



Everything Michigan

GVSU ArtPrize Project: UICA review

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Guest writer
By



T.J. Hamilton | The Grand Rapids Press

Lynn Igo of Hudsonville reads the description of Evan Mann's 'A Modest Materialization of the Human Duality' looming above her in the lobby of the UICA.

Editor's note: GVSU journalism students taught by Prof. Brian J. Bowe are partnering with The Grand Rapids Press to provide stories about ArtPrize.

By Dale Johnson

There are 29 pieces on display at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts (UICA)—remember that number. Without keeping a mental tally, it's easy for an unsuspecting ArtPrize-goer to lose track while navigating one of the most complex gallery spaces at this year's event.

Although the UICA has occupied its new building on Fulton and Division for two months now, this marks the first high-profile event prompting public exploration of the site. Amateur Grand Rapids art patrons may not remember the institute's previous Sheldon street location or its single-floor main gallery spaces, but returners and newcomers alike will appreciate the expansive, albeit mazelike, updates that attempt to set the UICA apart from the city's other venues.

Above all, the UICA's new layout emphasizes interconnection. The site contains two floor's worth of mini-galleries, many with no clear beginning or end. Walls have built-in niches and alcoves seemingly constructed with specific forms of art in mind. The oddest space—a grave-like hole in the lower level floor, knee-deep and roughly the length of a person—is currently filled with Megan Heere's untitled motorized paper sculpture, obscured by the reinforced glass tiles which prevent viewers from crashing down into the piece.

Each displayed work is an eccentricity that begs close examination. From Meir Lobaton's Serial Reproduction, a set of progressively flawed ceramic castings, to Marisa Keller's Up Close, etchings alongside field samples of coral and sand (magnifying glasses provided), having time to spend is a necessity.

Michelle Jaff's Wappan Field also isn't to be missed; her series of metal helmets command the space and fill it with reverberating wails and unnerving whispers as approaching viewers trigger the sensors surrounding each. Like any packed hub, there are the usual one or two ArtPrize casualties. Ben Stagl's suspended fabric-and-projection form Pulse Point is dominated rather than complimented by the visual clunkiness of the staircase it's been constructed around, alongside the logistics of tromping up two stories to get the full view, meeting a dead-end, and backtracking.

To a casual spectator, contemporary art can be a foreign experience, especially in an event as diverse as ArtPrize. Fortunately, the UICA understands this and is nothing if not helpful; laypersons are encouraged to visit the learning lounge and gain some insight on what qualifies as contemporary art through videos as well as definitions and examples which are, of course, expectedly nonspecific—this is art, after all.

Staff is also present to help viewers register to vote, explain the layout, and start people off on their perplexing, but satisfying explorations. The venue is even selling concessions. It may be tempting to use your purchased popcorn as a contemporary trail-of-breadcrumbs to mark your way through this in-depth venue, but there's no need; maps are free.

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