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Discovering the sublime, avoiding the ridiculous at ArtPrize

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GRAND RAPIDS — "Nature does not proceed in a straight line, it is a rather sprawling development."

Those words from Robert Smithson (1938-73), the pioneering earthworks artist and trenchant critic, appear on the wall in the small, thoughtful exhibition "(Re)compose" in an empty downtown storefront here as part of [ArtPrize](#), the world's most lucrative and democratic contemporary art competition. The six emerging artists in "(Re)compose" all meditate on the links between material, memory, perception and time. Their materials range from diaphanous cheesecloth to dirt, found objects, pastel and borax crystals. The show was organized by Brianna Baurichter, one of ArtPrize's four young curatorial fellows for 2016.

Smithson surely would have enjoyed his oracular presence, but Lord knows what he would have made of ArtPrize. Still, he might appreciate that in its eighth year, the competition also hasn't always proceeded in a straight line, and "sprawling development" is a pretty fair two-word distillation for an event that has never been easy to get your arms around.

Founded in 2009 by a 27-year-old Rick DeVos, ArtPrize is a 19-day orgy of art. The 2016 edition includes more than 1,400 works by more than 1,500 artists from all over the world. The art is packed into 170 venues, most concentrated in three square miles of Grand Rapids' core. Art is everywhere: museums, restaurants, businesses, banks, bars, hotel lobbies, street corners, parks, plazas, bridges, the river. More than \$500,000 in prize money is at stake, half decided by public vote, half by a jury of experts, with the grand prize winners in each division pocketing (gulp) \$200,000.

But it's not the money that best defines ArtPrize, which opened Wednesday and continues through Oct. 9. It's the experience: The street-fair vibe and infectious energy. The way tens of thousands of people pack the streets and venues at peak viewing times and annual attendance hovers around 440,000. The way you have to bushwhack through dense forests of kitsch to get to the good stuff, and the way the good stuff always redeems the journey. The sublime and the ridiculous are indivisible at ArtPrize. Sure, it's maddening, but it's a byproduct of the populist engine that drives the event. And it's easy to overlook that this is also a key part of the magic.

The egalitarian soul of ArtPrize, expressed through public voting and an open admissions process in which anyone can enter via an online dating process that matches artists and venues, slyly subverts traditional art world hierarchies. It empowers a broad general audience that rarely, if ever, engages with contemporary art. At Artprize, those people look, feel, think, learn and talk about the art. Yes, there are long lines to see saccharine dross like Robin Protz' group of winged horses (sculptures of lightweight silver) at the Amway Grand Plaza. And ArtPrize showcases goofy spectacles like artist [Andrew Rockwood](#) pedaling a bicycle while wearing a 16-foot long fish costume. Hey, it's a trout-mobile!

But viewers are also exposed to the sublime: One example is veteran art world star [Kiki Smith's](#) sumptuously made large-scale tapestries, rich with poetic, symbolic imagery, at the Grand Rapids Art Museum. Another is Amber Bledsoe's delicate cast-paper vessels filled with salt-like crystals in "(Re)compose." Yet another is the challenging site-specific installations and architectural interventions that unfold at Site:Lab's Rumsey Street Project, a suite of 10 abandoned structures in a low-income neighborhood south of downtown.

The trick for ArtPrize leaders has always been finding ways to get higher quality art on view — to attract better artists and raise the level of curation without mortgaging the democratic ethos of the event. It has not been easy given the art world's reflexive (and not always unjustified) suspicion of splashy populism. But in addition to choosing artists from those angling for a spot through the online system, venues and curators have always been able to proactively invite specific artists to participate. The more ways ArtPrize leaders can encourage this to happen, the better.

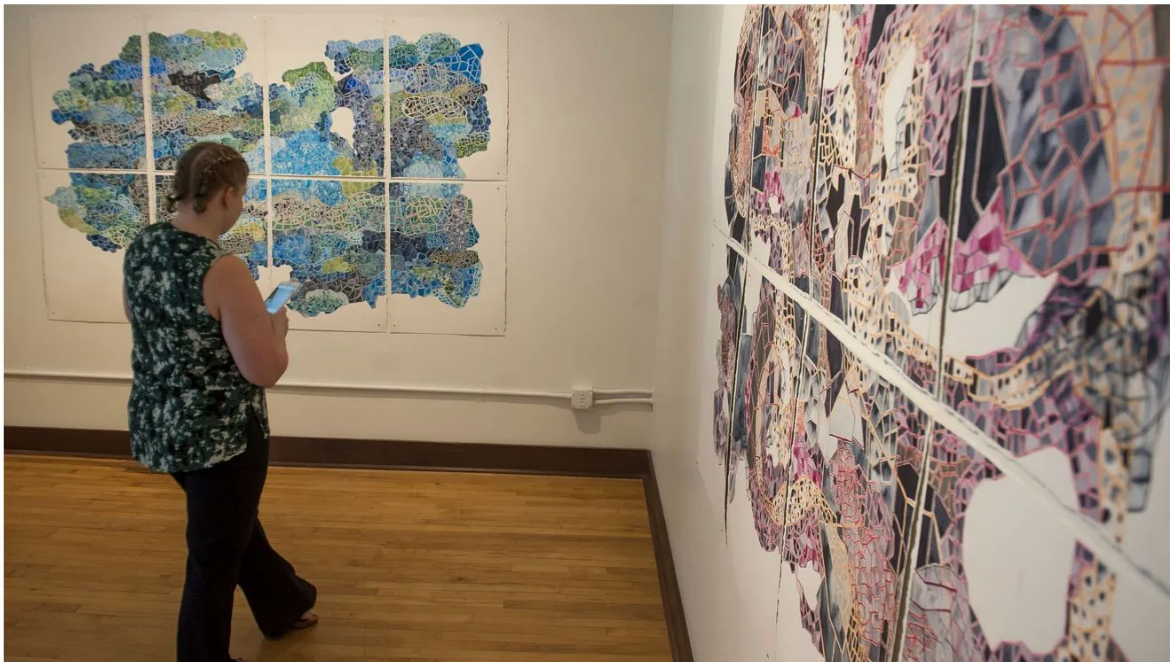
Last year's ArtPrize turned a positive corner as the dividends began to flow from initiatives like giving equal weight to public and jury awards, artist stipends, curatorial fellowships and the growth of self-contained, thematic shows within the competition's infrastructure. The 2016 event has a similar feel based on the two days I spent in Grand Rapids. I don't think quality is better than last year, but the trend lines are still pointing in the right direction.

"Nature is never finished," Smithson once said. Neither, apparently, is ArtPrize.

Highlights, disappointments and observations

Best traditional venue (large division): The Grand Rapids Art Museum, whose chief curator Ron Platt has organized "Past/Present/Future." It's a strong grouping of 15 entries (three are collaborative efforts), each riffing on a simple but rewarding theme. Among the strongest works are Smith's aforementioned tapestries and Ori Gersht's digital video triptych in which a traditional flower arrangement shatters into fragments. Both pieces find a way of channeling the past — Renaissance tapestries, 18th-Century Dutch still-life painting — into distinctive and fresh contemporary works. (The museum connected with only a few of the artists through the online matching process; the rest were invited by the curator.)

Best traditional venue (small division): Calvin College's cozy (106) Gallery, whose exhibition "Inked, Pressed, Cut & Sewn" whispers with quiet beauty. Curated by Joel Zwart and Paula Manni, the show collects 13 artists manipulating fiber and paper with formal ingenuity and zen-like focus. Keren Kroul's large, abstract watercolors translate nature into feeling. Aaron Fein's digitally stitched cylinder-hoop on acrylic fabric, rendered in minimalist two-tone grayish white, blurs the line between fiber art, sculpture, painting and digital mediums.



Keren Kroul's "Drops in a Limitless Ocean" is displayed at the Calvin College-run (106) Gallery during ArtPrize in Grand Rapids on Sept. 24, 2016. *Nate Smallwood, Detroit Free Press*