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Populist spirit fuels ArtPrize in Grand Rapids, Michigan



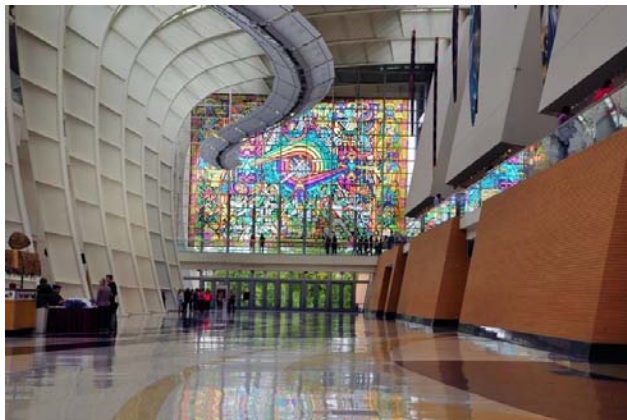
What time is it? A video of men sweeping rubbish in the shape of a clock face received lots of attention and an award last year during ArtPrize in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Courtesy of Maarten Baas (Dutch, b. 1977). Sweeper's Clock, 2009. Video, 720 minutes. Grand Rapids



The pedestrian Blue Bridge crosses the Grand River linking two sides of downtown Grand Rapids, Mich. It is the setting for buskers and musical performances during ArtPrize.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



The installation "Carpet of Promises" by Ukrainian artist Roman Minin lit up the lobby in the DeVos Place Convention Center like a stained-glass window during ArtPrize last year.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Visitors to ArtPrize vote for their favorites by smartphone or online. The public put a sand painting by New York artist Gary Moran, "Sand Sturgeon," among finalists in the two-dimensional category last year.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



ArtPrize visitors of all ages find opportunities to create their own art during the international art competition held in Grand Rapids, Mich., every fall.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



A handmade wool carpet made the ArtPrize jurors' short list in the two-dimensional category last year. "Coherency" is the work of Faig Ahmed of Azerbaijan.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



"Victory" is made entirely of chair parts. It was a finalist in the 3-D category by public vote during ArtPrize last year.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

Who would have thought watching two men sweep rubbish could be so fascinating?

Thousands of viewers did, apparently, as they sat mesmerized before a video showing long piles of garbage form the hands of an analog clock face. Moving ever so slowly, the sweepers kept accurate time. No one inside the Grand Rapids Art Museum, where the [12-hour video](#) played on a gallery wall, needed to check a watch or smartphone.

"Sweeper's Clock" by Dutch artist Maarten Baas won the public vote in its category last year during ArtPrize, an unorthodox international arts competition that takes over Michigan's second city for 19 days in the fall, this year Sept. 20 through Oct. 8.

It's the most attended public art event in the world, according to The Art Newspaper, drawing more than 500,000 folks.

And it's free.

ArtPrize has helped turn Grand Rapids, once jokingly referred to as "Bland Rapids," into a hip, cutting-edge community that celebrates creativity. It isn't for art snobs, just your selfie-snapping average joes. Families turn out, parents pushing strollers while kids run around outdoor sculptures. Girlfriends on a getaway mill about, choosing their favorite works. Multigenerations come together, grandparents taking a toddler by the hand for a closer look at a painting. Couples make a day of it, some in wedding clothes posing with oversized murals to mark their special day.

An inclusive, grass-roots approach sets ArtPrize apart. It thumbs its nose at typical highly curated art competitions by putting out an open call for artists here and abroad. Anyone older than 18 can apply. And any venue within ArtPrize boundaries can offer to showcase artwork. Last year 1,453 works were displayed, most within a walkable three square miles downtown. This year the number of venues is on track to increase. Museums and public buildings are included, of course, but also shops, hotels, restaurants and odd places to find art, like an auto body shop, a Laundromat, a hospital, a police station and the Department of Corrections. All must remain open daily -- even corporate offices normally closed to the public -- with no admission charge.



The inflatable sculpture "Light Cave" illuminated Ah-Nab-Awen Park on the Grand River during ArtPrize in Grand Rapids, Mich., last year. It is the work of Los Angeles-based collaborators Samuel Borkson and Arturo Sandoval III. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

A half-million dollars in prize money will be awarded, half to artists chosen by a jury of art experts, the other half by people voting on their smartphones or online. Works fall into four categories: two-dimensional, 3-D, installations dependent on the site where they appear, and time-based works.

"Sweeper's Clock" fell into the latter category, as did "Higher Ground," a video showing a family dismantling their home to build a spaceship in their backyard -- a finalist in the public vote last year. The public awarded its grand prize last year to "Wounded Warrior Dogs," a set of woodcarvings of battle-scarred canines evoking compassion for military veterans. The jury's grand prize went to "The Bureau of Personal Belonging," another time-based work re-creating a 1960s office that poked fun at bureaucracy. Each Grand Prize winner received \$200,000; category winners \$12,500.



The mural "Metaphorest" by Chicago artist Tracy Van Duinen remains in downtown Grand Rapids, Mich., after it was entered in a former ArtPrize competition. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

The money is nice, of course, but artists also enter ArtPrize for the exposure and come home with commissions. Sometimes they stick around their creations, passing out business cards and chatting up visitors. Last year, New York artist Gary Moran told passers-by he spent months planning his sand painting of a sturgeon and a week assembling it on site. It made the public vote's list of finalists in the two-dimensional category.

How did a world-class event in the art world end up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a city of 194,000 residents? Perhaps its history as a furniture-manufacturing center created a culture of craftsmanship. And it never hurts to have wealthy families supporting the arts.



A woodcarving of a dog was part of the 3-D entry "Wounded Warrior Dogs," last year's ArtPrize grand prize winner by public vote. Ohio artist James Mellick was awarded \$200,000. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

One such family member launched the first ArtPrize in 2009. Entrepreneur Rick DeVos, whose grandfather co-founded the Amway company, wanted a populist art competition with the world's largest art prize. So many people showed up that first year restaurants ran out of food by the first Sunday and had to close. Hotels ran out of rooms by the next Sunday.

The inaugural prize winner, Brooklyn artist Ran Ortner, had been living on ramen noodles, his phone turned off for nonpayment. Now he has six employees and his works have hung in the United Nations and the World Trade Center. His winning entry, the painting "Open Water No. 24," remains in Grand Rapids hanging above the bar at Reserve Wine & Food, a restaurant owned by the DeVos family.



Ron Platt, chief curator at the Grand Rapids Art Museum, shared his views on artwork with visitors during ArtPrize in Grand Rapids, Mich., last year. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

The works of several former contestants still can be seen in the city. Several outdoor murals remain from past years, including the Acton Building's "Metaphorest" a 40-foot-tall mosaic mural by Chicago artist Tracy Van Duinen. "Sweeper's Clock" has been added to the permanent collection at the Grand Rapids Art Museum but will not be on display during ArtPrize this year.

Grand Rapids has plenty of other works of art not related to ArtPrize. The Grand Rapids Art Museum has more than 5,000 works of art. And the recently renovated Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum has historical photographs and artifacts and serves as an ArtPrize venue. Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, one of the few ArtPrize venues outside of downtown, sits on 158 acres on the northeast side of the city. Among more than 200 sculptures in the permanent collection, the 24-foot-tall "The American Horse" attracts the most attention. Partly inspired by the work of Leonardo da Vinci, artist Nina Akamu formed two casts of a figure of a horse, this one and another in Milan, Italy.



The work of the first ArtPrize winner, "Open Water No. 24," hangs above the bar at Reserve Wine & Food in downtown Grand Rapids, Mich. -
Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

In the heart of downtown, the urban park Rosa Parks Circle comprises three circular forms designed by Maya Lin, creator of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Alexander Calder's 42-ton metal sculpture "La Grande Vitesse" in his signature red stands in a plaza outside the Grand Rapids City Hall.

A festival atmosphere prevails during ArtPrize with musical performances and buskers on the city's iconic Blue Bridge, a 19th-century railroad bridge turned pedestrian pathway over the Grand River. Art lectures and panel discussions, as well as screenings of feature-length films, fill out the ArtPrize schedule of events.

And budding artists can make their own art in a variety of hands-on programs for all ages, including the littlest visitors. Who knows, some of these tiny hands may shape a prizewinning entry one day.

• *Information for the article was gathered during a writers' conference sponsored by Experience Grand Rapids.*

ArtPrize

Where: Grand Rapids, Michigan

When to go: Sept. 20 through Oct. 8; visit on a weekday to avoid the biggest crowds. During preview week, Sept. 13-19, visitors can watch artwork going up at some venues but may have to pay admission.

Where to stay: Three downtown hotels connect by skywalk: Amway Grand Plaza, amwaygrand.com/, JW Marriott Grand Rapids and Courtyard by Marriott Downtown, marriott.com/default.mi, but these and other downtown properties fill up quickly during ArtPrize. Another 28 outlying hotels connect with free shuttles to ArtPrize Fridays through Sundays, experiencegr.com/events/artprize/hotel-packages.

Getting around: Information on park-and-ride locations and a variety of public transportation options can be found at artprize.org/visit/details#visitor-getting-here and at ArtPrize Hubs. ArtPrize Pathways markers on sidewalks lead pedestrians within a block of 90 percent of ArtPrize venues.

Information: ArtPrize: artprize.org/; Experience Grand Rapids: (800) 678-9859 or experiencegr.com/

<http://www.dailyherald.com/entlife/20170829/populist-spirit-fuels-artprize-in-grand-rapids-michigan>