

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

ARTS & THEATER

Creative Capital keeps its cutting edge sharp



"This World Made Itself," a work in progress by Creative Capital grantee Miwa Matreyek, is an example of some of the forward-thinking art being produced by people in the program.

By Molly Glentzer
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For a few intense days the audience sat attentively, often rapt. A few times they wept. Sometimes they cheered.

They heard Juan William Chavez of St. Louis talk about building a bee sanctuary where a housing development once stood. Detroit's Design 99 collective described how it's re-purposing found objects.

Laurie Jo Reynolds of Chicago discussed "legislative" art, including a campaign that began with poets writing letters to inmates, exposed inhumane treatment at Illinois' Supermax prison and ultimately led to its closing this year.

Paul Rucker, a cellist and visual artist from Seattle, drew parallels between slavery and the prison system, showing stunningly gorgeous works full of horrific data he's gathering.

The Degenerate Art Ensemble, also from Seattle, explained its multidisciplinary "Predator's Songstress" project, which involves site-transforming portraits of six invented anti-heroines inspired by historical, mythical and contemporary women.

The annual Creative Capital retreat at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., included 85 presentations—their biggest gathering ever of artists, curators and presenters.

The speakers were artists who have received funding from Creative Capital, an organization founded in 1999 to fill the gap left by the reduction in government funding of the National Endowment for the Arts.

First-year grant recipients had seven minutes each to give their presentations. Returning grantees had five minutes each.

Karen Farber and Dean Daderko were among about 250 arts presenters from across the nation privy to the talks, which offer a snapshot of the most avant-garde art happening in America. They went with their radars focused to scout performances, art installations, films and literary projects their institutions could help produce in coming seasons.



Kenny Fries presenting at the 2013 Creative Capital Artist Retreat. Kenny is a 2009 Literature grantee who wrote the libretto for the new opera "The Memory Stone," which premiered with the Houston Grand Opera in April.

"Creative Capital will fund projects no other organization would touch," Daderko said.

"We are the risk takers in the field," said executive director Ruby Lerner, who's led the organization since its inception.

Creative Capital conceived the idea of "venture philanthropy"—not just writing checks but also training artists to promote and market themselves, write strategic plans and even incorporate for-profit elements.

Far from being exhausted by the presenters' information overload, Farber and Daderko came back to Houston utterly jazzed.

"It was invigorating, inspiring and exciting beyond belief," said Farber, executive director of Mitchell Center for the Arts at the University of Houston. She's been involved for several years, initially joining as a reader of the nearly 3,000 proposals submitted annually.

Sitting through the presentations is a little like curatorial speed dating, acknowledged Daderko, a curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. He first participated last year. "It's one of the most inspiring and information-packed art-world gatherings I know of," he said.

Various disciplines are funded in cycles, and things get especially challenging when the "emerging fields" category rolls around. This year it brought a mother lode of social practice projects—endeavors that have no precedent.

Houston visual artists Zach Moser and Eric Leshinsky, the Houston collective Shrimp Boat Projects, presented in the emerging fields category. For three years, they've studied the culture, history and

environmental aspects of Galveston Bay shrimping by actually doing it. Their magnum opus has been operating their own boat as a commercial enterprise, Discovery Shrimp & Oyster Co. On a higher level, they're looking at our relationship with the landscape.

"Shrimping is a specific lens that allows us to see all these things," Moser said.

When the season ends in November, he and Leshinsky will head to the studio to process their latest ideas. They have three projects planned, including a video installation.

Mitchell Center has supported Shrimp Boat Projects, so Farber knows her way around emerging fields. Still, she felt overwhelmed by the number of artists investigating food, agriculture and sustainability issues. Projects involving prisons also were abundant, she said.

Looking for projects that will resonate with the Houston community (on or off campus or both), she envisioned several of the presenters as Mitchell Center residents. One has made a detailed database of hip-hop lyrics; another develops installations after exploring issues in the community.

A third uses remote-sensing technology in wild environments, juxtaposing the natural and the unnatural.

"Our relationship to the Mitchell family gives us access to a property that would be interesting for that," Farber said.

Mitchell Center offers a growing handful of residencies each year, and a number of past recipients have been Creative Capital grantees, including Theaster Gates and Karyn Olivier.

Daderko sat on the panel that selected the emerging-fields grantees. (Next year he'll be among the lead consultants for visual arts.)

Social practice can challenge exhibitors and collectors to think about how they engage with art that's not object-based, said Lerner. "It twists your head around. But with our projects, there's usually some other manifestation. One artist is currently adopting a pig in five countries, and she'll follow them from cradle to ham. She'll produce a film and will also make books."

Creative Capital artists in more tangible fields consider tough questions, too. LaToya Ruby Frazier's documentary photography exhibit "Witness," on view through Oct. 13 at the Contemporary Art Museum Houston, is part of her "Monument for Braddock" project, which probes issues about urban decay and industry in her Pennsylvania hometown.



"Soundless Series: June 7, 1998, Jasper, Texas," by Seattle artist Paul Rucker, is part of a Creative Capital project called "Recapitulation." The Soundless Series features wood sculptures marking historic deaths related to civil rights.

Daderko, who considers himself a newbie to the field of choreography, was especially inspired by performance projects. "Visual art spaces are grappling with how to present live dance or theater," he said, noting the "s" at the end of "Arts" in his museum's name.

Despite early skeptics, Creative Capital has committed about \$29 million in financial and advisory support to more than 400 projects involving about 530 artists. A separate professional development program has helped about 6,000 artists in 170 communities.

The checks are generous; \$50,000 per project, plus \$40,000 worth of services. Yet the artists aren't pressured to produce.

"Almost nobody completes a project in less than three years, and some have been with Creative Capital for a decade," Lerner said. "It's allowed things to blossom in ways no one could have anticipated."

Several Oscar-nominated documentaries and a Broadway show were developed with Creative Capital's help, and many grantees have gone on to win prestigious Guggenheim and MacArthur grants. "Sometimes projects don't happen, but the ones that do are fabulous," Lerner said.

Moser said networking opportunities are one of the best benefits of being a Creative Capital recipient.

"Our project is so Houston-specific. We'd like it to have relevance as part of a national conversation," he said.