



## ArtPrize exhibition center review: UICA entries on display have intelligence, diversity

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By **Joseph Becherer | The Grand Rapids Press**

GRAND RAPIDS — Great anticipation surrounds all of ArtPrize, but this year, it is most keenly felt around the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts. This is the first major exhibition in UICA's new downtown home at Fulton Street and Division Avenue.

The location is right at the heart of the city, and its exhibition is right at the heart of the very best that ArtPrize can be.

In other words, UICA has more than delivered at the highest order: with intelligence, diversity and a commitment that art can make a difference in our lives and in the world.

Although all of the work is worthy of consideration, a few memorable examples stay with the visitor and may require return visits.

Among the most sophisticated in terms of concept and form was "Wappen Field" by Michelle Jaffe, of New York. A group of highly polished, frontal helmets is suspended from the ceiling. Viewers are encouraged to step forward from behind and experience the helmet as if wearing it.

### But wait, there's more

The pleasant discovery is that this is really an audio installation, with each helmet broadcasting different sounds. Ideas of the group experience dissolve, and notions of anonymity, personal experience, protection and isolation are among those that emerge from the experience.

Nearby is an elegant and more fragile installation, by Caroline Young of Chicago. "Remember: Replay, Repeat"



T.J. Hamilton | The Grand Rapids Press

More than helmets: Crowds check out Michelle Jaffe's ArtPrize entry, "Wappen Field," at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts on Wednesday, the art competition's opening night.

is an intimate work in film and video, with ghostly images of a female figure presented on four small screens. The subject seems familiar, or at least grows familiar, as we examine each screen. Yet, the figure is never completely deciphered, because of the movement, the masterfully hazy cinematography and the projection surfaces.

The work deserves some quiet contemplation and is an opportunity to reflect on our own bank of personal imagery, which, as the title suggests, we remember, replay and repeat.

Sympathetic to the ethereal mood of this work is another, more traditional video installation in the lower level. Here, one discovers Chele Isaac of Chicago's "There is No Fixin The Drift." Water is the seeming protagonist in both the 11-minute continuously running video projected on the rear wall and the large bubbling tank in the center of the gallery. Water contained, controlled, uncontrollable and all powerful are juxtaposed.

Through the video, the sights and sounds of the sea give way to images of a woman in Victorian mourning attire plunging downward and drifting upward. Water, therefore, becomes more a symbol of time and timelessness, power and the powerless. Ultimately, the patient and willing viewers are transfixed by the cinematic experience.

A large and intentionally eclectic mixed media mural, "Wall Drawing #3 (Screwed Rapids)" is a decidedly cinematic effort in scale and visual activity. The colossal work is a collaborative effort by seven artists from St. Louis who form the Screwed Arts Collective that takes its name from the panels that are screwed into the walls to form the mural's foundation. There is a decidedly raw and urban feel to the work, and it immediately calls to mind the painted and graffiti-covered surfaces one encounters in grittier city quarters. The irony is the work has been created and installed inside a gallery environment, forcing the boundaries between high culture and street culture to fade, unifying the voices of individual, creative expression to serve as boisterous chorus for human creativity of our time and place.

### **Time and place**

Speaking volumes about time and place are two very different works that deal with commercialism, wealth and the visual arts. The first is a bold and stimulating installation by the New York husband-and-wife team of Adam Eckstrom and Lauren Was, titled "Ghost of a Dream." The large-scale work describes a stage-set interior of a bourgeois home. From a distance, the boldly colored installation looks like a gaudy mosaic. The stroke of brilliance is that the entire high-key environment is formed from tens of thousands of discarded and decidedly

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non-victorious lottery tickets gleaned from numerous countries. The fulfillment and emptiness of dreams clash with energy, excitement and disappointment in a visual essay about easy money, social position and the trappings of wealth.

More subtle is the "La Petit Gallery," which is not to be missed as it is coyly positioned just near the UICA gift shop. The invention of Laurene Grunwald, of Nunica, the title plays on Alexander Calder's "La Grande Vitesse," which is an icon of art for the public here in Grand Rapids.

In Grunwald's world, original works of art are available to everyone, too, but for a small charge. A commercial sandwich vending machine of a largely bygone era has been transformed into a commercial gallery. A group of collaborating artists have produced dozens of original art objects that visitors can claim as their own for a small fee. Humor and invention inform this decidedly egalitarian work that should be contemplated and used as you enter or exit the building.

From the commercial to the sublime is a wonderfully interactive piece, "Pieces of Mind" by Ji Lee, of Paolo Alto, Calif. His sublime project involves the creation and dispersion of 10,000 tiny images of Buddha, which are made readily available to the public. They are intended to be taken and placed according to the desires of the individual. The idea of capturing and sharing the peace and enlightenment symbolized by Buddha is enriching, but the notion of sharing and sharing again may be an example of the community spirit of ArtPrize at its best.

On multiple levels, UICA as an organization reflects ArtPrize at its best. It is one of the most forward-thinking of all our cultural organizations. For many, aspects of ArtPrize are rather like the very essence of UICA, but beyond a specific structure or site and blanketed across the community and its people. The new building has been worth the wait, as it seems to be fulfilling the dreams of the staff, donors and innumerable volunteers that have made it a reality.

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