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Eyes on the ArtPrize

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. — Dozens of kayakers paddled down the Grand River here on Sunday to get a close look at “Nessie on the Grand,” a stylized foam version of the Loch Ness Monster floating near the shore. A few blocks east, outside the Grand Rapids Children’s Museum, groups of excited youngsters posed for their parents’ cameras against a colorful mosaic, gazing at their reflections in bits of mirrored tile. And inside the nearby Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, adults and children fired questions at a chatty New Yorker named Jason Hackenwerth as he twisted balloons into the components of a giant caterpillar-shaped sculpture.



Adam Bird for The New York Times

Jason Hackenwerth’s “Ecstasy of the Scarlet Empress” was a finalist in the ArtPrize competition in Grand Rapids, Mich. [More Photos »](#)

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As popular as these attractions were, they and many others spread around Grand Rapids were more than just crowd-pleasing curiosities — though they had to be that, too. The three are among 10 finalists in a new art competition here that is being judged by members of the public, and that has drawn more than 1,000 entrants with its top prize of \$250,000.

The organizers of this first-ever event, called the ArtPrize, describe the sum as “the world’s largest art prize,” and the competition — open to anyone over 18 and to be decided by the votes of tens of thousands of visitors — as among the world’s most democratic.

The winner of the election — balloting concluded on Wednesday — is to be announced on Thursday night. In addition to the top payout, each of the nine runners-up will receive at least \$7,000, from a total pool of \$449,000.

Nancy Spector, the chief curator of the [Guggenheim Museum](#) in New York and an organizer of the museum's \$100,000 Hugo Boss Prize, said that while she could not be sure the Grand Rapids prize was the world's largest, "it's certainly substantial."

No matter who wins, the 17-day competition has spurred a lively debate in Grand Rapids, a city of about 200,000 with a tradition of interest in art. It is home to several museums and a college of art and design.

"Every conversation I've had here for the past two weeks has been about art," said Dustin Dwyer, a correspondent for Michigan Radio, a public radio network, who is based in Grand Rapids and has reported on the competition since its inception earlier this year. "From that perspective, it's a success. But are we rewarding good art? That's up for question."

The competition's creator, Rick Devos, a 27-year-old Web entrepreneur and a member of one of the city's most prominent families, said he had shied away from judging the merits of the entries.

"The first challenge is to get people to show up and get engaged," he said.

For the past two weeks it has been impossible to walk more than a few feet in the city's downtown, a combination of historic buildings and glistening new structures, without seeing an orange placard declaring, "ArtPrize Venue," meaning that an artwork was on display.

Entrants ranged in skill and variety, including a number who have exhibited in museums and galleries nationwide, like Young Kim, an installation artist from Greensboro, N.C., who caused a buzz here with his portraits in salt and earth. He was among the top 25 but did not make the finals.

The competition, which was staged at 159 locations, took shape only a few months after Mr. Devos began to explore the idea. (A foundation started by his parents, Richard and Betsy Devos, longtime figures in state and national Republican politics, was among the sponsors and provided the prize money.)

Seeking to start a community project, the younger Mr. Devos, a soft-spoken man with spiky hair, first looked into holding a film festival, but grew discouraged after learning about what he considered the excessively rigid rules of such events in places like Toronto and Telluride, Colo.

The rules of the ArtPrize, which he announced in April, were relaxed enough to allow 1,262 artists to participate in the first part of the competition, which concluded last week.

Voters could cast "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" ballots at [artprize.org](#) for as many works as they liked, though they could cast only one vote per work. More than 32,000 people registered, casting an average of about 10 votes each. In the final round of competition, each voter could cast only one ballot.

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Two of the most noticeable finalists could be found at the Blue Bridge, which leads from the commercial district to the other side of the river, where the city's historical museum, as well as the [Gerald R. Ford](#) Presidential Museum, are.

On Sunday Jeff Roof of Grand Rapids, and Carl Craven of St. Paul, both engineers, appeared fascinated by the huge plywood and steel table and chairs that the artist Sarah Grant, of Des Moines, had built atop the bridge.

"The art piece is construction in itself," Mr. Roof said. Mr. Craven said he was impressed by the scope and ubiquity of the art displays. "You're not filing across in front of a picture," he said. "It's everywhere."

Nearby floated Nessie, a team effort by "The Nessie Project," easily the contest's biggest attention getter. Its carved foam pieces were tethered to the bridge so they would not be swept away by the fast-moving river. At night Nessie's eyes light up, with power generated by solar panels set in its body.

Nessie's artists were among the competition's most aggressive marketers, handing out fliers on the bridge above; setting up a blog, (nessieproject.wordpress.com), a [Facebook](#) fan page and a [Twitter](#) account; and posting photographs of the building process.

They faced criticism that the project was more like a display at a Disney theme park than a valid creative effort, something they refute. The creature is the result of drawings, animation and sculpture, they said. "What part of this is not art?" asked Richard App, one of the project's artists and the owner of a local gallery.

The competition included more traditional pieces, too, like two finalists on display near each other inside a gallery at the city's old federal building.

"Open Water No. 24," by Ran Ortner, of Brooklyn, N.Y., was the only painting to make the finals. The three-panel canvas, which depicts deep blue ocean waves, sat near a kinetic sculpture, "Field of Reeds," by John Douglas Powers of Birmingham, Ala.

Inspired by Sanjusangendo, a Buddhist temple in Kyoto, Japan, the sculpture consists of a moving wooden frame set with dozens of undulating metal rods meant to evoke the reeds in a marshland. On Sunday gallerygoers stood four deep around each artwork, their heads seeming to bob amid the reeds and the water.

There were just as many viewers in an art-filled courtyard next to the B.O.B., a downtown restaurant complex, where "Moose," a life-size sculpture of a moose covered in nails by Bill Secunda of Butler, Penn., stood imposingly in a miniature grove of evergreens.

Not everyone has been entirely impressed with ArtPrize. Deborah Rockman, a professor at Kendall College of Art and Design here, said she feared the competition could cast the wrong light on the talents of area artists. Her own entry, a series of drawings called "The Danger of Being Born" that depicted the faces of stillborn infants, was ranked among the 100 most popular works but was not a finalist.

"This community is potentially giving a quarter of a million dollars to what is potentially a weak work of art," Ms. Rockman said. The competition had churned up "a lot of work that was based on spectacle," she added.

"If it was bigger, it was better," she continued. "If it was colorful, it was better; if it was entertainment, it was better."

Mr. Devos defended the wide range of work and the open voting system as preferable to a more restrictive method of appointed arbiters, in which "we choose 100 pieces of art and say, 'Come look at them.' "

In recent weeks Mr. Devos himself has drawn a great deal of attention through dozens of interviews and appearances in regional media outlets. He is already planning next year's competition, which may include some changes in the voting procedure as well as in the display spaces.

Some artists who were assigned outlying spaces complained that their work had not received as many visitors as those clustered downtown, putting them at a disadvantage when it came to voting.

But Mr. Hackenwerth, the balloon artist who lives on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, said he reveled in his ArtPrize experience, despite the long hours spent at the Urban Institute and the spartan living conditions.

He and three friends spent the past month rooming in the basement of a local art patron's home and surviving on ham-and-cheese sandwiches stashed in the contemporary art museum's refrigerator.

All that seemed forgotten on Sunday, though, as he showed a small visitor how he twisted balloons with his fingertips, covered in athletic tape.

"It's exhausting, oh, my," he said. "But if you meet kids and inspire them, they can grow up to be curators."