



Michigan

ArtPrize 2014 venue review: Site:Lab @ Morton is passport to global art world

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on September 25, 2014 at 3:04 PM, updated September 26, 2014 at 8:28 AM



Scott Hocking's ArtPrize installation "The Secrets of Nature" at the SiTE:LAB @ The Morton exhibition in downtown Grand Rapids, Mich. Photo taken Tuesday, September 23, 2014. (Chris Clark | MLive.com)

Once again Site:Lab ingeniously takes us someplace we have never been, most of us anyway, and to places where we never imagined we might go. It is a brave and stellar collaboration: Site:Lab and its visionary leaders Paul Amenta and Tom Clinton, 13 diverse artists/teams, and forward-thinking Rockford Construction reopened the lower levels of the grand old Morton building to art. (It has been partially reopened after being shuttered for 40 years.) Their efforts effectively and honestly alter the landscape of ArtPrize 2014 by bringing it in relevant contact with ebb and flow of the global art world as it really exists.

Much of the work will be challenging to the senses and sensibilities of most visitors – even seasoned visual arts professionals. But the ideas, voices and objects to be experienced in the gothic ambiance of a ghostly building interior are in keeping with the frontiers contemporary artists are trying to navigate. Much of the work is either performative or installation-based or somewhere in between.



Scott Hocking works on the lighting for his ArtPrize installation "The Secrets of Nature" at the SITE:LAB @ The Morton exhibition in downtown Grand Rapids, Mich. (Photo: Chris Clark | MLive.com)

In what was once a grand lobby space of the Morton building, there is a marvelous accumulative installation by Brooklyn-based artist Julie Schenkelberg. "Symptomatic Constant" is composed of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of cast-away objects and swaths of aqua tinted clothes. Much of the debris from earlier chapters of ordinary life was gathered locally. Unwanted, disused, chipped and broken, these objects have been masterfully combined to create a monumental installation that can be read as a kind of homage to or excavation of ordinary lives now lost. The work is extremely effective up-close, at a moderate distance, and most stunningly, from views into the lobby from the second floor.

"Love 'em, Leave 'em" is a manic effort and fascinating experience by Kate Gilmore of New York. Meticulously installed in a huge vault in the building's basement, the work is a recorded video performance of the artist brutally but beautifully transforming a pristine white alcove into abstract expressionist mess through dropped pots of vibrant paint. Gilmore's efforts are simultaneously intentional and accidental. Moreover, they are mesmerizing to behold. One can join in the viewing at any moment, but taking in the whole process in the 25-minute video is most worthwhile investment of time.

In contrast to the visual energy and sublime bewilderment of the two aforementioned works, there is great calm and clarity in Ryan Roa's spatial drawing titled "Space Drawing #36." Roa is a member of the Brooklyn-based collaborative Present Company. The work uses dozens of bungee cords drawn taut in a carefully planned composition that acutely responds to the space of the room. The black of the cords is in contrast to the light colored walls enhancing the notion of a drawing that can be encountered three-dimensionally.

Dance and active performance is an important element at this venue and many authentically engage with the very fabric and spaces of the building itself. In some instances one could almost list the Morton as co-author of the work because the place plays such a vital role in the work. But, alas, this is part of the glory of Site:Lab as an organization. From skateboard negotiations and motorcycle dervishes in the basement, to dance throughout all the floors, to rollerskating in the gilded remains of the former ladies lounge, the Morton will never be the same.



Scott Hocking, right, and Michael Peoples are shown at Hocking's ArtPrize installation "The Secrets of Nature" in the SITE:LAB @ The Morton exhibition in downtown Grand Rapids, Mich. (Photo: Chris Clark | MLive.com)

Although performances cannot always be continuously presented, visitors will have the most luck catching the performances on the weekends of ArtPrize and many of have video components included that capture a defunct interior brought to post-modern life.

Perhaps the most haunting and, for many, the most complex work is a massive multi-part installation by Detroit-based artist Scott Hocking. "The Secrets of Nature" is an extraordinary endeavor using old funhouse mannequins and disused scientific cum science-fiction props in a way the original makers and audiences likely never could have conceived. Hocking explores ideas about mythology and ritual as they have permeated human societies since people first gathered together. His world is invented, but skirts the boundaries of innumerable traditions in a manner that causes us to question and consider.

If you like skating, skateboarding, Jamaican music, motorcycles, mythologies and masquerades amidst grit and grunge, you need to go Site:Lab at the Morton. If you want neat and tidy and straightforwardly comprehensible, you need to go, too. Much of the work, most of the ideas and

many of the spaces are not soft and easy, but then again much of life today isn't either. Site:Lab's collaboration delivers the truly avant garde for ArtPrize 2014, and we should all be grateful for the passport to the frontiers of the art world as it exists today.

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