

Contemporary Art and Ambition in the American West

by Darren Jones

Utah is a romantic wanderer's grail: its chromatic spectrum, the metaphysical power of its topographies and its geopolitical location combine to make it the nexus of lore and industry which defines the Western United States. Utah's history has often set epic human endeavor against celestial grandeur, casting this vast territory in mythic terms. The landscape's breadth, with its possibilities and challenges, is reflected in the state's pioneering artistic story. In 1899, arts patron Alice Merrill Horne - only the second woman elected to the Utah House of Representatives - proposed legislation that would establish the Utah Arts Council and a state art collection. It was the first such initiative in the United States, making Utah a ground-breaking force in municipal investment and support for art and artists. Under the auspices of the Utah Division of Arts and Museums, the archive - now the Alice Merrill Horne Collection - continues to chronicle the state's creative journey, educate local audiences, and record the diverse narratives of the Utahns. The artscape of Salt Lake City reveals the legacy of that entrepreneurial spirit. Institutional anchors include the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, and Utah Arts and Museums. The latter administers the Rio Gallery, located in the Rio Grande Depot, and the Alice Gallery, in the historic Glendinning Mansion, along with government buildings - the state capitol among them - as the principal display venues for the collection. The associated traveling exhibition program takes art into colleges, universities, and public galleries statewide. Recent shows highlighted current, Utah-based indigenous artists in *A Living Legacy: Celebrating Native American History Month*; explored works by a range of emerging and established artists, in the latest edition of the *Statewide Annual*; and acknowledged the 150th anniversary of Utah women becoming the first to exercise suffrage rights in the United States, in *Women to the Front: Perspectives on Equality*,



Ed "Big Daddy" Roth's Ratfink Museum, Manti, Utah

Gender, and Activism, which is currently viewable online.

In addition to civil support, enterprising individuals have opened a slew of commercial and artist-run sites, deepening the presence and impact of contemporary art in disparate communities, while



David Brothers' studio, Salt Lake City, Utah

also looking beyond state lines to nurture Utah's relationship to the national apparatus.

Many states, located away from the coastal governments of artistic taste, contend with chronic underfunding, condescending perceptions about the parochialism of art made there, creative exodus, and dismissal by critical hierarchies. How then might a balance be struck between inward investment and procuring external interest? Perhaps that is both the question and the answer.

Unlike the (ironically) homogenous fashions for certain artists, palettes, or aesthetics that often define each art season in New York, where the desire and effort required to simply be there can exact immense costs upon artists, less populated locales offer time and, possibly, living environments more conducive to production and consistency. They are also less prone to narrow definitions of what constitutes valid modes of expression. Artists are more likely to retain interest in local characteristics and influences - distinguishing strengths, and points of difference - that may be shed when an artist relocates to an art metropolis, where paradigms are shaped by a few powerful voices that elevate only a sliver of the massive quantity of work produced there.

For example, artist Wendy Wischer has investigated how politics and economic cravenness threaten and change fragile habitats. For *Displacing Vibrations* (2019) Wischer and geologist Jeffrey Moore recorded seismic reverberations within Utah's rock arches, part of

national monument land that has been decreased in size, to allow corporations to tap - and potentially destroy - resources. Subterranean rumblings were synchronized with photographic animations of the rock to create a rich visual soundscape that 'breathes'. The effect is mesmerizing and terrifying; a clarion call to nature's sacking, against the greed that fuels it.

Also in contemporary dialog with ancient environments, Jean Richardson uses found or discarded items - envelopes, tumbleweeds, bottles - to form patterned planes and spidered impressions. *Traversed* (2017) consists of large wallpaper tracts made from yellow envelopes, that look like maps of barren, sun-baked fields seen from high above. They once contained gifts, administration, or love letters; were sent and delivered. Now, emptied of their cargoes, they act as poetic remonstrances to the melancholy of time, distance, and lost touch. In another series, *Naturalized* (2019), wind-blasted, spindled orbs bloom with exotic rose-colored flowers. But a closer look reveals them to be lifeless, tumbleweed skeletons that have gored pink foam packing peanuts, used in mass distribution deliveries. Whether in her objects or her videos, Richardson strikes an eloquent, romantic balance between the lost and found: *Life-Jacket Blanket* (2015) portrays a lonesome figure adrift, wearing a mantle of buoyancy aids in the Great Salt Lake; a sphere of umbrella-hoods titled *Brolly Ball* (2014) is situated in the vast expanse of Utah's Salt Flats.

David Brothers' stage sets are an opulent evocation of the cheese, hysteria and fairground clanging of American game shows. His studio is a cavernous space on an industrial complex in Salt Lake City, filled with props - cardboard palm trees, puppets, billboard signs - the viscera of America's blazing technicolor television dream. To stand on that stage, lights flashing, heat emanating from the electrics, but in total silence - no crowds, no camera, no action - is to experience the emptiness of a sales pitch in which we all are either involved, or targeted by. Brothers' constructions are the eerie shadow of theme park fakery. His riotous and fascinating evocations are as seductive as the cash prizes, spinning wheels, fleeting fame, and glittering promises of the culture he skewers. Apart from contemporary art, but with lessons which that field might learn from, is the Ratfink Museum in rural Manti. It's a magnificent testament to Ed 'Big Daddy' Roth's antihero,



Western Star, in the artistic community of Spring City, Utah

as authentic a commentary on American society as any blue-chip proselytizing. The antithesis of Disney's saccharine Mickey Mouse, Roth sank his abject junkyard wastrel into the greasy fabric of America's hotrod underbelly - a necessary stain that no detergent can remove. A visit there will be seared into one's memory, just as quickly as a trip to any major museum and its tired McDonald's menu of canonical names will be forgotten. Perhaps such differing metiers can't be compared, but in an age when contemporary art has been plasticized and petrified by corporate dictate, Ratfink's unshackled *joie de vivre*, counter-establishment integrity, and magnetic originality, can.

If it were even possible to find consensus among Utah's art workers, what might they want to achieve from a redoubling of collective efforts to raise the state's profile? Were the goal to surmount the frustrations previously mentioned, Utah could foster more incisive criticism, help choreograph the dance between traditional Western iconographic art - cowboys, ranches, mountains - and sharper conceptual pursuits oriented toward today's foremost urban discourses. It could also guide conversation and apply pressure where needed to trim the fat, encouraging a leaner output. Sometimes words have also to be the sword.

But that isn't easy to cultivate; it would require insightful writers to stay in Utah, writers capable of objective, occasionally searing dissection, not just description and advertisement. Valuable commentary on the art and gallery scene, sprung from a profound belief that Utah could become nationally regarded, might agitate fresh perspectives. It wouldn't be helpful to scythe the crops without replanting afterwards. Difficult truths might have to be voiced to artists and gallerists, who critics would doubtless run into during exhibition openings. It might get awkward. But is

that what Utah wants? A coastal model of potentially invigorating criticism which ignites discussion, even fervor, but may be very tough to swallow? What might retain, or attract such a critical corps? It may help to stoke artistic responses rooted in the currencies of what is unique and powerful about Utah - its

history, landscape, commerce, politics, religion - contextualized as relatable issues to many other places; and to do so without inferiority that what is happening in New York or other art capitals, is somehow more interesting. It isn't. When that ingenuity and turbulence fosters excitement, it emanates across borders, prejudices and stereotypes. It is then that attention is gained, not chased. There is precedent.

Until the 1950s, Glasgow (UK) was one of the world's dominant industrial powers, known as the 'Workshop of the Empire'. Shipbuilding on the River Clyde was pre-eminent, 'Clyde Built' was an internationally envied stamp.

Lanarkshire's abundant coal and iron reserves fuelled the city's manufacturing: up to a quarter of the world's locomotives were built there. But heavy industry declined due to increased competition from the Far East and the rise of the airline industry. The subsequent financial devastation, social dereliction and civic incompetence left an indelible scar on the city for decades, architecturally rife even today. But the ideals of physical labor, organization and communal action within the workforce (hallmarks of the city's political history) informed a renaissance that began in 1983, with the 'Glasgow's Miles Better' campaign. Glasgow's art workers were at the forefront.

Until the late 1980s Scottish artists often left to study or live in London or Europe, as American artists leave Utah, Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, or Idaho, for New York. But a remarkable change came to fruition in the early 1990s, although it had been decades in the making. The legendary promoter Richard Demarco had brought many international artists to Scotland from the mid 1960s - Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic, and Paul Neagu among them - under the auspices of his Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh. The links that he and others helped forge between Scottish artists and institutions and their European counterparts became lasting bonds. Later, in large part through the dynamism of Sam Ainsley, David Harding and Sandy Moffat (inspirational leaders at the Glasgow School of Art) the city's art status evolved from historical contributor (The Glasgow Boys, Charles Rennie Mackintosh) into a buoyant modern hub, particularly through the Environmental Art Program, which prompted artists to engage with Glasgow's cityscape. Reinvention was based on community and collaboration: Glasgow School of Art became a locus of productivity and excellence, attracting students from around the world, while newspaper criti-

cism helped elevate the profile of artists and galleries. State support, new festivals and urban regeneration began to transform the city's reputation. In the past three decades, commercial and artist-led spaces, both past and present - Transmission Gallery, Tramway, The Modern Institute, Mary Mary Gallery, Sorcha Dallas Gallery, Washington Garcia Gallery, Kope Astner, Patricia Fleming, and Frutta among them - have played their part in Glasgow's resurrection. They have attracted investment, helped forge Turner Prize winners and international careers. Since 2005, the Glasgow International biennial has shown local and international practitioners, as has the Edinburgh Art Festival, established a year earlier.

The effects have spread throughout the country, to other cities and rural regions, culminating in a potent, supportive and sustained Scottish art world, something quite different from the commercial art industry of rugged landscapes, snow-capped peaks and romantic mythologies that dominated Scottish art for centuries and still caters to tourists. Does that sound familiar to Utah readers? Glasgow has become a major global center of contemporary artistic production in a short time, because of its past, sensibilities and individualism - not despite them.

Scotland and Utah, Glasgow and Salt Lake City, differ too greatly for direct comparisons, but artistically there are similarities: the historical - perhaps overbearing - influence of the landscape on artistic perception, socio-economic factors, and distance from

centers of supposed sophistication. Glasgow had no collector base, little investment, decades of civic stagnation, and a drain of creatives to larger cities. It was dismissed as derelict, rough, dangerous, provincial and poor; a rusting hulk subject to xenophobic, patronizing English attitudes. It has overcome many of those handicaps, and while it cannot rest on its laurels, what Hans-Ulrich Obrist termed in 1996 (with gruesome evangelism) 'The Glasgow Miracle' has been realized, however demeaning and unfit his phrase may be. Glasgow's success came not from a biblical supervisor, but from the molten tenacity and shipyard anvils of its art workers.

Utah has everything it needs to enact its own emergence as a chamber of creative industry. The DNA of Utah's modern artistic progenitors flows through their successors today: immensely talented people, grounded in Utah's potential, who have already formed a circuitry committed to propagating and quickening existing infrastructure. Love for one's homeland and its constituencies, and belief in its stories, combined with intellectual capacity, unified vision, and organization, can move ... mountains. If those reformers in Utah are to accrue enough cultural matter to ignite a new Western star in the art firmament, and fulfil their forbears' beginnings as an inclusive, dynamic capital of aesthetic engineering, they have only to make it a reality

