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ArtPrize in Grand Rapids

Michigan's second largest city turns into an art gallery — and you decide what's good and what goes

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. — It's a provocative, ambitious event: More than 1,700 painters, sculptors and other artists put their work on public display for 19 days, vying for \$449,000 in prize money — the world's largest purse for an art competition. And regular Joes like you and me get to decide the winners.

It's called ArtPrize, and you won't find it in New York, London or Paris. Through Oct. 10, you'll find it right here in the Midwest, about 180 miles northeast of Chicago in Grand Rapids, Mich.

"I'd never been to Grand Rapids in my life until now," said Thomas Roeser, 50, a Lake View resident and Illinois state government employee whose "passion is painting." His canvas of an outdoor market scene is hanging on a wall at Grand Rapids' Cathedral Square, one of 192 venues showcasing ArtPrize entries.

Just about everywhere you turn within a three-square-mile section of Grand Rapids, there's ArtPrize art. It's painted on the bricks of old buildings. It's mounted in churches. It's hanging in shoes stores, museums, bars — even the windows of the police station.

"I'm just so proud to be a part of this," Roeser said last Wednesday at an opening-night reception for the event, now in its sophomore year.

The idea for ArtPrize sprang from entrepreneur Rick DeVos, 28, who wanted to do something to jump start his hometown's creative culture.

His first thought: a film festival.

Nah, everyone does that.

What about extending an open invitation to artists to transform part of the city into one giant gallery for a couple of weeks? Any artists — professional or amateur — could enter, as long as they found a willing exhibitor within a designated part of downtown. The public would not only get to see a lot of art for free, they'd be empowered to voice their opinion by voting for what they like or don't like.

So last year, DeVos decided he would dangle a big incentive, keep the rules to a minimum and see if his grass-roots artistic experiment could grow.

Did it ever.

Restaurants ran out of food. Hotel rooms filled up. Some 334,219 votes were logged via text message or the Web. On Twitter, on Facebook, on the streets of Michigan's second-largest city, people were talking ... about art.

"Pretty much everything we could count was exceeded by three to five times what we expected, from the number of artists who entered to the number of people who voted," said DeVos, who dabbles in photography. "I never thought this would be of much interest to people other than 20 or 30 somethings, but we had children, families, seniors — it was across the spectrum."

As for DeVos' family, well, they're kind of like the Rockefellers of Grand Rapids. His grandfather co-founded the extremely profitable direct-sales giant Amway Corp. His dad ran (and lost) as the Republican nominee in the last gubernatorial election. The deep-pocketed DeVoses have a long history of supporting the town's cultural institutions, and the purse for ArtPrize comes from Rick's parents' foundation.

The top vote-getter in last year's ArtPrize was a New York artist who barely scraped together enough money to get to Grand Rapids. He crashed on the couch of a local family — one of many who volunteered to host cash-strapped artists during the competition.

He took home the \$250,000 grand prize and sold his winning oil painting of ocean waves to DeVos' parents. The 19-foot-long piece, which looks more like a photograph than a painting, hangs in their new wine bar, Reserve, in downtown Grand Rapids.

Second place's \$100,000 check went to Chicagoan Tracy Van Duinen, whose eye-catching mural can still be found on the wall of the Grand Rapids Children's Museum.

Van Duinen, 44, teaches art at Social Justice High School in Little Village and lives in Portage Park. But he grew up in Grand Rapids, a town that he said "has always been very art-centered, but [ArtPrize] has really put it on the map."

"People have called it the 'American Idol' of art, but that doesn't do it justice," he said. "It makes art accessible to the masses. When art is accessible, people from all classes, all stations of life will look at it, interact with it, make judgments on it. A really good dialogue has resulted from it, and I don't know where else that's happened."

Roughly 500 more artists than last year are competing in ArtPrize. They come from 15 countries and 44 states, including more than 100 Chicago area entrants. One of them is John E. Bannon, a teacher at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Bannon's life-size sculpture of a human covered with little mirrors is mounted on top of a tall radio tower, where it slowly rotates and reflects tiny images of floating people on the ground below.

"It's basically taking the disco ball effect and pushing it further," said Bannon, 43, of Logan Square. "I picked it because I thought it might do well with the general public."

The public can weigh in on what they see by giving an entry a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" on the website artprize.org after they register to vote — in person — in Grand Rapids. Once registered, they also can vote by sending a text message over their mobile phones or downloading the ArtPrize iPhone app from the iTunes store.

At 11:59 tonight, the pool of 1,713 artists will get narrowed down to the 10 with the most votes. Those 10 will divvy up the \$449,000 in prize money based on how well they fare during the final week of voting, which ends at 11:59 p.m. Oct. 6. Winners will be announced the next day.

An army of 1,000-plus volunteers in "Ask Me" T-shirts are stationed around the event to help people register, vote, find art or get to the nearest shuttle stop. That's where you can hop on an ArtBus and take free rides between various venues if you're wearing an ArtPrize wristband, which can be bought with a map for \$5.

Seeing art isn't the only thing to do at ArtPrize. People can sit in on a speaker series that tackles topics such as the role of contemporary art in today's society or attend an expert panel discussion about the top 10 finalists. Free concerts are being held, including Natasha Bedingfield and David Archuleta on Saturday. And various neighborhoods within the ArtPrize district are putting on block parties.

"It's a real opportunity to show off our city," DeVos said. "But the real goal is building a broader creative culture in western Michigan. We need more people engaged. ArtPrize is about trying to be the spark that ignites the conversation."

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