

Ever since its inception, ArtPrize has sparked our curiosity. Artists from all over the world have registered to partake in a competition for the largest sum of money awarded to a work of art. Unlike other art competitions, ArtPrize will use an *American Idol* format for voting, allowing the public to decide on who receives prizes including the \$250,000 grand prize. The community is anxious to see what kind of effect this will have on our city and the artists and galleries that reside in it.

Melissa Selmon is a Grand Rapids native and an artist in the midst of the ArtPrize selection process. Selmon is also a member of the Arts Council of Greater Grand Rapids, a participating venue and part of the Grand Rapids Gallery Association, a group of non-profit and for-profit galleries dedicated to bringing arts and culture to the Greater Grand Rapids area.

Selmon sees ArtPrize as “an amazing opportunity for all artists... I’m proud of my city for this,” though she has to admit it has been a learning process. Her first step was to register and pay the entry fee. Afterwards, Selmon made a point to attend a number of meetings to have her questions answered. “The [artist’s] statement is very, very important, it has to represent what venues want.” It must paint a clear picture for the venue, so they know what will be hanging on their walls, and what extras are needed such as lighting or audio/video equipment.

Emotionally, Selmon is feeling a mixture of excitement and nervousness, “I know without a doubt that I will get picked, but the waiting process is the hardest thing.” With over 1,000 artists in the registration process, and only sixty registered venues, competing for a space could be a challenge. “A lot of venues have to decide the number of pieces they’ll show,” Selmon explained.

Many venues are feeling the same mix of emotions. Joel Zwart, curator of 106 Gallery (a subsidiary of Calvin College) explained, “We’re not sure how to do it, when to pick. Do you wait for a greater pool of artists and respondents? If you wait too long no one is available. It’s a catch twenty-two.” Zwart and a number of area businesses recently attended an ArtPrize workshop, where they were encouraged, if their venue had not already secured an artist, to do so soon. They do not have to fill their venue immediately, but it is good to have a start. The Arts Council’s panel of jurors recently moved their selection date from early August to July 13th.

Scott LaFontsee, owner of LaFontsee Gallery and Underground Studio, thinks that the inaugural year will be “[A] challenging process on both sides. Businesses are having a hard time because of the details.” Artists may be picky about venue selection. Selmon’s artwork is

emotionally driven and the pieces she has submitted are abstract. She wants to find a venue that has “good lighting, and a good feel to it. A place like that would add to the feel of the work.” She has applied to five different venues that fit her criteria.

With a large number of artists participating, Selmon hopes that ArtPrize will bring a greater appreciation of the arts, in general to Grand Rapids. “People are not as educated in the arts as they should be,” she added. This event will hopefully get the public talking about art. LaFontsee agrees that ArtPrize has been designed to “Create dialogue within the general public. Many people think that art is only for the elite... we need people to say ‘What do you think of that?’” The LaFontsee gallery will be focusing mainly on the education aspect of ArtPrize helping to make people more aware.

The voting format has been designed to further discussion and art education. “The public vote puts more focus on [art],” said Selmon, “It will create a greater appreciation of art in general.” Artists are also encouraged to present educational programs in collaboration with their venues. This is something that Selmon has considered doing.

Selmon is also happy that Rick DeVos chose this year to kick off ArtPrize as it “Shows confidence in the event and what it can do for the city.”

Artists can share these thoughts and concerns on a variety of social networking sites. Selmon prefers the Facebook site for artists. “Facebook has an artist page where you can get the feeling of what artists are going through. They all want to be in on it.”

There are a number of GRGA members participating in ArtPrize: the Urban Institute for Contemporary Art (UICA) that is curating their own building as well as the Old Federal Building, Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University, the Grand Rapids Art Museum (GRAM), Open Concept Gallery, Grand Valley State University Gallery, 106 Gallery (Calvin College) and Grand Rapids Community College Gallery.