I like working here because of the bigness — the big spaces, the big timber. That drama affects my work. It’s made me realize how much the place where I work influences the art I produce.

It wasn’t so much that I wanted to come to Oregon, but more that I didn’t want to go to California or New York. The limitations are the opportunities. Once you figure that out, you’re OK.

I feel that a lot of the work that is made here is authentic. Art takes time. Becoming a mature painter takes a lifetime.

The work in this region is now more about community rather than just being about the mountains or the ocean.

I feel that a lot of the work that is made here is authentic. There’s no museum without artists. There’s no art community without artists. To keep our community strong we need more artists and we need to keep them here.

Encouragement is what builds the next generation. The limitations are the opportunities. Once you figure that out, you’re OK.

The light here is a little complicated because it changes so much.

Working way out here — it’s like you’re a diamond in the rough.

I wanted to develop an exhibition program that encouraged artists to make new things, and to show them with me.

I have one foot planted firmly in Oregon, and one foot outside in the “other” art world.

When I go to a gallery and see a show that falls short, I feel a responsibility to go back to my studio and make better work myself. It inspires me to raise the bar for other artists.

I feel that a lot of the work that is made here is authentic. Yes, it’s important for me to show the artist’s hand in things, but it’s more important to show my heart.


The most important thing is the dedication to a studio practice, because ultimately success is a byproduct of how hard you’re willing to work.

I don’t have a studio. I have one foot planted firmly in Oregon, and one foot outside in the “other” art world.

I don’t have a studio. I don’t have a studio.

Yes, it’s important for me to show the artist’s hand in things, but it’s more important to show my heart.

I’m sitting in my studio, three blocks from the place where I was born.

When I get a grant or a fellowship it’s like getting a vote of confidence that I’m on the right track.

I’m inspired by that community. When I get a grant or a fellowship it’s like getting a vote of confidence that I’m on the right track.

I love this place. I feel that my work has become more brave, more honest. And that feeling just keeps getting stronger.


I feel that a lot of the work that is made here is authentic. Yes, it’s important for me to show the artist’s hand in things, but it’s more important to show my heart.

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I have one foot planted firmly in Oregon, and one foot outside in the “other” art world.

My studio is on the coast. From my window I can see a forest and the remains of a sprawling old sawmill.

From my studio I can see the rotunda of the State Capitol.

In my sixth-floor studio, I can hear the chain of the elevator clanking as it goes between floors, and I can hear crows cracking walnuts on the skylights. I can hear the wind.

My studio is my basement. Above me I can hear the footsteps of my children and my dog, walking across the kitchen floor.

From my studio I can see the ships that come in for the Rose Festival.

From my studio I see the forest and the remains of a sprawling old sawmill.

I’m sitting in my studio, three blocks from the place where I was born.

When I go to a gallery and see a show that falls short, I feel a responsibility to go back to my studio and make better work myself. It inspires me to raise the bar for other artists.

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The most important thing is the dedication to a studio practice, because ultimately success is a byproduct of how hard you’re willing to work.
WHY WE WORK HERE

THE ECOLOGY OF THE VISUAL ARTS IN OREGON
There’s no art without artists.
There’s no museum without artists.
There’s no art community without artists.
The goal is to get artists and keep them here.
When Oregon and ecology are included in the same sentence, visions of our state’s natural beauty first come to mind: statuesque mountains, meandering streams, tall timbers, sandy beaches and windswept fields. These physical wonders have served as both backdrops and players in the stories of our “place,” from steel and timber to tech and apparel, which now define a particular Oregon character. Among them is a story of Oregon’s visual arts.

Over time, different sectors have mapped their industries’ evolution, chronicling shared accomplishments, milestones and influential leaders. Many such exercises emphasize the importance of place, how it has shaped their past and influenced their forward trajectory. Why We Work Here is a first attempt to portray what the visual arts in Oregon have meant and continue to mean. Our chronicle begins with the voices of those who are most essential to the foundation of this ecology: Oregon artists.

The Ford Family Foundation initiated this project in partnership with the Oregon Arts Commission to look to our shared visual past and bring it forth to present day. The genesis of the concept can be found in an initial meeting of the Foundation’s “kitchen cabinet,” advisors to its visual arts program, who, in visualizing a cohesive funding initiative,
attempted to “draw” the interconnectedness of the visual arts ecology. The commissioned work by Tad Savinar and the commissioned essay by Jon Raymond are two “takes” on this ecology. Numerous interviews with Oregon artists and institutional leaders, as well as significant research, underpin their work. The questions foremost in their minds: Why are artists drawn to Oregon? Why do they remain here? What is success, and must one live in a major art center to achieve it? Is the ecology sufficiently strong to generate and sustain artists? What are the turning points in our history? What will make a quantifiable difference for the future of the visual arts in Oregon?

It would take tomes to do justice to every person, institution and policy that has influenced the visual arts ecology we experience today. Not everyone views the ecology from the same vantage point, the same era or the same complement of life experiences. More than anything, we hope that this project will stimulate thinking, robust discussion and ongoing contributions by others to a shared understanding of the value of the visual arts to our state, to our citizens and to our region, as well as contribute to the national and international dialogue about contemporary art in the 21st century. Tad Savinar’s archival inkjet print joins a hand-bound book containing Jon Raymond’s essay and quotes inspired by artists and leaders interviewed by Savinar. These, considered together as the full artifact of our project, have been gifted to the Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University, where they will be preserved for public access. Copies of the essay are being made available to public visual arts institutions and libraries, and will join the online archives of the Foundation and the Commission, which are exploring together the potential for a new online Visual Arts Portal—a place to continue the dialogue and shared history begun with Why We Work Here.

Thanks go to all the visual artists and other arts leaders who were engaged in this process. We have continuing gratitude for all citizens who shape and sustain Oregon’s visual arts ecology.

Anne C. Kubisch
President
The Ford Family Foundation

Christine D’Arcy
Executive Director
Oregon Arts Commission
I remember driving up to Seattle with Izquierdo and Bunce because there was a bookstore that had booklets with colored reproductions of Picassos. Everything in the magazines in Portland was in black and white, and the only way to really see what artists were doing was to see something in color.
I opened the gallery so that local people could experience real art, and artists would have a place to show their art.

Colescott is a good example of someone who started here and did well outside.
From my studio window I can see the rotunda of the State Capitol.

When I got here in the early 1970s, the art was pretty much dominated by second- and third-tier Abstract Expressionism. It had a somber palette—little Cézanne-esque paintings in clunky wooden frames.

I tried to make them feel comfortable about buying something abstract.

I am a regional artist.
I think of all the years I’ve been teaching and trying to get my students to understand form, and then I see a C.S. Price painting and it seems so easy.
The limitations are the opportunities—once you figure that out, you’re OK.

When I first got here in the early ‘80s, everything was being supported by the National Endowment—Blue Sky, PCVA, NWAW, etc. Then collaborative places formed like Blackfish and NW 24th Avenue Gallery.

It was really tough being a woman artist. But thank God for Laurie Paul and Sherrie Wolf. They were full of support for me as an artist—and as an artist who was also a mother.
My studio is in a 40-foot by 60-foot building in the middle of a wheat field. If I step outside, I can see the broad Umatilla Valley looking five miles upriver and twenty-five miles downriver.

I think it is important to be part of the national conversation. But I like working here and being removed from the constant pressure of the art market.
I saw Jay Backstrand’s work when I was in my early twenties. He seemed like such a smart painter. I appreciated that this kind of work was going on in Portland—the scale, the content, the skill.
Craig Hickman, Ann Hughes, Terry Toedtemeier, Robert Di Franco and I wanted to see more photographs, so we formed Blue Sky. One day, Lucinda Parker and Laurie Paul came in and they immediately got it. Blue Sky’s role in the art ecosystem was to bring in more water.

I didn’t really know how to go about it in the beginning, but Drake Deknatel and Lillian Pitt helped me figure out how to prepare a portfolio. Then Pam Johnson introduced me to William Jamison and that was it.
I got a $2,000 fellowship and I turned it into a limited edition of prints, which I then sold for $40,000. All of the prints were editioned at North Light in Portland, so all that money stayed in the state. It was a real shot in the arm and I was on cloud nine.
The most important institution in the city was PCVA. The arts community rallied around Mary Beebe, which created a small group of collectors who made my gallery possible.

After that, the commercial galleries like Leach and Jamison got stronger. Now we have informal artist-driven places like Homeland or Ditch.

The support of people in the community, like Joan Shipley, created the Portland contemporary art community that thrives today.
From my studio, I can see the ships as they come in for the Rose Festival.

To watch an artist’s work change after they have moved from California to Oregon is always interesting.
My studio’s in my basement. When I work, I can hear the kids and the dog running across the floor above me.

The artists have chosen a lifestyle over “making it.” What does “making it” mean?
I wanted to develop an exhibition program that encouraged the artist to make their next thing and show it with me.

I got rejected from showing my work in the Governor’s office. That really made me a more determined artist.
I like working here because of the bigness. The big spaces, the big timbers. That drama affects my work.

The fire had a profound effect. It made the community realize the fragility of the culture of their city, and it made the artists work all the harder to make new, good work.
My mind is my studio.
OREGON IS A MIDWESTERN STATE. Unlike its neighbors to the north and south, places settled on waves of gold fever and over-the-top bootstrapping individualism, populated by great innovators of West Coast lifestyle and technology, the Beaver State has generally been content to welcome a more sedate brand of pioneer—emigrants unmotivated by glitzy Hollywood dreams or Klondike riches, and wary of the men who would hype them. Never a land of booms or busts, grand schemes or world-conquering plots, Oregon has plugged away instead as the West’s more quiet option, an incubator of practical ambitions and the small-town values of propriety, niceness, privacy and discretion. It’s a conservative sensibility, arguably running even deeper than the state’s pioneer roots, all the way back to the Native peoples of the Willamette region, known not so much for grand statements of culture—the iconic totem poles, exquisite bentwood boxes or flamboyant headdresses of their neighbors—but more for their cozy lodges, easygoing subsistence living and watertight cedar root baskets.

In this culture of modest values, the visual arts of Oregon have managed to flourish almost against the odds. Over the decades, in the hands of a series of small communities, a narrow but vital history of painting, photography, sculpture and other hybrid forms has maintained its momentum, wending its way through the years like a slow-burning fuse. From the carpetbagging nature scene artists of the 19th century to
the midcentury easel painters and teachers of the Museum School, to our current catalogue of postmodern communitarians, cartoonists and performance artists living the DIY dream, the artists of Oregon have created a kind of shadow history to the larger arcs of national and international art discourse, always within shouting distance of the debates of the day, but rarely wholly joining the conversation. Perhaps the last ten years’ minor explosion of notoriety has been the coming-out party for a self-enclosed scene long in the basting, but one is still left to wonder: Has Oregon really, truly awakened and joined the broader culture of the West Coast and the globe? Or was the last decade’s flurry of flashbulbs just a brush with history as, once again, the outside world lapped us and moved on?

THE EARLY HISTORY OF ART IN OREGON is mostly one of talented visitors come to document the natural wonders of the unspoiled West. With oils and glass-plate cameras in hand, notables such as Albert Bierstadt, Carleton Watkins and Edward Curtis trekked from afar to bear witness to what they imagined would be a richly romantic land peopled by exotic creatures and colorful natives, and which they proceeded to represent as such regardless of the cooperation of precise physical evidence. From these men, the iconic images of the mythical West were born—grand mountains reflected in polished lakes, noble Indians bedecked in ceremonial garb, waterfalls plunging through rainbows. The images were beguiling, and they continue to lure and disappoint migrants to this day, and also to vex the locals, who see in the myth an ultimate denial of the realities of the region’s ecological depletion. But whatever one’s view of the pioneer myth of the West—a great story, a terrible lie, propaganda sponsored by railroads, or folk art beloved by masses—one can’t deny its central importance to the identity of this region, if only because it stands at the beginning of something monumental and new.

With more humans to the area came more artists and art appreciators, too, and by 1892 the city of Portland had become sufficiently civilized that leading citizens felt obliged to establish the Portland Art Association (PAA), a collection of Greek and Roman plaster casts housed on the second floor of the Portland Library Association’s subscription library building. Curated by a series of prominent women including Henrietta Failing, Agnes Jamieson, Alice Strong, Lucy Failing Burpee and Anna Belle Crocker, the PAA acted as the city’s omnibus museum/art school/salon/general conduit of European high culture, bringing together citizens for afternoon drawing classes, history lectures and exhibitions of paintings and sculptures including, somewhat astonishingly, Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, fresh from its unveiling at the New York Armory Show. Not only does the PAA now stand as the cornerstone for nearly all the city’s subsequent art institutions (i.e., the Portland Art Museum, the Northwest Film Center, the Pacific Northwest College of Art), but it established the template for the fundamentally matriarchal tradition of arts stewardship in Oregon ever since (see Sally Lawrence, Bonnie Bronson, Hallie Ford, Arlene Schnitzer, Terri Hopkins, Elizabeth Leach, Joan Shiple, Mary Beebe, Victoria Frey, Kristy Edmunds, etc., etc., etc.).

Among the founders of the PAA was one of Oregon’s first nationally recognized artistic personae, the voluptuary anarchist C.E.S. Wood. A noted writer, thinker, soldier, lawyer, political firebrand and sometime painter, Wood arrived to the Northwest as an infantry officer in the Nez Perce War and went on to dominate the local cultural attitudes of his day, impressing his boisterous, anti-imperialist opinions upon friends in Portland’s social elite and far-flung comrades like John Reed, Mark Twain and Chief Joseph alike. Inventor of the Portland Rose...
Festival, defender of Emma Goldman, Wood also managed to produce a body of rustic landscape paintings and portraits of Native Americans in his spare time, though, in the end, one probably wouldn’t characterize his true gifts as those of painting or even writing per se, as much as those of life and democratic citizenship itself.

It was C.S. Price, a former cowboy illustrator turned Modernist, appearing in town a few years after Wood’s departure, who perhaps first exerted a uniquely painterly influence in these parts. A modest, serious fellow by nature, Price discovered in Oregon a land and a culture sympathetic to his transcendentalist ideals regarding art as an inward spiritual journey, and proceeded to pursue his muted images fusing land, animal and sky with a quiet, mystical, noncommercial fervor. Like many artists showing up in this region, he eventually left, but not before giving the community an example of what serious, committed, ambitious art-making might look like, and leaving behind a body of work that might, possibly bear some influence on later artists like Wayne Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn. Between Price’s artistic self-reliance and Wood’s comfortably appointed bohemianism, the basic ideological poles of Oregon’s art scene were fixed early on.

IT IS TESTAMENT TO THE BREVITY of Oregon history that the eras of Wood and Price are only about one generation removed from today. The next major grouping—and one that persists—formed somewhere in the middle of the 20th century, on the grounds of the Museum Art School at the Portland Art Museum, and with the founding of the Fountain Gallery by the city’s one indispensable patron of the visual arts, Arlene Schnitzer. The Museum School, rising from the PAA, attracted a diverse array of area students, including future success stories Mark Rothko and architect Pietro Belluschi, and created a hive of regular employment gigs for local artists. Meanwhile, the Fountain Gallery—anchored by Schnitzer’s hard-won collector pool in the West Hills—established a small but reliable marketplace for locally made art. Between these two budding institutions—one educational, the other commercial, both bearing the imprint of Arlene Schnitzer—a middle-class life for a small handful of artists in the Portland vicinity became thinkable, and it’s from this lucky stable that many of the region’s public sculptures, murals and institutions derive. Indeed, without Schnitzer’s early and unwavering commitment to the visual arts, it’s hard to imagine what this place would look like today, and by extension, what it would be.

So, who were the Fountain artists? A diverse lineup, to be sure. Among them: Louis Bunce, a natural bon vivant and second-hand stylist who created well-turned work in Surrealist, Abstract or Minimalist modes, depending on the year; Manuel Izquierdo, a Spanish-born political refugee turned Expressionist sculptor in the mediums of wood and welded bronze; Michele Russo, a politically active figurist in the graphic vein of Matisse and Stuart Davis; Mel Katz and Lee Kelly, heavy-gauge Modernist sculptors working in painted aluminum and brushed steel. There were also Carl Morris and Hilda Morris, the painter and sculptor, George Johanson, a hallucinogenic Expressionist, Lucinda Parker and, briefly, Robert Colescott, but he moved away, too. There were others as well, many of whom are still working, still practicing the daily hand-eye action of the studio, still enjoying the genial life of their art and society. As a group, they not only established the indigenous images and objects that have come to define our local sense of style, but also trained generations of local aspirants in the fundamentals of drawing, painting and sculpting, while imparting a high-minded devotion to art history as a continuous, civilizing conversation.

Unlike the artists of Seattle’s celebrated Northwest School—Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan and Guy Anderson—however,
the midcentury artists of Oregon never clumped into a coherent stylistic movement. Formally speaking, they were more akin to H.L. Davis’s early Oregon settlers in the novel *Honey in the Horn*, “an assortment of set-charactered old bucks as distinct from one another in tastes, tempers, habits, and inclinations as the separate suits of a deck of cards.” Whereas the Northwest School painters, pace New York, pushed their images into abstract realms, seasoned with foggy local colors and elements of Japanese art and philosophy, the Oregonians were content to stick to their 19th century models, enjoying their artisanal labor, living among a community of decent, hardworking, avowed individuals. In good Midwestern fashion, open competition was largely eschewed, perhaps because to encroach on a neighbor’s pool of ideas would have been deemed improper, or perhaps because the community simply never reached the critical density that would make those border squabbles necessary.

So by the 1970s, Oregon boasted an enviable creative freedom—home to a scene of simmering artistic activity, but unencumbered by any particular house style. The Museum School was growing to become the Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA). The Fountain Gallery, the Sally Judd Gallery and a small host of other spaces were in full swing. The Portland Center for the Visual Arts (PCVA)—an artist-run noncommercial space founded by Fountain artists Michele Russo, Mel Katz and Jay Backstrand, with Mary Beebe as director—was importing art by national luminaries like Richard Serra, Frank Stella and Carl Andre for local delectation. And a craft renaissance, including work by pioneering ceramicist Betty Feves, was producing distinct, funky, uncategorizable objects that reimagined the boundaries between art and craft.

For young local artists like Tad Savinar, Cynthia Lahti and a remarkable, original-minded group of students passing through PNCA in the 1980s, including Michael Brophy, Eric Stotik, Malia Jensen and others, the creative atmosphere of Portland was heated and strange, with solid studio education in the classrooms augmented by regular exhibitions of advanced art in the galleries, and the burgeoning network of alternative spaces—including The Art Gym, Blue Sky Gallery and Nine Gallery—taking up the slack left by the region’s less-than-abundant supply of public art institutions. Meanwhile, in the bars and clubs, came the first, furious glimmers of homegrown Punk.

**ONE COULD ARGUE THAT THE RECENT** blossoming of arts in Oregon is the result of these long-germinating eras, but, in fact, the current scene grows from other taproots, too. The contemporary allure of The City That Works is in some ways indebted to the local art scenes of yesteryear, but probably even more so to new demographics and the infusion of young slackers come seeking what the TV show *Portlandia* has termed, retroactively, the “dream of the ‘90s.”

What was the dream of the ‘90s? A few adjectives spring to mind: noncommercial, multimedia, underground, political, feminist, handmade. Most of these tendencies can be summed up in what has come to be known as “DIY” culture, and for whatever reason—cheap rent, grunge spillover—Portland found a spot on the national DIY map of the ‘90s, alongside cities such as Austin and Chicago, also known for their earthy, music-centric scenes. Despite an absence of basic civic amenities—i.e., research universities, arts institutions and jobs—Portland attracted a steady stream of creatively inclined young people, some of whom even aspired to practice visual arts. They weren’t coming because of C.S. Price or Louis Bunce, though, but rather because of Miranda July, Sleater-Kinney and the greater indie rock/riot grrrl culture that was assembling, sub rosa, on the banks of the Willamette. And as more rock
luminaries landed in town, the unlikely magnetism of Portland only grew.

Portland of the ’90s was well-poised for the rise of the institution of the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA) in the hands of Kristy Edmunds, a charismatic curator springing from the Portland Art Museum. PICA’s main thrust was and remains performance-based art, but the organization has always kept a strong hand in the plastic arts, too, over the years exposing the city to the faraway voices of Ryan Trecartin, Peter Coffin, Dana Schutz, Charles Atlas and literally hundreds of other rising and established artists, in some cases acting as the launching pad for major careers and major reassessments of careers. In addition, PICA, like PCVA before, has offered the community a reliable stage on which to assemble, a ground on which to congregate, pioneering a convivial model that has been successfully adopted—to the pleasure of Portland’s “creative class”—by younger alternative spaces/cruising grounds like Disjecta and YU.

The punky young-person party of the fin-de-millenium might well have smoldered along for decades if not for the gas poured onto the embers by the early millennium’s real estate boom. As the housing bubble pushed artists out of San Francisco and Seattle, Portland became a previously unconsidered notion, and for a spell the Rose City received the masses, along with a momentary jolt of real West Coast energy. Writer/curator/provocateur Matthew Stadler from Seattle. Writer/curator/dynamo Stephanie Snyder at Reed College. Mission School alums Chris Johanson and Johanna Jackson, and fellow San Franciscan, relational aesthetician Harrell Fletcher. Chicago-bred Jessica Hutchins. Chicago-bred Sam Gould. Dan Attoe across the river. Plus ambitious locals Storm Tharp and MK Guth upping their games and establishing national reputations, not to mention the continued looming presence of our great, sphinxlike outliers, D.E. May, Rick Bartow, James Lavadour and, most of all, Robert Adams. Briefly, the town fairly teemed with artists commanding broader audiences and responding to broader concerns. The 2003 artist-organized, city-wide party known as Core Sample perhaps marked the beginning of this era, as the sleepy, small-town atmosphere shook off for a moment, replaced by a spirit of Western barn raising.

Arguably, the ’00s will be regarded as a high-water mark for Oregon arts in general, an era of homegrown art fairs, burgeoning galleries, curatorial visits from afar, budding alternative art spaces, intelligent arts newspapers and a seemingly reserved spot at the Whitney Biennial for artists with once-and-future 503 prefixes. In 2002: Miranda July; 2004: Miranda July, Harrell Fletcher and Chris Johanson; 2008: MK Guth; 2010: Storm Tharp, Jessica Hutchins and PNCA alums Alex Hubbard and Julia Fish; 2012: onetime Portlander KB Hardy and Oregon-associated filmmaker Kelly Reichardt, in a show curated by former Portlander, Salem-bred Jay Sanders. Along with the culinary, filmic and musical scenes of the city, the visual arts garnered serious attention around the world, and the perpetual values of the Oregon arts community—collaboration, craftsmanship, recycling—enjoyed a spell of broad relevance. Portland might have remained a community of adamant individuals with no identifiable stylistic bond but, in the unshakably pluralist art world of the last thirty years, one could say the social in some ways has become the stylistic and, in this sense, the style of Portland became fashionable to the world at large.

AND SO, TEN YEARS DEEP INTO the boom, we are left to ask: Is it over yet?

The data coming in are somewhat mixed. In the plus column: PNCA continues to expand under the leadership of Tom Manley, PSU’s
Art and Social Practice MFA is vibrant in the hands of Harrell Fletcher. PICA remains a powerful presence, with its TBA festival a global institution, and Disjecta, YU and Springfield's Ditch Project are energetic, intellectually engaged breeding grounds for new things of all stripes. College and university museums, such as the Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University, the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon and the Schneider Museum of Art at Southern Oregon University, have sprouted in smaller Oregon cities and serve as their communities’ respective art centers. Gallery-wise, a handful of stalwarts—Liz Leach, Jane Beebe—is reinforced by Jeanine Jablonski’s Fourteen30, Reed College’s Cooley Gallery, an academic museum curated by Stephanie Snyder, and a teeming ecology of small, nonprofit spaces including, as of this writing, Rocks Box, Carhole, Appendix, Portland Museum of Modern Art, ad infinitum. Artists like the recently departed yet still Portland connected Jenene Nagy and the recently Guggenheimed (and departed) Arnold Kemp are emerging into national recognition, James Lavadour made the Venice Biennale and, somewhere along the way, Portland became a comic book mecca to boot.

In the minus column, though, the perennial issues bedeviling the community persist. The collector pool in Oregon remains small, the critical feedback loop spotty and, with the crash in the housing market making larger cities on the West Coast re-inhabitable, Oregon has once again hemorrhaged a goodly portion of its best artists. Chris Johanson moved to Los Angeles, Jessica Hutchins and husband, Stephen Malkmus, to Berlin, Dana Dart-McLean to New York, Miranda July, long ago, to Los Angeles. Even Gus Van Sant is mostly living in LA these days. Anecdotally, it feels like the magnetism has weakened of late, prey to the ongoing exodus initiated by the likes of C.E.S. Wood, C.S. Price, Minor White, Mark Rothko, Robert Colescott, Carrie Mae Weems and countless others.

And yet, even with these less than encouraging developments (or non-developments) in mind, one can’t really deny that the basic tenor of the region has perceptibly shifted. Exiting the gold rush years, Oregon seems different, its age-old veil of detachment from outside influence at least somewhat lifted, to the degree that even the ongoing defections don’t feel so pointed anymore, less repudiations than a healthy traffic. In a world with no defined center, Oregon has become one more node in the global network of culture, its spokes of connection no stronger or weaker than anywhere else. In particular for those able to sell their work elsewhere, Oregon stands as an excellent base of operations for the making, and for the living out, of art.

Portland still isn’t, nor will it ever be, a major media center. The West Hills will never teem with rigorous, superwealthy patrons. Oregon still is and always will be a climate consigned to semidarkness. But at the same time, it’s getting harder to identify it as the region H.L. Davis described so many decades ago: “The place where stories begin that end somewhere else. [The place with] no history of its own, only endings of histories from other places; [the place with] no complete lives, only beginnings.” For better or worse, history has come to Oregon, insinuating itself into the damp earth, finding habitat in the shaggy trees, and quietly replacing the state’s long-held promise as a place where one might disappear with the new, strange and implausible promise of a place where one might actually be discovered. Moving onward, those emigrants drawn here by the hope of obscurity, comfort and the impossibility of failure will find a less inviting home. Like it or not, the door to the world is now open.
I work seven days a week until noon.

Portland is still very much a painter’s town.

My studio’s on the Yaquina River, a place where I used to dig clams with my uncles and my grandfather.
I was in Italy, and I decided that when I came back home I’d just start painting what was around me.

Over the years it’s been in the kitchen, in the living room, in the garage and now in a warehouse.

Edgy isn’t always comfortable.
Jim Lavadour made people realize you could break out of the region.

This is a hard job that we do, and it requires an extraordinary amount of will to go to an uncertain place.
It wasn’t so much that I wanted to come to Oregon, but more that I *didn’t* want to go to New York or California.

I was living in Buffalo. Sean Healy and Topher moved out to Portland, and they got jobs at Kinko’s and kept bugging me to come out and join them. Soon I was working at Art Media and running Swallow Press.
I was befuddled by Portland at first. Then Nan Curtis moved in next door.

All of a sudden it seemed like everyone in the city was an artist, but no one was collecting it, and no one was writing about it.
Artists have always had a role in making things happen—PCVA, Blue Sky, Northwest Artists Workshop, Disjecta, Portland Art Center, The Art Gym …

It’s a small community, and there’s this mania in thinking that what’s good is outside the region.
My studio has no windows.
But if I go outside I can see an old sawmill in the distance
and a tall stand of trees behind it.

I had a community.
I mean I’d sit around drinking beers with Randy, Brophy and
Cynthia Lahti discussing Velázquez.
The real shot in the arm for my career was the publication of my exhibition catalogue.

Success is a by-product of how hard you’re willing to work.

The next step is to make better work.
Judy Cooke and Bob Hanson always seemed like they were the “artist’s artists.” I have always admired Judy’s work. Now that I’m in my forties, I appreciate her work even more as a quiet influence on my own work.

The visual arts infrastructure hasn’t quite caught up with the level of visual arts activity yet.

I’m not willing to compromise the work, and that has its consequences.
There’s a feeling that this is still a frontier. And that’s a really good thing for an artist—something to be inspired by.

My exhibition at the Hallie Ford Museum released me from what I had been painting in the ‘90s.

The attitude has changed. Now artists see themselves as having careers outside of the state.
Never mind the boosters. Portland in 2012 is simply a very kind place where there is space and support for thinking about making things.

I think this is a remarkable place to work. And so, as a result, the work is quite idiosyncratic. I like that.
The Ford Family Foundation has dramatically changed the cultural landscape in the state of Oregon forever, by meeting the specific needs of the artistic community.

Encouragement builds the next generation.
MK Guth’s show at The Art Gym was a great example of how an artist can push an exhibition to new ground if provided the resources and opportunities.

Being part of an artist-run space, we all help each other out. Rather than being inspired by a particular artist, I’m inspired by the community of my fellow artists.

My studio’s in an old Cash&Carry grocery, and I can hear the crows cracking walnuts with their beaks on the roof.
All these fellowships work on many levels. They not only enrich the community, but to the individual artist they can be life-changing.

When I go to a gallery and see a show that falls short, I’ve come to realize that it’s my responsibility to go back to my studio and make a better work for myself, so it can inspire the other artists by raising the bar.

It’s a blessing and a risk. You have lots of time to make work, but no one to sell it to and no one to write about it.
You’re a diamond in the rough.

Catalogues and criticism are so important to an artist’s career.

I don’t have a studio.

PICA filled the void.
A place like this, you can go on your own and stake your own path.

The work in this region is now more about community, rather than just being about the mountains or the ocean.

We could really use a big grant for brave, unproven work.
The light here is a little complicated because it changes so much.

Yes, it’s important for me to show the artist’s hand in things, but it’s more important to show my heart.

There were so many opportunities for me to show—Homeland, Ditch, Disjecta, vacant storefronts, bSIDE6, Detour, Pioneer Place …
I have one foot in the door and one foot outside in the other art world.

Art takes time. Becoming a mature painter takes a lifetime.
I’m sitting in my studio, three blocks away from the place where I was born.
Why We Work Here is a partnership of The Ford Family Foundation and the Oregon Arts Commission, 2013.

Artists: Tad Savinar and Jon Raymond

Mr. Savinar captured the sentiments of over 45 artists, curators and collectors from around the state of Oregon, with whom he spoke. Our sincere gratitude for their time and thoughts.

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