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At ArtPrize, ask the right questions and you'll grow

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By Joseph Becherer | The Grand Rapids Press

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The third annual ArtPrize is on the horizon. Can you feel the excitement? The energy? This is a promising and momentous opportunity for the community. Are you taking full advantage?

Over and again during the first two incarnations of ArtPrize, we heard this event was about "starting a conversation." But what were we talking about? I heard a lot of number-speak. The number of artists. The scale of the works. The size of the lines. The rise in bar and hotel business. The prize money.



Grand Rapids Press File Photo

Josh Kempker, 10, of Holland, gazes at the 2010 ArtPrize entry "Look Around You" by Austin Blough, of Lowell, at The B.O.B. Blough's entry was made entirely of mirror glass.

But that's the easy stuff, too easy to measure. It is like party chatter about the weather – not really a conversation. The arts and humanities, however, are deep and abiding forces that simultaneously reflect and nurture a culture. They are not about quantity but about quality. Whether it's Calder or Koons, Mozart or Marley, Ortner or LaPorte, it's about the dimensions of content and experience.

Before we go forward, let's look back. Last year's ArtPrize winner, the outsize pencil drawing "Cavalry, American Officers, 1921," was extraordinary and deserving. What were your thoughts standing before it? Like many, you may have marveled at its scale and the artist's technical virtuosity.

But where else did your thoughts take you? Was it comforting or challenging to face the men who are depicted? Did you think of them as of their time or timeless? What was the relationship of the individual to the group?

Did the piece cause you to think about the military? About war? Did you consider the technologies and timeliness of art (drawing) and warfare (cavalry)? Or simply, did it stir something inside you? Were you open to its power? Did you try to imagine yourself as the artist? Did you think about the power of line?

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And – just curious — did you go to see the piece again?

If your experience centered on the scale of the work or the skill of the artist, that's a fine beginning. But that's really a weather conversation: the terms "large," "realistic," "gifted" and "expensive" are equal to hot, cold, rainy and sunny.

But if your mind was turning and something inside you was touched, you were having a conversation. You were growing, even if you didn't know it.

Growth is a wonderful, complex thing, especially for humans. And just as you need good nourishment to grow physically, you need good role models to expand your spiritual and psychological horizons. Since I haven't yet heard of any edible entries for ArtPrize, let's take nourishment to mean good work in form (the shape) and content (the meaning). Similarly, let's take as our role models a few sage questions of art appreciation.

For all the right reasons, make the exhibition centers the foundation for your ArtPrize experience. These venues have been professionally organized and thoughtfully presented. The Achilles heel of ArtPrize may be a resistance to trust art-world experts, but how is that different from trusting a teacher, doctor or counselor when you need to learn, to heal, to be consoled? You probably will not embrace all the work at any one of these venues, but they offer the means to have that true conversation about objects, issues and ideas.

Now what about the art appreciation advice? Ask yourself three simple questions about what you are viewing: what, how, and why. Sound familiar? It should, in that they drive every field of discovery. Give yourself some time, survey a number of works in a given space or gallery, and at least initially pick something you find compelling. Then ask away

The What. What am I looking at? Start with the genre: painting, sculpture, video, installation, and so on. But move on, too. What made the work worth putting on display? What need might creating it fulfill for the artist? For you, in being drawn to it? What comforts you? What challenges you? What about it might attract or deter others? What value does it hold for you?

What thoughts and feelings are you encountering specifically because of your interaction with this work?

The How. How was this object made? How does it hold together visually? How do the physical and visual elements come together? (In other words, how do shape, color, pattern, texture and all work in concert?) How does the object work intellectually? Emotionally? How does it compare with other art in your memory bank? If you were the artist, how would you approach the subject? The form?

How does your experience with this work make a difference to you?

The Why. This is the tough one. Ask yourself why this work was made from the perspective of the creator, the audience – and you. Why were you drawn to it? Why did it provoke your curiosity? Why is it of a certain time and place? Why is it timeless? Why does it matter to you? To others?

And most telling, why would you revisit this work, or why not?

By now, you probably are understanding the method to my madness. Start with something of

IF YOU GO

ArtPrize 2011

When: Wednesday-Oct. 9

Where: 163 places within a 3-square-mile district downtown between Leonard Street and Wealthy Street, north to south; and between Straight/Alpine Avenue and College Avenue, west to east; and at Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, 1000 East Beltline Ave. NE.

Venue hours: Minimum hours for all venues are 6-10 p.m. opening day Wednesday. Afterward, 5-8 p.m. Monday-Thursday, noon-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and noon-6 p.m. Sunday, through Oct. 9. Venues may be open additional hours.
Exhibition Centers hours: 6-10 p.m. Opening day Wednesday. Afterward, noon-8 p.m. Monday-Thursday, noon-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and noon-6 p.m. Sunday, through Oct. 6.

Admission: Free admission to all ArtPrize venues during ArtPrize hours.

More info: artprize.org

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quality and substance. Ask yourself and your colleagues, family and friends questions of quality and substance. Now you are having a conversation with meaning, and maybe even message. In the end, you will likely find that you have grown.

All that is for each individual, to be sure. But when many of us experience it together, it becomes a community conversation. As the collective grows and develops, so does the culture and the society. This conversation, this growth, is the ultimate gift from ArtPrize. It has nothing to do with statistics, tables and charts, because the true impact is immeasurable.

Editor's Note: Joseph Becherer is chief curator and vice president for collections and exhibitions at Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park and a professor of art history at Aquinas College. He also was on the curatorial team for the ArtPrize exhibition center at Meijer Gardens as well as Calder Plaza and the Gillette Bridge. This is the first in series of columns on various art topics throughout ArtPrize 2011.

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