibition, "Seven Days Brunch," that was held as a satellite show at the Basel Art Fair in June. The show featured seven galleries from seven countries for seven days.

"It was great," Escoto said about the week he spent in Switzerland. "I got to meet dealers and artists from different countries."

Escoto was born and grew up in Amarillo, Texas. He got his undergraduate degree from Texas Tech University in Lubbock. He said that while he was there, he didn't get much guidance. "I've always been self-motivated," he said, "I really don't need deadlines to work. My friend and I had the place to ourselves. We would work in the studio all night long."

Escoto has shown great interest in the United Nations. "All the situations we are dealing with today — globalization, war, global warming — got me thinking about the U.N.," he said.

"Initially, I wanted to make some kind of political but not angry art. Actually, I hate political art. I now see what I make as apolitical art. I don't have an interest in politics, per se, but I have an interest in people affected by politics."

Escoto sees humor as a way to keep people interested. "I use humor and sarcasm in my work," he said. "When you make someone laugh, you can hit the truth."

Escoto's work starts with drawing. "I always have a sketchbook with me," he said. "If I have an idea, I draw it immediately."

For the biennial, Escoto will be showing drawings and objects of a fictional "Global Repair Service" based on the United Nations.

He has created objects, one of which, "Global Misuse Offsets Coin Funnel," will be in the lobby of the Contemporary. "The idea of selling carbon offsets seems weird to me," he said, "It's sort of like the Catholic Church selling indulgences."