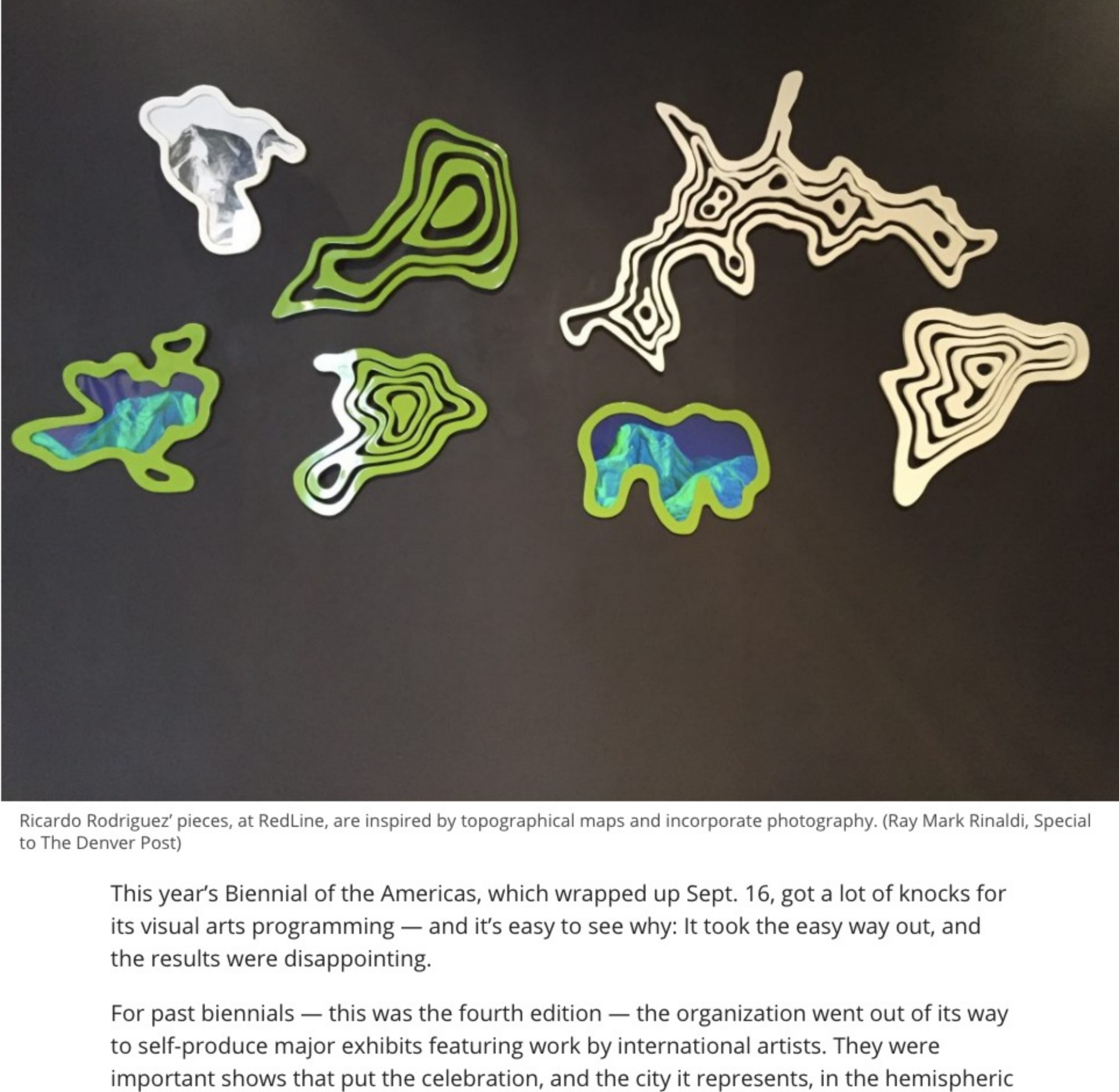


Hemispheric views on display in Denver galleries thanks to Biennial

Denver is rich in ambitious — and entertaining — art exhibits right now that connect it to the social and geographic issues of the world around it.

By Ray Mark Rinaldi, *Special to The Denver Post* · Sep 29, 2017, 12:01 am

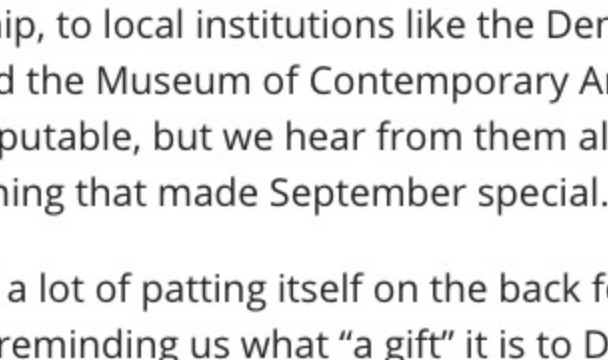
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Ricardo Rodriguez' pieces, at RedLine, are inspired by topographical maps and incorporate photography. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)

This year's Biennial of the Americas, which wrapped up Sept. 16, got a lot of knocks for its visual arts programming — and it's easy to see why: It took the easy way out, and the results were disappointing.

For past biennials — this was the fourth edition — the organization went out of its way to self-produce major exhibits featuring work by international artists. They were important shows that put the celebration, and the city it represents, in the hemispheric spotlight. Denver's biennial simultaneously features a lot of government officials and social entrepreneurs chatting among themselves, but the art exhibits gave the event a soul. They got beneath the politics and self-promotion of all the talking heads involved.

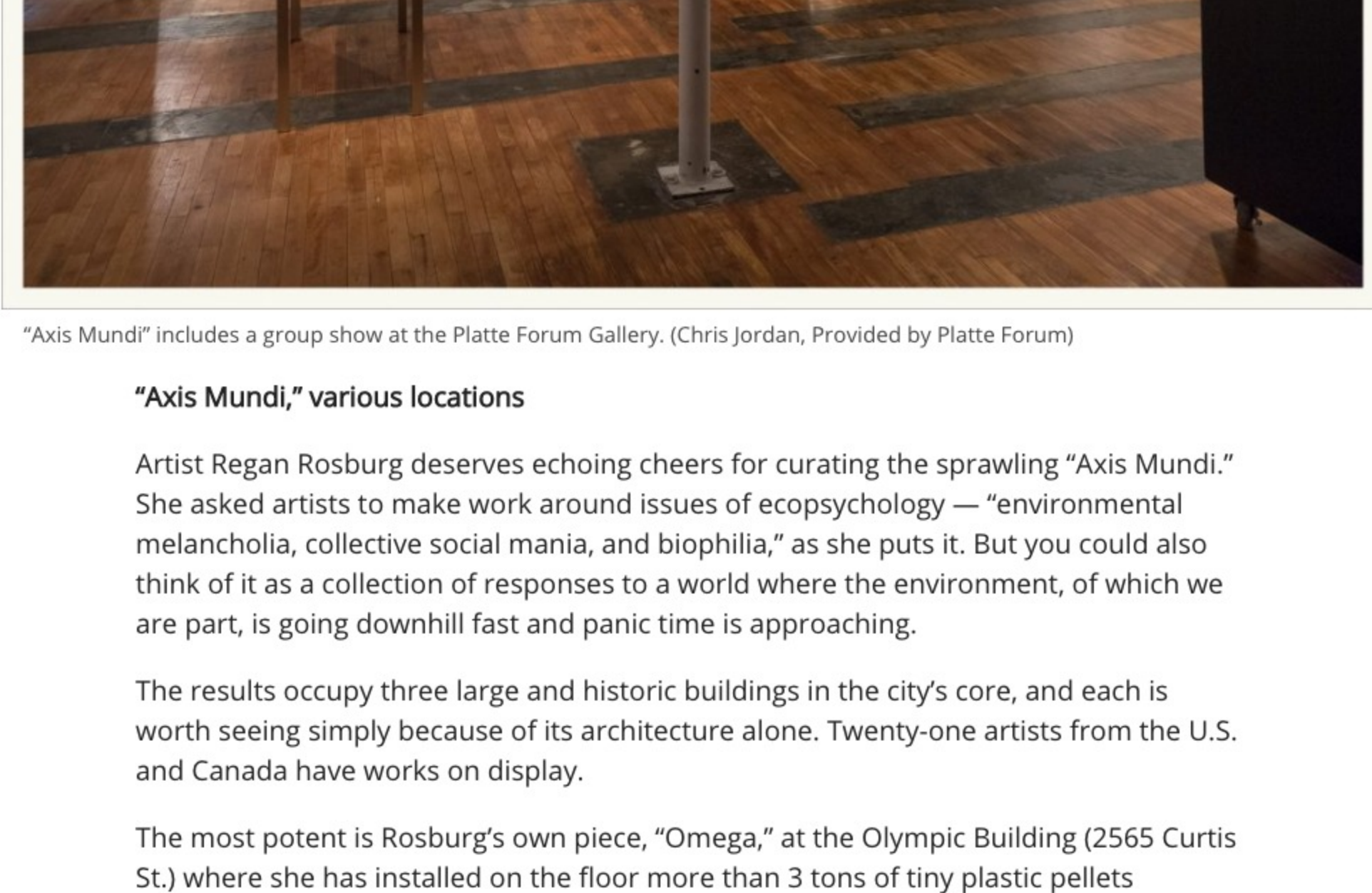


In 2017, the biennial downgraded the priority of art and simply handed over the reigns, through a bit of sponsorship, to local institutions like the Denver Art Museum, the Museo de las Americas and the Museum of Contemporary Art. These are bedrock art purveyors and certainly reputable, but we hear from them all the time. Their shows were high-quality, but nothing that made September special.

While the organization did a lot of patting itself on the back for its accomplishments — with one sponsor actually reminding us what “a gift” it is to Denver — there's good reason to believe these art shows, long in the works, would have happened anyway, even if the biennial never attached itself. DAM's exceptional “Mi Tierra,” for example, was in planning for four years and it opened in February; it's an incredulous stretch to connect it to an event seven months later.

But I do have to give the biennial some credit, reluctantly, if only for simply existing. Several local artists and galleries put together terrific shows to coincide with it. They did it without ample resources from the big biennial and received a neglectful lack of promotional help, but they made the effort because they want any biennial held here to be special for the city and its artists.

The good news is that these shows remain open for a few weeks, and they are, indeed, as massive and celebratory as the word “biennial” promises art will be. They are serious examinations of international issues — borders, ecology, immigration — but they are also hugely entertaining. I consumed the three that follow here in one day, and it was a perfect outing. But note: There are also exhibits at places such as the Art Students League and the Center for Visual Arts that are worth checking out.



“Axis Mundi” includes a group show at the Platte Forum Gallery. (Chris Jordan, Provided by Platte Forum)

“Axis Mundi,” various locations

Artist Regan Rosburg deserves echoing cheers for curating the sprawling “Axis Mundi.” She asked artists to make work around issues of ecopsychology — “environmental melancholia, collective social mania, and biophilia,” as she puts it. But you could also think of it as a collection of responses to a world where the environment, of which we are part, is going downhill fast and panic time is approaching.

The results occupy three large and historic buildings in the city's core, and each is worth seeing simply because of its architecture alone. Twenty-one artists from the U.S. and Canada have works on display.

The most potent is Rosburg's own piece, “Omega,” at the Olympic Building (2565 Curtis St.) where she has installed on the floor more than 3 tons of tiny plastic pellets representing the massive amount of waste created by the discard of “disposable” water bottles.

Visitors are required to take off their shoes to enter the circular-ish field, about 30 feet in diameter, to witness their bad habits and also to feel them, as tiny plastic bits peep between the toes and make walking a challenge. The assemblage is mysterious, pitch-black and visceral, and drives the point home in an artful way. We rarely see over-the-top works like this in Denver; “Omega” is a thoughtful work and also a moment for the city.

A short walk away, in the yard of the Land Library (2612 Champa St.) are two installations. For “Dirt Soup,” artist Viviane Le Courtois collected thousands of plastic shopping bags, fashioned them into strips and crocheted them into a canopy (under which she served vegetable soup in her own hand-made ceramic bowls on the exhibit's opening night). The canopy is a shelter for conversation and the topics are waste, recycling and the role each of us might play in the world's ruin and redemption. This mega-effort took months to construct and involved the community, which collected bags and donated vegetables for the soup.

In the same field is a living installation by Eileen Roscina Richardson, another long-viewed, labor-intensive piece that comes together as a spiraling, walk-through labyrinth of sunflowers. The land work offers a meditative experience around the energy and fragility of nature. She planted the flowers four months ago and most of them are actually dead now, making the piece a little eerie and, in a way, more beautiful.

The third part of the exhibit is a group show at Platte Forum Gallery (2400 Curtis St.). It's an anxious affair that talks about the interweaving of politics, science, art and anxiety. There's too many interesting pieces to list here, but do pay attention to Ron Pollard's “Extruded Monsters,” a series of manipulated photo portraits of political figures, like Kellyanne Conway and Vladimir Putin; Tarah Rhoda's dripping flask connecting chlorophyll to hemoglobin; and Darya Warner's glowing orbs of living, bioluminescent algae.

Axis Mundi continues through Oct. 7. Info at axismundiartistsrespond.wordpress.com.

Eduardo Portillo, “Frontera,” Rule Gallery

Eduardo Portillo is a Houston-based artist whose work addresses natural terrain and the borders that define and disrupt it. His solo show at intimate Rule Gallery evokes both modern art history and current events.

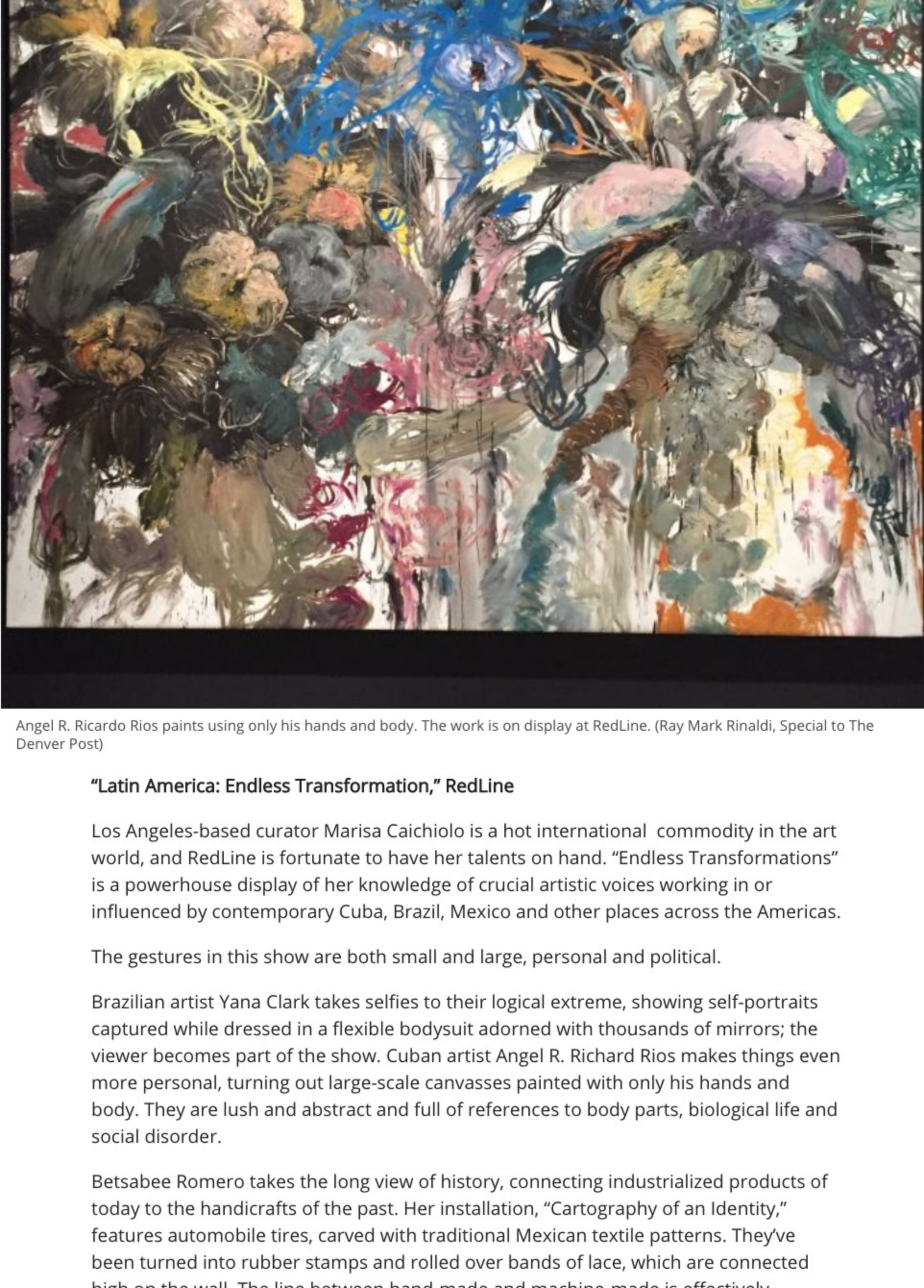
The objects on display fall between genres. They appear as paintings, and also reliefs that hang on the walls while concurrently pressing away from them, due to the fact that he stretches his canvas on hand-made wood frames that vary in thickness. The practice leaves the surfaces looking irregular and uneven; with the same varying of high and low depths captured by topographical maps.

In a way they are simple, solitary objects that evoke the stripped-down sensibilities of minimalists like Ellsworth Kelly without the pure geometry. But they also reflect the complicated politics and the politics of the day. Portillo's more colorful pieces are named after far-off stars, like the brilliant orange-y “Aldebaran.” Others are muted into shades of white and named for deserts, like “Kalahari.”

Portillo, who was born in 1986, is an immigrant to this country from El Salvador and it's possible to see his experience captured in the works. They are masses of land and sky without clear edges and sometimes with deep and violent divisions. They seem to float in the universe around them without obvious connections to anything.

Still, there is a confidence to them, due in equal parts to their craftsmanship and invention. They may be lost, but they're graceful and determined.

“Frontera” runs until Oct. 28 at Rule, 530 Santa Fe Drive, 303-800-6776 or rulegallery.com.



Angel R. Ricardo Rios paints using only his hands and body. The work is on display at RedLine. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)

“Latin America: Endless Transformation,” RedLine

Los Angeles-based curator Marisa Caichiole is a hot international commodity in the art world, and RedLine is fortunate to have her talents on hand. “Endless Transformations” is a powerful display of her knowledge of crucial artistic voices working in or influenced by contemporary Cuba, Brazil, Mexico and other places across the Americas.

The gestures in this show are both small and large, personal and political.

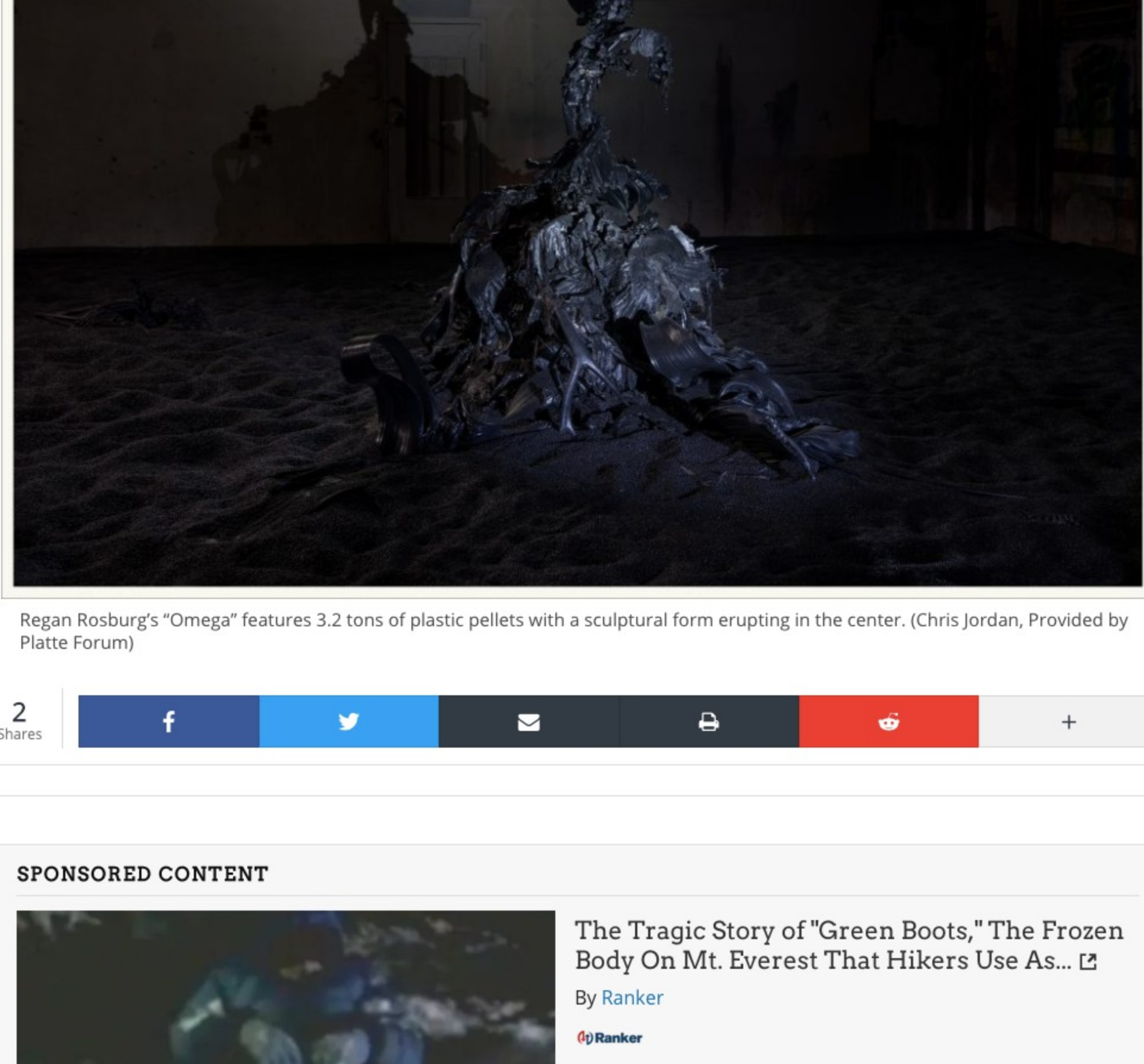
Brazilian artist Yana Clark takes selfies to their logical extreme, showing self-portraits captured while dressed in a flexible bodysuit adorned with thousands of mirrors; the viewer becomes part of the show. Cuban artist Angel R. Ricardo Rios makes things even more personal, turning out large-scale canvases painted with only his hands and body. They are lush and abstract and full of references to body parts, biological life and social disorder.

Betsabee Romero takes the long view of history, connecting industrialized products of today to the handicrafts of the past. Her installation, “Cartography of an Identity,” features automobile tires, carved with traditional Mexican textile patterns. They've been turned into rubber stamps and rolled over bands of lace, which are connected high on the wall. The line between hand-made and machine-made is effectively blurred.

Ricardo Rodriguez, who was born in Puerto Rico, takes an even wider scan of the universe as it relates to Latin America. His “Topographical Studies” are wall-mounted installations that turn hand-cut wood forms, coated in automobile paint, into abstract, topographical maps that hang at various depths. The objects are arranged in groups, but they are unconnected — islands like Puerto Rico itself — and they question our need to organize the world both geographically and politically.

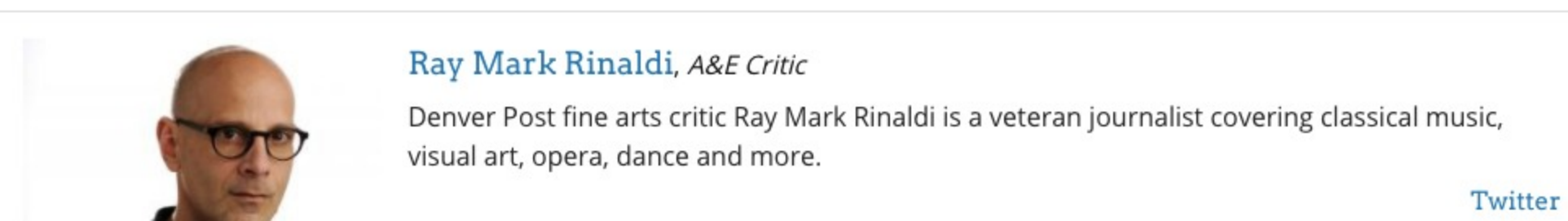
“Endless Transformation” is a solid group show but also part of a group of shows that connect Denver to the continents on this side of the globe. Considered as a set — along with “Axis Mundi” and “Frontera,” and the exhibits at DAM, MCA and the Museo, the city does indeed deserve its place in the hemispheric spotlight.

“Endless Transformation” continues through Oct. 29 at RedLine, 2350 Arapahoe St., 303-296-4448 or redlineart.org.



Regan Rosburg's “Omega” features 3.2 tons of plastic pellets with a sculptural form erupting in the center. (Chris Jordan, Provided by Platte Forum)

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