

As you read this sentence, shrieks of outrage are shattering the silence in studios and art galleries all over the city.

"Did you see this? How dare a critic degrade artists by shoving them into categories! Then, he ranks them. Ranks them! Art cannot be reduced to ranking and lists. Art is...art is..."

Yes? Tell us. We'd like to know, once and for all.

All we can write is what we know. Besides an artwork's exceptional vision, disciplined craft and clear execution, one elusive quality informs a critic's judgment about art: Some artists are more gifted than others.

It may offend the purist or the egalitarian, but Michelangelo is better than Michelino de Besozzo; Picasso will be remembered long after conceptualist Claudio Parmiggiani is forgotten, or mistaken for a cheese topping.

And whether they confess it or not, the average Austin artist, collector, dealer, curator and critic maintains a mental hierarchy for local talent. You hear the comments whispered over opening-night wine, or wherever art lovers discuss the latest shows.

"She's so 30 years ago."

"He's not in her class, not even close."

"Can you believe how utterly lame they've all become?"

So much for the collegial community of Austin artists we sometimes hear about. And while they stage no noisy Academy Awards, you should hear how visual artists chatter about the bellwether Whitney and Venice biennial exhibits.

"Who was inducted this time?"

"Forget that, who was slammed?"

"If they only listened to me, I could fix the art world in a New York minute."

It must please some deep-brain impulse to list and rank. A list

ends, thereby establishing boundaries, a field of study. Division by categories often improves analysis. (See: Aristotle.) Ranking allows us to consider which work merits an investment of time or money, and, in the long run, what will last.

With all this in mind, we decided to rate at least 100 Austin visual artists. Consulting critics, curators and artists, our intention was to graph a field of Austinites whose work is accessible through regular local exhibitions (hermits apply elsewhere).

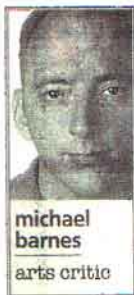
Just making preliminary selections proved instructive. After some consideration, we nixed film, video and performance artists, since these specialized pods deserve stories of their own. We also cold-shouldered Austin's cherished craft-makers, designers and architects, since their names would balloon this list beyond manageable proportions. (Later, later.) And, despite a fondness for illustrators and cartoonists, we felt most of them belonged in another XL story as well.

The lists published on the following pages are meant to start conversation, not end it. The rating of Austin artists should fire well-reasoned debate. We invite that.

Any list, too, can be changed, amended in time. Perhaps XL can publish an updated rating of artists two years from now, creating our own little biennial.

Whatever you do, ignore the prissy attitude of standard cultural guardians who prefer to keep discussion and judgment of art within self-selected circles.

Rating comes naturally. Express your opinion. Consider our list a springboard for further, more thoughtful evaluation of Austin's bountiful visual arts scene.



**michael
barnes**
arts critic

NEW ON VIEW

Nobody is placing bets, but these artists seem on the way up.

1. Naomi Schlinke — Abstract painter with a hint of reality.
2. Marc Silva — Crafts minutiae.
3. Regina Thomas — Glass artist with a future.
4. Laura Pickett Calfee — Up and coming photographer.
5. Anna Marie Pavlik — Pleasing work under construction.
6. Brian Blount — Small-scale glass.
7. Nine Francois — experimental photographer.
8. Lori Lejeune — Painter with a touch of the surreal.
9. Nathan Jensen — Not just murals.
10. Sam Chavez — Zealous painter in various formats.



Anna Marie Pavlik,
'Global Consumption'

Lori Lejeune,
'The Watcher,' 1995