

ArtPrize's safe, non-provocative winner

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Mia Tavonatti's *Crucifixion*, a work of stained glass mosaic, is the winner of this year's ArtPrize in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Decided by popular vote, the award comes with the largest single cash award for a work of art--\$250,000.

This is ArtPrize's third year, and there were more than 1,500 entries in 164 venues. The basics are this: for a fee of \$50, anyone can enter the competition. You just need to find a venue in the city that will host your work. Viewers vote, and then vote again for one of the [top ten](#) vote getters.

This year, however, the award has caused an uproar. On the one hand, critics complained about the aesthetics of the winning piece. [One](#)

called *Crucifixion* "[Tim McGraw](#) wearing a wig on a cross." Some suggested that ArtPrize change its name to "ArtandCraftPrize," because the only thing that sets this mosaic work apart is the amount of patience required to make it. The other objection was that the work could only win in Grand Rapids, a city in competition for the Christian capital of the United States--that the award had far more to do with the city's self-concept than with the art itself.

But I disliked *Crucifixion*

for maybe the same reason that other people liked it. The sweet, serene Jesus in a setting of pastel colors seemed to combine the worst of petty Christian religiosity with the squishy imprecision of the "[God-in-the-sunset](#)" crowd. There is nothing

offensive, nothing irritating, nothing troubling, no hint of suffering.

Theologically, what does this piece of art evoke and why? To me, it suggests the religious aesthetics of a self-satisfied people.

ArtPrize founder Rick DeVos has not been deaf to criticism of the contest's method. He has, however, repeatedly reminded critics that the purpose of ArtPrize is to get people talking about, thinking about and experiencing art. "My concern is not the art world and what they think of this. It's about the process," DeVos said at a lecture at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. "This [ArtPrize] is only three years old. If you assume that people in Grand Rapids had a second-grade understanding of art [in 2009], we're maybe in fifth-grade now." DeVos is right that the conversation is lively--and that almost everyone is in on it.

Despite my own obsession with all things religious, my personal favorites from the competition express sadness, whimsy, melancholy, joy and fear with nary a religious reference, beyond light and shadow. I love Mari Andrew's small sculpture [Helium](#), made from wire and tree moss, which quietly evokes a sad, sweet melancholy. I also like the loud, all-too-obvious, lottery-ticket-constructed [Ghost of a Dream](#), by the ironically named collective Dream Home. This is art that is visually effective and multi-layered, that woke me up and asked me to see differently.

Could explicitly Christian art, at its best, do the same?