

Sunday, June 06, 2010

Rocket Grants boost local artists, getting their works out of the studios and into the street

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star

At a moment when Kansas City artists are finally making inroads at area museums — even the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art had local work on view in its recent “Magnificent Gifts” exhibition — a new grant program encourages artists to look beyond object making and exhibiting in traditional venues.

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts is funding the program, called Rocket Grants.



Dancer and choreographer Leralee Whittle received a Rocket Grant to fund “WorkArtOut,” a performance installation featuring her gym videos. Whittle is among local artists awarded grants from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Awarded to individuals and artist groups, the grants support artist-created public events designed to reach audiences outside museums and galleries.

Late last month, 12 proposals involving 28 area artists received a total of \$40,000 in Rocket Grants. They include performances, installations, a children’s art workshop and artist-generated publications.

The grants are being administered by Kansas City’s Charlotte Street Foundation and the Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence.

Two years ago, groups in San Francisco and Houston received Warhol Foundation funding for programs supporting artistic innovation; Kansas City was next; and Chicago just joined the list.

“It’s a huge win for the artists’ community to have this level of support for new projects,” said David Hughes, director of the Charlotte Street Foundation. “It’s a huge win for Charlotte Street and the Spencer to be the third site in the country in a nationally leading program.”

Grant winners include established artists such as Lisa Cordes and former Charlotte Street Foundation Award winners Ke-Sook Lee, Mark Southerland and May Tveit.

Through the Charlotte Street Foundation, Tveit also was selected to attend this summer’s Art Omi International Artists Residency Program in Ghent, N.Y. During that residency, she plans to begin work on her Rocket Grant proposal for several public art interventions.

The interventions will take the form of giant, helium-filled latex balloons, each printed with a single word of text. Tveit will “plant” them in farm fields in New York and Kansas and also take the big balloons to the parking lots and aisles of area big box stores.

The Rocket Grants help support an already strong performance impulse in Kansas City art.

Cordes will use hers to develop a multimedia performance about the landmark lawsuit challenging California’s Prop 8 ban of same-sex marriage.

A group of seven artists, including Lee, Southerland, choreographer Jane Gotch and composer Paul Rudy, will collaborate on a dance performance designed to break down the barriers between performers and audience.

Three of the grants went to artists based in Lawrence. Several of Kansas City’s high-profile younger talents, including Seth Johnson, Ashley Miller, Jaimie Warren, Cody Critcheloe and Peggy Noland, also edged out the competition from a total of 83 submissions.

Johnson and Miller are collaborating on an “experimental public think tank.” The Warren-Critcheloe-Noland team has a new video planned, and their track record promises something both provocative and entertaining.

The winners were selected by a panel of five artists who also work as educators or curators. Three of them — Mel Ziegler, Adriane Herman and Hesse McGraw (former director of Charlotte Street’s Paragraph Gallery) — are based out of town but have worked in Kansas City in the past. The other two — Yeon Park and Patrick Alexander — are area residents.

The panel awarded \$4,000 grants to most of the projects, which will be realized within the next year.

The first to launch will be artist A. Bitterman’s “Point of Interest,” an informational installation in the front yard of his Brookside house.

With his wife, Deborah Pettid, Bitterman created the giant banana sculpture at the Folly Theater for the 2007 Avenue of the Arts. His Rocket Grant project, opening in mid-July, will feature National Park Service-style cases with historical accounts of his home's location and "interpretive discussions" about his house and family.

"We no longer perceive nature as a place we actually inhabit, but rather a place to visit," the pseudonymous Bitterman said.

His takeoff on our society's packaging of natural phenomena will include fliers, pamphlets, artifacts and a walking trail.

The recent disappearance of Western honey bee colonies inspired Jarrett Mellenbruch's winning proposal for a beehive sculpture designed to promote the health of bees, rather than human use of their honey and wax.

Winner Kurt Flecksing will use his award to generate micro-grants for other artists.

Earlier this year, as part of a downtown exhibition at Charlotte Street's Paragraph Gallery, Flecksing began selling s'mores from a street vending cart and donating part of the profits to other artists. Rocket Grant funds will enable him to upgrade the cart and get a street vending permit to sell s'mores year-round.

Since its inception 13 years ago, the Charlotte Street Foundation has put \$630,500 in area artists' pockets in the form of Rocket Grants, individual artist awards and commissions through its Art Through Architecture program. With another \$40,000 in Rocket Grant funds guaranteed for next year and a possibility of extending the program to 2013, that figure may well reach three-quarters of a million by the foundation's 15th anniversary.

For a full list of Rocket Grants winners, visit www.charlottestreet.org