

# ARTFORUM

## The American Way

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Left: SITE:LAB founder Paul Amenta with Kate Gilmore's *Higher Ground*. Right: Visitors admiring Loveless PhotoFiber's *Northwood Awakening*. (Except where noted, all photos: Kevin McGarry)

**A PERSON FROM GRAND RAPIDS** is called a Grand Rapidian. From a coastal vantage, life in the seat of Western Michigan is not particularly grand or rapid, but one could argue that its banner civic event, ArtPrize, is both. In just seven years the open-submission contest that places work by more than 1,500 artists everywhere from Main Street to museums to coffee shops, reclaimed buildings, and hotel lobbies has ascended to the number-one position in the *Art Newspaper*'s annual Big Ticket shows list, which ranks the daily attendance of large-scale exhibitions around the world. With an average of 23,225 visitors per day, ArtPrize reported nearly twice Manifesta 10's crowds (#3) and roughly four times those of the Bienal de São Paulo's (#14).

The other outsize aspect of ArtPrize is the pair of \$200,000 cash awards given to winning artists selected by separate juries: one comprising experts, the other the general public, like *American Idol* except bounded by a "geo-fence" drawn around the three-mile radius of the ArtPrize zone. (In addition, there are eight discipline-based \$12,500 prizes given to the best 2-D, 3-D, installation, and time-based projects, each by jury and public.) Last year, both went to the same artist, Pakistani sculptor Anila Quayyum Agha, whose caged lamp *Intersections* bathed a room in the magnified shadows of anodyne Islamic designs. This coincidence was wildly atypical. ArtPrize's most striking illustration is the chasm between the institutional or market-oriented art world and the populist one that could not

care less about biennials, online-auction websites, or concierge services for international collectors.

I arrived in Grand Rapids on a Thursday by private jet. The plane belonged to Amway, and so did the hotel I stayed in: a twenty-seven floor riverfront glass tower somewhat overproportioned for a city of fewer than 200,000 people. ArtPrize is the brainchild of Rick DeVos, a grandson of Richard DeVos, who cofounded Amway and is worth more than \$5 billion. The DeVos family is nationally known for supporting a conservative Christian political agenda through think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute. In Grand Rapids they are famous for everything—their name is on buildings, public squares, and street signs.



Left: Artist Judith Braun. Right: Artist Pamela Alderman with her *Hometown Hero*. (Photo: Kevin McGarry)

By design, ArtPrize does not seem to privilege Amway politics, though there are definitely some fringe voices sounding off in the competition. Greeting me in the lobby of the Amway Grand Hotel was an interactive drawing by Pamela Alderman called *Hometown Hero*. A finalist for the public 2-D award, it's a portrait of a Wyoming soldier slain in Iraq made on a whale-length field of red and white stripes. Seated beside the soldier, the artist invited onlookers to write the name of their personal hero onto the flag with felt-tip marker. After GOD, GOD, and GOD, the most popular words are DAD, MOM, and JESUS. The reverse side of the drawing, visible from outside the hotel, resembled a confederate flag. While the placement of this work in the busiest hotel in town was prominent, it was not ArtPrize's decision. It was the product of the "dating service" through which compatible ArtPrize artist and venue registrants find each other online. The frozen yogurt shop down the street arranged to host an oil painting of a lighthouse called *Baby, It's Cold Outside*.

Entering ArtPrize's HQ, ArtHub, was like walking into a Walmart. An elderly volunteer was stationed at the door to say hello, and another sat at a kiosk registering voters for the competition. With a couple taps, an icon appeared on my screen that looked like a gerrymandered blob, which I recognized as the ArtPrize logo. I asked her what it was,



and she told me it's the outline of *La Grande Vitesse*, the red Calder sculpture outside City Hall. "I don't know if Alexander would like it being used this way," she began, then with a whiff of derision, "He was pretty fussy about his art," she seemed to tell me in confidence. "But I can't say that I blame him."

We drove across town to the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, which was hosting a special exhibition of Japanese ceramics. All the pieces were entered in the competition. A delegate from the museum explained that "they put out a call to all the Japanese ceramicists in the entire Japanese country." Not a bad way to solicit ceramics from Japan. The artists in the show represent all different ages and degrees of traditionalism, but I didn't find any of the bowls or figures to be aesthetically compelling. An anthracite skeleton of a demonic cow called *Mimesis* by Kushiro Akinaga was one of the five shortlisted finalists for the juried 3-D prize.

Next we took an hour-long tour of the Meijer's new Japanese gardens. This was odd because with well over one hundred ArtPrize venues we would not have time to see, these gardens had no connection to the competition other than having been paid for by the DeVos family. I asked why they had such a keen interest in Japan, having supported the ceramics show as well, and the curator simply explained that Amway Japan was a priority for them. Makes sense.



The ArtPrize ceremony.

Next on the tour was The Rumsey Street Project, an initiative by the volunteer-run, nomadic nonprofit SiTE:Lab, which uses abandoned buildings and other transitional spaces for temporary projects. Founded and led by Paul Amenta, a professor at Kendell

College of Art and Design, since 2011 SiTE:LAB has usually won the award for best ArtPrize venue. This year it availed a handful of buildings on Rumsey Street, which after the exhibition will be turned over to Habitat for Humanity and converted into low-income housing.

Friday night was the awards ceremony, which filled a theater downtown for a vampy Oscars-style show complete with scripted banter, live video segments outside, and prerecorded citations from the jury. For one of these, Dallas Contemporary curator Justine Ludwig, who presided over the 2-D award, was inadvertently channeling *Saturday Night Live* doing Bard CCS when she concluded "...I felt that it was an *important* body of work—and quite *striking*." I want a T-shirt that says that.

The \$200,000 jury prize went to Kate Gilmore for *Higher Ground*, a house at SiTE:LAB (which again won best venue) painted pink on the outside and red on the inside, with performers in skirts and ballet flats whose toes rhythmically peeked out the windows as they swung on swings strung inside the building. The most telling thing about this selection is that Gilmore is probably the only entrant in the entire competition who was on the radar of the contemporary art world that jurors Dan Cameron and Michael Rakowitz call home.

The public went with the Michigan husband-and-wife team Loveless PhotoFiber for *Northwood Awakening*, a large-scale collaborative work that begins on the left as a photograph of a forest taken by Steven Loveless and gradually, as you track right, morphs into a photorealistic quilt by Ann Loveless—who won the ArtPrize public award in 2013 as well!



Left: Terryberry's Scott Vanderleek with Paul Amenta and artist Kate Gilmore. Right: ArtPrize founder Rick DeVos with artists Steven Loveless and Ann Loveless. (Photos: Bryan Esler / Stellaflly)

The afterparty was held at a pinball pub called The Pyramid Scheme. It's quite a cheeky name considering that in 1979 the Federal Trade Commission ruled that the multilevel marketing company Amway is technically not an illegal pyramid scheme. Today, businesses with iffy recruitment structures carefully follow "the Amway Rules" in order to stay on the right side of the law.

The quasireligious devotion that has been described of Amway distributors could be extended to the constituents of ArtPrize as well. For one, the event is an immense source of local pride and engagement. In terms of finance, while ArtPrize makes a number of grants and donations to some of the host organizations, there are many cases where ArtPrize venues are fronting the costs of presenting ArtPrize themselves. Also, entrance to ArtPrize is universally free of charge, even at institutions that ordinarily sell tickets. These losses are not explicitly offset by ArtPrize.

The biggest heap, at the bottom, consists of the more than 1500 artists who don't win \$200,000. Almost 70 percent come to Grand Rapids with their work. While there are twenty-five \$2000 grants available to offset flights, hotels, and production—as well as a couch-surfing program that transfers the costs of boarding artists to townspeople, which locals reportedly love—for most artists, a modest to large buy-in is required to participate. Those who toss their paintings etc. into the ring are entering a fairly random popularity contest (since only a handful would be considered for the jury prize in earnest), and so, more than anything else, ArtPrize reminds me of another profoundly American tradition premised on dreams and delusions: the lottery. Whether this is any better or worse than the reward structure of the international art market, where thousands of artists make nil and several dozen mint works that sell for many times over ArtPrize's big payout, is a matter of debate. What is not is the fact that ArtPrize represents a step in the evolution of a populist American art world. It would be hubristic of the liberal elite to ignore it.