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Van Ryzin: Local artists' work fills People's Gallery at City Hall

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The soaring three-story lobby of Austin's City Hall is relatively quiet on a recent Friday afternoon. No gatherings of citizens waiting to enter city council chambers. No officials presiding over public presentations or press conferences.

Still, passers-by glance at the tall sculpture that hugs a wall in the lobby — pieces of reclaimed cardboard teetering upward in five gangly towers vaguely reminiscent of stalagmites rising from the floor of a cave.

Some give the sculpture a bit of a double take as they walk by.

George Sabra's "Vibrations" is one of 129 on view in City Hall as part of the People's Gallery, an annual juried exhibition that assembles work by local artists, professional or otherwise.

Michael Anthony Garcia and Thao Votang — both jurors for the 2014 People's Gallery — have come by for a walk-through and talk-through. They were invited to juror by the Cultural Arts Division of the City's Economic Development Department, which leads the People's Gallery. (This year's third juror, Terence Moline, was unable to join the recent meet-up.)

Garcia and Votang have catbird seats to Austin's visual art landscape.

Garcia had two of his large sculptures in the lobby as part of 2012's People's Gallery exhibit. His next solo show opens at Grayduck Gallery next month. And he's garnered attention for his independent curatorial work at Mexic-Arte Museum and the Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center.

Votang, who works at the University of Texas' school of fine arts, co-heads Tiny Park Gallery, the indie showplace that's collected critical kudos in its few short years on the scene. And though the gallery recently shuttered its East Austin space because of rising rent, Tiny Park still exists as a projects-based endeavor.

No long late-night discussions over slide-projected images for the People's Gallery, though.

Garcia, Votang and Moline culled through hundreds of submitted images privately, flagging ones they liked, the final decisions then tallied and meted out by Cultural Art Division staff.

With the selection open to any artist living within a 50-mile radius of city hall — professional artist, emerging, first-time art-maker — the nearly 1,000 entries ran the gamut.

"I liked just looking at art for art's sake," Garcia says of the process. "Of course I recognized some people's work, but it was fun to just look. (The process) had a kind of 'American Idol' feel to it that was open, flexible and democratic."

This year's exhibit's is the 10th iteration of the People's Gallery. And so intermixed with the jury selections are past People's Choice-winning art works — pieces selected by public ballot to become part of the city's permanent collection. (Voting is open until Dec. 31 for the 2014 People's Choice. Ballots are available in the second floor lobby.)

It's the first time Votang's been back to see the People's Gallery display since the opening celebration in February.

"There's lots of work I learned about and got to know through this process," she says. "And certain things surprised me."

Votang became enchanted with Fidencio Duran's "El Caballero," a suggestively dream-like painting of a young man riding a horse across a bright Texas landscape, rider hovering over horse in surreal fashion.

Garcia and Votang were impressed with Shalena White's "Mountain Laurel Mandala II," an elegantly intricate wall installation of red Texas mountain laurel seeds affixed to the wall with sewing pins to create a circle 12 feet in diameter.

Ditto with David Culpepper's installation of dozens of miniature oil derricks affixed to the wall over an interior stairwell, a piece named "How the West Was Won."

Both also took a fancy to Sarah Collins' colorful stitched collages made of old clothing. And they praised Claude van Lingen's subtly charged charcoal drawing.

Designed by New Mexico-based architect Antoine Predock, the city hall building is characterized by walls that run along angled axes, niche-like built-in seating, walkways that span over the three-story central lobby. Its interior is awash in natural light.

For a busy public office building, it is actually a surprisingly decent place to view the art on display.

The People's Gallery, says Votang, "offers a big snapshot" of a segment of Austin's local art community.

"You never know what you're going to see," says Garcia. "And (for an artist) you'll never know who's going to see your work."