

When art comes to church

The annual ArtPrize competition in Grand Rapids brings artwork—and artists—into places of worship.

by [David A. Hoekema](#) in the [March 28, 2018](#) issue



Holly Wilson, *Bloodline*, in the 2017 ArtPrize festival in Grand Rapids. Photo courtesy of Holly Wilson.

Each autumn since 2009, a great assembly of artists and artworks has gathered in downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan, for ArtPrize, an international competition with half a million dollars in prizes based on both jurors' assessments and popular votes. In 2017 ArtPrize drew 1,300 submissions from 41 states and 47 countries, displayed in 180 venues that ranged from art museums to bars and auto garages.

And churches. In 2017, ten churches in central Grand Rapids signed on as ArtPrize venues and displayed the works they had selected from applications received.

The benefit for the churches was evident as you walked from one venue to the next. Each congregation could convey to thousands of visitors its sense of how religious faith relates to artistic vision. Some churches selected highly conventional depictions of stories and figures from the Bible, others chose gauzy images of the transcendent that were similar to pieces that could be found in banks and hotels. Some selected challenging and unconventional work that engaged religious themes directly or indirectly.

The city's most determinedly nontraditional congregation is Fountain Street Church, which advertises itself as a "beacon of liberal religion" for those who "craft their own spiritual journey." This year its exhibit—cosponsored by the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union—addressed issues of human rights. Angels and rays from the heavens were scarce, but political messages were everywhere. ArtPrize jurors gave an award to a drinking fountain, installed by New Orleans artist and activist Ti-Rock Moore, titled *Flint*, which spouted an endless stream of filthy water.

In some of the displays at Fountain Street, politics eclipsed artistry. But other pieces offered fresh approaches to the politics and art of religion. Local artist Jay Constantine's multipanel painting *Luther's Lapse: The German Peasant Revolt* looked from a distance like a conventional "scenes from the life" biographical painting. A closer look revealed soldiers swinging their swords at defenseless men, women, and children, while Luther, ears and eyes covered, pretends not to notice. It is a visual rebuke to Christians who see other religions as violence-prone but never look at the history of their own.

Some churches seemed unable to say no to anyone who submitted an entry. Central Reformed Church crammed 45 submissions into its foyer and small chapel, making it difficult for the viewer to focus on any one of them. Two pieces with lacustrine themes stood out: a whimsical collage of drawings and texts about Jonah, by Ohio artist Trisha Raymond, and an abstract triptych of large paintings evoking Jesus's calming of the storm, by Michigan artist Agnes Fisher.

Another of the historic religious anchors at the center of the city, Park Church, spread its 30 entries over large areas conducive to contemplation. Among the submissions were several striking three-dimensional pieces by Michigan artists.

Emily Adelman combined acrylic human forms with found branches and resin butterflies to create an inviting *Tree of Life*, while Steve Howland in *The Notebook* and Jim Rutledge in *Leaving the Nest*, employed wood and other natural materials to create complex renderings. Dissimilar as they were, all the works in this venue evoked a sense of wonder at the natural world.

The congregation that most successfully explored the intersection of faith and art was Monroe Community Church, an urban congregation of the Christian Reformed Church. It was honored by the jurors as an outstanding venue, and one of its selected sculptures made the jurors' short list. This was *Bloodline*, a complex construction of small cast figures striding along wall-mounted sections of a tree branch. Oklahoma artist Holly Wilson described her work as an evocation of legends handed down by her Cherokee grandmother.

Some of the other pieces on display were more explicitly Christian: a huge drawing of the Last Supper populated by contemporary religious heroes; a trio of abstract paintings identified as "three wise men"; a host of angels created from fabric scraps. Others used metaphor and allusion to evoke experiences of joy, grief, and renewal. At this site—unique among the churches—the artwork was displayed in the main worship space, and each Sunday one artwork was highlighted during the worship service.

The rich fare available in Grand Rapids churches gave me hope that the dialogue between religion and art is growing increasingly sophisticated. Far too often in ArtPrize's short history, religion has been associated with gimmickry and gaudiness. One of the most discussed entries in 2011—it didn't win a prize, but it was purchased by Ripley's Believe It or Not for its museums—was a replica of Leonardo's *Last Supper* created entirely from little tufts of multicolored dryer lint.

The two big winners this year were very different from each other, and both, in my assessment, fell far short of the quality of the best works mentioned above. The people's prize went to A. Lincoln, a 12-foot image of the beloved president created by Richard Schlatter from 24,000 Lincoln pennies. It exhibited extraordinary skill in the use of a glue gun but little originality. The jurors' top award was given to Seitu Jones for *HeARTside Community Meal*, a meal served to 250 residents of an impoverished downtown neighborhood, which was described in a placard at a museum and recorded on video. This outcome does not encourage optimism about where ArtPrize is headed: the biggest prizes in the world's richest art competition

awarded—to what? Is *A. Lincoln* an artwork or just an impressive gimmick? Is a big outdoor meal an artistic performance? *HeARTside Community Meal* exhibits both hospitality and creativity, but seeing the video does little to stimulate thought.

In the statement posted beside each ArtPrize entry, one could observe the artists often stretching to disclose, or invent, the meaning of their work. Some of these were absurdly hyperbolic. One artist declared that by using gigantic pencil sketches of first responders to the 9/11 attack, he revealed the true meaning of violence and the possibility of inner peace. Another artist asked us to see in watercolors of swamp weeds the fundamental unity of all living things. A colorful collage, another creator insisted, is about the transience of suffering and the possibility of enlightenment. (A mental exercise I recommended to some other viewers: imagine that each of the artists' statements had been moved one entry to the right. Would you be able to tell?)

When art comes to church accompanied by such pretentious hokum, it is not surprising that it receives a cool reception. But the remarkable achievement of ArtPrize is this: at the best of the religious venues—those mentioned above, as well as St. Mark's Episcopal and First United Methodist—the negotiations between artist and venue gave birth to exhibits in which works entered into dialogue with each other and with the space. Artists who sought a place in these churches tended to propose work that was thoughtful and reflective, not merely pretty or showy. Most of the churches selected work that would reinforce, not contradict or ignore, their commitment to fostering purposeful and faithful living.

When a piece of art is displayed in a church, it becomes in subtle ways a different work. Perhaps the horizon of its meaning expands. Perhaps it speaks more clearly of the beauty of creation, or of the ways we have sullied it. The juxtaposition of a traditional still life and a figure study, displayed across from a bold abstract canvas, under a treelike assemblage of worn farm tools, is seen differently when viewed within the architecture and symbolism of church.

The same truth goes the other way: fill a church with artwork, and it becomes in subtle ways a different sort of building—especially if there happen to be tens of thousands of people coming and going. We like to think that our churches convey welcome to every passerby, every week of the year, but this is seldom true. Barriers of unfamiliarity and not belonging are not easily removed. During ArtPrize, these barriers became much lower. What had been a place for one congregation to gather

became a place for everyone to look, to ponder, and to engage in dialogue with artists, with church volunteers, and with artworks. Whether the visitors ever return on a Sunday or not, their presence is a form of participation in the religious life of a particular Christian community.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Sanctuary exhibits."