

THE SEEN CHICAGO'S INTERNATIONAL ONLINE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY & MODERN ART

ART SEEN: INTERNATIONAL

BNLMTL 2014 // ANDREA BOWERS

In Conversation with Tina Gelsomini

Montréal's biannual international contemporary art event, *La Biennale de Montréal*, has officially released the list of artists who will be represented in their latest edition, BNLMTL 2014, slated for the coming fall. Announced earlier this month, the line-up contains 50 artists and collectives from 22 countries around the globe. Hosted by the newly-independent nonprofit organization *La Biennale de Montréal*, the event is held in partnership with Montréal's prestigious *Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal*. The MACM will also serve as the nexus for the event, housing BNLMTL 2014's principle exhibition *L'avenir (Looking forward)*. From art and politics, to ethics and the economy, curated works will grapple with the ubiquitous question of "what is to come" and will engage with imagined futures from diverse perspectives and backgrounds.

LA-based artist Andrea Bowers is only one of the many artists whose work will be exhibited at BNLMTL 2014. Represented by Dusseldorf's *VAN HORN* and Susanne Vielmetter *Los Angeles Projects*, Bowers is internationally recognized for creating forceful works that challenge the status quo. As there is no better advocate of the future than today's artist-agitators, I took the opportunity to hold a brief yet compelling exchange with the artist. Below is our conversation, and a small window into what one can expect from the upcoming BNLMTL 2014.



Andrea Bowers. *Courtroom Drawings (Steubenville Rape Case, Text Messages Entered As Evidence, 2014 (detail); installation view, Andrea Bowers: #sweetjane, 2014. Pitzer College Art Galleries, Claremont, CA. Courtesy of the Artist, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects and Nichols Gallery, Pitzer College Art Galleries. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.*

TG: *How did you become involved in BNLMTL 2014?*

AB: Greg Burke, one of the curators, has been a supporter of my work for many years. We stay in communication and he follows the development of my practice and vice versa. I really appreciate our continued discourse about contemporary art practices.

TG: *In the press release for BNLMTL 2014's main exhibition, *L'avenir (Looking forward)*, they hint that your work will look at society's precarious relationship with technology. Can you tell us a bit more about what we can expect from your work in the exhibition, and how it relates to this larger theme of looking forward?*

AB: Included in the BNLMTL are works drawings from 2 different projects. The majority of the work comes from my most recent project *#sweetjane*. Personally, it is probably the most emotionally intense project I have ever made.

#sweetjane is a multi-media project that was exhibited at two different spaces fifteen minutes walking distance from each other at the Claremont Colleges, a consortium of five liberal arts colleges. The exhibition is about the actions of a group of teenagers who asked an audience of college students to consider critical questions about their generation. This project tells the story of the Steubenville rape case. *#sweetjane* serves as a counter-narrative to the romantic portrayal of the “all-American glory days” of high school. This project bears witness to a horrific instance of sexual violence as a reminder of the generations of rape culture the U.S.

TG: *Can you speak more about the narrative?*

AB: Steubenville is a small, close-knit town on the Ohio River bordering West Virginia. As part of the rustbelt, it reflects the last remnants of industrialization as the citizens of the town struggle for work. The air smells of refined oil and processed coal. Abuse of alcohol seems endemic as people just try to get by. The high school football stadium seats 11,000 people in a town whose population is 18,000. “Big Red” is one of the most famous high school football teams in a state obsessed with football. On the night of August 11, 2012, the star football players sealed their infamy when they raped a sixteen-year-old girl from the neighboring town of Weirton, West Virginia. The violent series of events took place at end-of-the-summer parties – as parents looked the other way – and came to national attention because the young men celebrated the rape by posting pictures and tweets on social media. The quarterback and wide receiver were splashed across Twitter dragging the unconscious girl, Jane Doe, from party to party. Journalist, Laurie Penny wrote,

“It lasted for hours. The pictures circulated online show the unconscious teenage girl hung like a shot steer between two laughing young men, Trent Mays and Ma’lik Richmond, who were convicted this week of driving her from party to party, raping her, assaulting her, and filming themselves doing so. Videos from the night include an extended tape of a friend of the attackers in drunken spasms of joy about just how “dead” the girl looked as she was handed around. “She’s deader than OJ’s wife!” he giggles to himself as his mates film him. It was sadistic young men like this with whom the mainstream media expressed immediate sympathy following the guilty verdict.”

Courtroom Drawings is a text-based drawing installation almost 70 feet in length comprising 56 sheets of paper. The subject of this drawing is a partial transcript of text messages retrieved from the phones of individuals involved in the Steubenville rape case. The texts were compiled from my own handwritten notes and those of two independent journalists, Don Carpenter and Amanda Blackburn (the official record of the trial cost six thousand dollars and wasn’t transcribed by early 2014). On March 14, 2013, we were all present in the courtroom and transcribing these texts while they were presented as evidence in the trial. The texts are very violent and difficult to read. The entire negative space is rendered in different shades of blue marker and looks very beautiful, but the text is shockingly intense. What the boys said and how they behaved can’t be buried, forgotten, or silenced.



The Pomona College Museum of Art and Pitzer College Art Galleries, “Andrea Bowers: *#sweetjane*” January 21–April 13, 2014.

TG: *Do you have a personal relationship to the case?*

I grew up in a small, football crazy town in Northern Ohio, not unlike Steubenville. My return to Ohio to document the Steubenville case is a form of personal mapping of thirty years of violence against women and, ultimately, survival. Although there are thousands of cases like this in the U.S., this case gained national attention because the cyber activists Anonymous and local bloggers publicized the details of the rape. The effects of social media upon the empathic nature of our culture are investigated in this project. While social media was the primary form of communication for both the activists and the perpetrators and the victim of the crime, the police chief couldn't tell the difference between a Tweet and a Facebook post. The Steubenville rape case revealed a new level of inhumanity—a new low reached in the lack of compassion that many blamed on a generation who communicate mainly through social media. On the other hand, this rape trail highlighted the powerful uses of social media as an activist tool. It is possible that this case was only prosecuted because of public demand for justice in response to the release of tweets and photos posted by the teenage perpetrators publicized by Anonymous actions and a local blogger, Alexandria Goddard.

TG: *Politically, socially, and culturally charged, your work consistently claims the difficult yet empowering space between art and activism. Can you speak more about your role as an artist-activist, and the challenges inherent in this role?*

AB: I see these two roles as interconnected and interdependent. I am an artist and I use my skills to support the issues that I am passionate about. Art and activism are collaborative methodologies for me. My art should be in service of social justice. I believe that certain systems of power must be changed and that ideas (theories) are only part of social life. It is our civic responsibility as members of the group to engage in political resistance that impels social change.