



ArtPrize exhibition center review: Collection at Grand Rapids Public Museum is earnestly and honestly eclectic

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

As happened at many of the venues at the heart of the city center, planners at the Public Museum of Grand Rapids thoroughly studied last year's ArtPrize looking forward to this year's event. As a result, it could easily be said that this venue is among the strongest in terms of the visitor experience and the cohesion of their display. The gallery was easy to navigate and the cohesion of the works chosen was noteworthy. Hats off to those who made informed decisions on every front.

One of the visual challenges of displaying contemporary art in this venue is that, unlike individual artifacts and historical objects, contemporary art is often earnestly and honestly eclectic. With its myriad of temporary and permanent displays, the Public Museum of Grand Rapids is earnestly and honestly eclectic. For this writer, it was often challenging to stay on task with ArtPrize when the museum's own displays were so engaging.

Such compelling eclecticism found a bridge between both context and object in Douglas LaFerle's mixed media installation, "Mad Science." This artist from Royal Oak has excavated domestic and industrial pasts to present an engaging work that re-envision the future but from the vantage point of a simpler, mid-century America. The charm of the work was its nostalgia and humor, but the composition and craftsmanship was impressive as well.

Such high-caliber craftsmanship registered with many of the most interesting and rewarding pieces on display and are telling of the curatorial concerns of the staff that organized the exhibition for the museum. Perhaps the strongest such work was the powerful abstract composition, "They Know the Language of the Waves on the Sea," by Sally J. Bright of Fenton. This extraordinary abstract, biomorphic form is quite compelling installed at the very entrance to the gallery doors.



Cory Morse | The Grand Rapids Press

Crow study: People look at Karen Bondarchuk's ArtPrize entry, "Four on the Floor, Observed" at the Grand Rapids Public Museum. Bondarchuk is from Kalamazoo.

Colored a jewel-rich aquamarine, the sculpture is a large-scale weaving that pulsates across the wall on which it was hung. Although it can be understood as an investigation of a body of water as seen from above or below, there is a larger concern for both the sensuality of form as well as expanding our notion of what is possible through more traditional weaving techniques.

Akin to this sculpture is a triad of highly organic sculptures by Wendy Wilkinson Gordon of Lambertville, N.J. "Venation" is made of a translucent rubber. At approximately six feet each, these works are physically impressive and register with the viewer even from a distance. However, close inspection reveals that each of these "leaves" is mystically translucent and that a complex and elegant veining system of wire is legible, furthering the biomorphic quality of the work but ultimately granting each an even deeper sense of elegance and movement.

A complimentary but vastly different neighbor is a large-scale installation by Linda Cole of Ann Arbor. "Rain" is composed of hundreds of paper-thin, iridescent elements descending from the ceiling on clear monofilament. The shimmering effect is mesmerizing. The clarity of the artist's vision is matched by her concern for organization and stability as these seemingly fragile elements create the illusion of rain, but uphold the stability of a well-defined composition built not on randomness, but order and organization. The metallic palette choice and the gallery lighting combine to create a truly memorable and luxurious vision.

Of a completely different sensibility and vision is a massive installation by Karen Bondarchuk of Kalamazoo. "Four on the Floor, Observed" fills an entire end wall of the gallery. The majestic and menacing crow is the subject of this mixed-media work. On the wall is a massive drawing of a crow that details the lively head and torso of one creature. There is an energy and vivacity to this creature that exists in bold opposition to the four massive bodies on the floor beneath. Each of these dead crows is a masterful sculpture in its own right and even though they have been stiffened by the realities of death, there is a powerful visual energy in each form. These sculptures are composed of scavenged pieces of rubber and wire. From a distance one understand the rich black as appropriate for the body of a crow, but close inspection reveals a rich array of textures and surfaces.

Close inspection is also required for the most quietly fantastical work on display, "Branches." This black cut-paper work is by Joseph Bagley of Dorchester, Mass. As if looking out a large second story window on a stark winter day, Bagley presents an extraordinary webbing of branches, large and small, in a dazzling silhouette. The technical virtuosity of a dazzling object this complex cut from a single sheet of paper is

REVIEWS

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spellbinding, but ultimately the power of the work is visual. The economy of form, composition and monochrome splendor stays with you for a long, long time.

ArtPrize at the Public Museum was certainly a worthy undertaking. The works in the gallery were the strongest of those on display at this exhibition center. Many stirred admiration and curiosity, much as many of the best displays from the museum's permanent collection does. Return visits during ArtPrize are advisable, but return visits over the course of the year to one of Grand Rapids' finest are required.

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