



Art world's eyes on Grand Rapids

By Kath Usitalo • Enquirer contributor •
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University of Cincinnati Professor of Architecture and Interior Design Henry "Hank" Hildebrandt is familiar with the furniture companies of West Michigan; he's taking a group of students to visit Steelcase and Herman Miller in late September. But he hadn't heard of ArtPrize until a UC graduate student told him about the second annual event in her hometown of Grand Rapids.

Now his sculpture "Red Desert, Steel Soul" is entered to win the "world's largest art prize" in an unusual competition that runs Sept. 22-Oct. 10 in Michigan's second largest city. ArtPrize is billed as a "radically open" contest in which the public, not a panel of art experts, votes on entries to share a pot of \$449,000, with a top award of \$250,000.

The public's job of jurying is no easy task, with 192 indoor and outdoor sites hosting 1,713 entries by artists from 44 states and 21 nations. Beginning Sept. 22 registered ArtPrize voters may decide "Thumbs Up" or "Thumbs Down" on each entry via text message, mobile browser, iPhone app, or online. Of the top 10 finalists announced on Sept. 30, the public may vote once for one entry. Prizes will be awarded on Oct. 7, and the art will be on view through Oct. 10.

Last year's premiere ArtPrize attracted more than 200,000 visitors to Grand Rapids, 37,264 of whom voted. Voters register at seven Exhibition Centers throughout the area, including the Grand Valley State University Art & Sculpture Exhibition Center where Hildebrandt's work will be displayed.

He describes his assemblage of a rusted steel plate, a broken piece of Portofino granite and oxidized copper as "a personal piece about the

conflict we have with our environment and the conflict we have with other people. As materials age and we age in our lives, we become more beautiful."

Hildebrandt, one of nearly 30 ArtPrize artists from Ohio, predicts the competition will be "monumental. It's going to develop into a fantastic (event) for the region, not just the city. (Grand Rapids) is lucky to have a patron for the arts."

ArtPrize support comes from the DeVos family, whose patriarch Rich DeVos co-founded Amway Corporation in Grand Rapids in 1959. Grandson Rick DeVos conceived ArtPrize as an experiment to involve individuals with, and create a dialog about, art.

Part art exhibit, part art happening, the 19-day event is sprinkled with free concerts, art walks, parties in ArtPrize neighborhoods, and a speaker series that includes Raphaela Platow, director and chief curator of Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center. She'll talk at 11:30 a.m. on Oct. 8 at the Hub, which is a good place to get oriented for an ArtPrize expedition.

Centrally located downtown in the Old Federal Building, the Hub is the place to find information on venues, shop for ArtPrize merchandise, and

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minge with other ArtPrize-goers. It's also a stop on the shuttle bus route that circles the main ArtPrize neighborhoods and Exhibition Centers. A shuttle bracelet is \$1; with a venue map it's \$5; spring for a special visitor's guide and the trio costs \$15.

Most of the 192 ArtPrize venues are located within a three square-mile area of the city, with the exception of Frederick Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park. Named one of the world's "30 must-see museums," Meijer Gardens is host to 26 ArtPrize entries, and is operating its own shuttle from downtown.

Viewing the ArtPrize entries at Meijer Gardens is free, but sculpture and landscape lovers will want to pop for the admission fee to see the indoor/outdoor botanic and art displays including A New Eden, 15 temporary glass installations by Dale Chihuly. His colorful pieces complement the permanent works by Moore, Rodin and other noted artists across more than 30 sculpture-filled acres.

Meijer Gardens is a must-see attraction in Grand Rapids, but there are other surprises in this walkable and bicycle-friendly city dotted with independent coffee shops, nightspots and restaurants. It's the home of Michigan's only U.S. President, and the Gerald R. Ford Museum on the banks of the Grand River is worthy of a visit for its look-back at the 1970s and the 20 ArtPrize entries on display.

Founder's Brewing Company pours beers made on site and crafts two-handed sandwiches; it's also host to eight ArtPrize pieces. The B.O.B. (Big Old Building) is 70,000 square feet of food, beverages and entertainment smack in the middle of downtown, and it's showcasing a whopping 92 ArtPrize entries.

HopCat, rated third best beer bar in the world by the Beer Advocate, has 16 ArtPrize pieces on tap. Off the ArtPrize path but worth the detour to the East Hills neighborhood, Marie Catrib's is part restaurant, part deli carryout, and a favorite

for meals and pastries including vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free options.

"What an unbelievable event for a city," says Russ Schnurr, an artist from Cincinnati whose day job is with Fifth Third Bank. Friends and business associates in the Grand Rapids area were "totally blown away" by ArtPrize 2009 and encouraged the painter to enter this year's event. His abstract in acrylic, "Sun, Stand thou Still," is one of two dozen works exhibited at the Plaza Towers -Eenhorn, downtown

Schnurr, who shows his work at Cincinnati's Brazee Street Studios, admits that the \$250,000 prize is attractive but not the only reason he entered ArtPrize.

"It'll be a riot. One way or the other, it'll be a blast," he says.

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A giant table and chairs were among the entries displayed on the Blue Bridge across the Grand River.



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Kath Usitalo for The Enquirer

This spider by Louise Bourgeois is in Frederick Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park, an ArtPrize venue in Grand Rapids.

If you go

What: ArtPrize, a free event showcasing the work of more than 1,700 artists vying for \$449,000 in prizes; the winners will be decided by public vote.

Where: Grand Rapids, Mich.

Information: info@artprize.org; artprize.org

Lodging: ArtPrize Package: amwaygrand.com; one of 23 properties are offering ArtPrize lodging deals at

visitgrandrapids.org

Dining: Founders Brewing, foundersbrewing.com; The B.O.B., thebob.com; HopCat, hopcatgr.com; Marie Catrib's, mariecatrib.com

Other sights: Frederick Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park, meijergardens.com; Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, ford.utexas.edu

Getting there: Grand Rapids is less than a six-hour drive from Cincinnati.

Grand Rapids Information: 800-678-9859; visitgrandrapids.org

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