

Pollack, Barbara, "Meet the Artist Who's Co-Curating the Whitney Biennial," *ARTnews*, March 3, 2014. Accessed online: <http://www.artnews.com/2014/03/03/michelle-grabner-is-the-artist-curating-a-floor-of-the-whitney-biennial/>

Meet the Artist Who's Co-Curating the Whitney Biennial

BY *Barbara Pollack* POSTED 03/03/14

As an artist, Michelle Grabner makes labor-intensive abstractions. As a curator, she runs a gallery in her backyard—and has organized an entire floor of the Whitney's much anticipated show

"I had been visited by curators of the Whitney Biennial many times before and I had always hoped that I would be included as an artist—but I never saw the possibility that I would be chosen as curator," says Chicago artist Michelle Grabner. But for the Biennial's 2014 edition, on view at the Whitney Museum from March 7 through May 25, Grabner was in fact selected as part of a three-curator team, along with Stuart Comer, chief curator of media and performance art at the Museum of Modern Art, and Anthony Elms, associate curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. Each curator will get his or her own floor, while in-house curators Elisabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders will act as advisers.



Michelle Grabner.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Grabner insists that she was not on a “talent hunt” during the 130 studio visits she made over the past two years. Instead, she says, she was looking for artists who serve as teachers and role models for other artists, herself in particular. “Even when they did not directly influence my work, they taught me how to be an artist,” she explains.

This is the first time the Whitney has allowed an artist to operate as a curator who chooses other artists for inclusion in a show, but Grabner doesn’t lack curatorial experience. In 1987, she organized “Postmodernism: A Spectacle of Reflexivity”—which featured late ’80s appropriation artists—as her thesis exhibition for her M.A. in art history at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. (She later went on to get an M.F.A. from Northwestern University.) Since then, she has continually brought exhibitions of international artists to the Midwest, and for the past 15 years she has been running a totally off-the-grid gallery, The Suburban, in an 8-by-8-foot garden shed in the backyard of her suburban Oak Park, Illinois, home. Three years ago, she and her husband, Brad Killam, opened a second Kunsthalle venue, The Poor Farm, in the former Waupaca County Poor Farm in Little Wolf, Wisconsin.



Grabner chose Alma Allen’s untitled marble sculpture, 2013, for the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

“One of the interesting things about including an artist is that they really understand process from within, and I think that affects how Michelle approaches the works of art she selects and the exhibition itself,” says Donna De Salvo, chief curator at the Whitney. “She has been a curator at a pioneering gallery, but also she is incredibly well published and has engagement with artists across the country. A mix of all those aspects were needed for participation in the Biennial.”

Grabner likens her curatorial approach for the Biennial to developing a curriculum—not for her students but for a community of artists. “I would have to say I am

learning from all these artists, absolutely, and in curating, I wanted to make a curriculum that works for other artists,” she says. “I am really interested in helping other artists understand context and whom they can learn from while they are slogging it out in the studio.” Among the artists she has chosen to include in the Biennial are Los Angeles–based ceramist John Mason and fiber artist Sheila Hicks, two examples of art makers who have sustained careers while not becoming household names in the art world. Grabner’s floor at the Whitney—the fourth—will not feature performance art, and will have little video work, but it will concentrate on painting and sculpture. “I am dealing with things and objects, as opposed to bodies and space,” she says.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



The MOCA Cleveland show included a replica of *The Suburban*, a gallery Grabner runs in an 8-by-8-foot garden shed in her backyard.

HOWARD AGRIESTI

This curatorial undertaking would certainly have been enough for most people, even full-time curators trained in the art of assembling an exhibition. But Grabner made sure that the Biennial would not overshadow her artistic practice, which has only gained momentum in recent years. Last fall, the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland opened "[*I Work From Home*](#)," a survey covering 20 years of her work. The show included a replica of *The Suburban*, with four mini-installations by artists Karl Haendel, Michael Smith, Amanda Ross-Ho, and Jessica Jackson Hutchins.

Although Grabner is a Conceptual artist, the show offered a surprising amount of visual and esthetic interest. She has always thrown the domestic into the mix, beginning with early abstract paintings that emulated the look and texture of tablecloths and curtains, such as *Granny Square Afghan* from 1996. Later, she made weavings of colored paper, inspired by one of her son's kindergarten craft projects. Throughout her career, she has made a practice of incorporating her family into her artistic process. Between 1994 and 2002, for instance, she formed an art collaborative with her husband and their boys (now grown) called CAR (Conceptual Artists Research), which used everyday events as the subject of humorous and meditative videos.

"Michelle has allowed the activities around her studio practice to stretch her intellect and her reception of art," says MOCA Cleveland chief curator David Norr, who sees Grabner's role as a curator as inextricable from her art. "Her ability to continue to change and to let these outside forces press and push onto her practice is what keeps it fresh."

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Beginning in 2003, the artist began her most labor-intensive work: a series of abstract paintings covered in tiny dots, which she applies in concentric circles using the Archimedean spiral as a motif. Though they are as convulsive as Op art, these works take incredible concentration to complete, as Grabner daubs the canvas with a single repetitive gesture that is just the opposite of an expressive brushstroke. The resulting canvases can be fairly compared to more visionary artworks, such as spot paintings by Australian Aborigines or Buddhist mandalas. More recently, Grabner has returned to the idea of fabric, using silverpoint to create drawings that look like woven metal threads, or making gingham patterns with acrylic paint on panel. Merging the domestic with the public experience of picnicking, these illusory tablecloths turn the banal into a hypnotic and almost meditative application of paint.

Next fall, Grabner is slated for a solo show at [James Cohan Gallery](#) in New York, which started representing her in late 2013. “If I can’t balance all the administrative duties with the studio, I think I would be a very miserable person,” she says. “The scales are actually perfectly even, with the survey show perfectly balancing out the most in-depth and extensive curatorial task that I have ever taken on.” Reflecting on her past year, she says, “I have learned so much. I think the most difficult thing for an artist to know and understand is how one’s work fits within a bigger context. So it looks self-sacrificing, but in fact there’s a side of this that is so selfish—and I love it.”

Barbara Pollack is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

A version of this story originally appeared in the March 2014 issue of *ARTnews* on page 60 under the title “She Works from Home.”

Copyright 2014, ARTnews LLC, 48 West 38th Street, New York, N.Y. 10018. All rights reserved.