



Kresge Foundation recognizes what Detroit knows: Charles McGee is an eminent artist

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Charles McGee's studio is a 4,000-square-foot converted industrial space located in the shadow of Marygrove College. Because it has no heat to speak of, on a recent afternoon it is a chilly 50 degrees or so inside, and the patriarch of Detroit's art scene, who turns 84 next week, is bundled in an olive and brown sweater and stocking hat. He stands by an overmatched space heater in front of a work-in-progress spread out on the floor.

It's a massive assemblage on heavy-duty board, 10-feet-tall, the bottom layered with meticulously patterned green, purple, creamy yellow and orange paint and a vibrant ornament of fabric. A tangle of elongated legs, the figures vaguely African, allude to a favorite theme -- community. Oodles of fabric, paint, feathers, precut paper letters and an oversized toy dollar bill are within reach.

"I'm privileged to live today," says McGee in a typically philosophical mode. "At that last moment of my life I'll go out very happy because I feel like nature has given me a kiss of beauty that nobody can take from me. It's nice to be able to share it with those willing to come into that arena."

After a lifetime of service to art in Detroit, the favor is being returned. The Troy-based Kresge Foundation announced today that McGee has been honored with its first Eminent Artist Award, a new annual \$50,000 prize designed to recognize a local artist for longstanding contributions to Detroit. The award, which puts an exclamation point on the foundation's recent \$8.8 million commitment to the arts in southeastern Michigan, was decided by a three-person panel of area experts, with input from a broad advisory committee.



McGee qualifies on every front, beginning with his paintings, sculptures and assemblages, which are in public and private collections across the country and on permanent display locally at the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, the Broadway Street People Mover Station and several hospitals.

But McGee also started an art school for kids in 1969, along with Gallery 7, a pioneering cooperative space in Detroit, the first in the city to show black and white artists side-by-

side. In 1978, he cofounded the Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit. Along the way, McGee taught for 18 years at Eastern Michigan University and still teaches one day a week at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center.



In his ninth decade, McGee wakes up every day and still makes art -- with boundless energy and an irrepressible sense of wonder, beauty and the endless possibilities of the creative imagination. With, in other words, soul.

"He's the essence of Detroit," says Kresge president Rip Rapson.

Though McGee works in a dizzying array of mediums and materials, from sculpture to painting to mixed media, his signature work is "Noah's Ark: Genesis" (1984), a beloved mural-sized mixed-media piece at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The 15-foot painting, part of a series, shows two Egyptian-styled women and animals rendered in playful simplicity. The picture pops with exuberant geometric patterns, cut-out fabric, primary color and jazzy rhythms.

The marriage of modernist and the primitive impulses, the visceral quality of the material, mythic spirituality and whimsical humor wink at McGee's idol, the protean 20th-Century French artist Jean Dubuffet. But no one could have created "Noah's Ark" but McGee.

"One thing that strikes you about Charles' work is his emphasis on interconnectivity," says Julia Myers, professor of art history at EMU. "He creates a whole ecology in his work of the relationships of people, animals, plants, whatever."

Not knowing he was even being considered for the Kresge award, McGee was flabbergasted when the call came last month out of the blue -- not so much because of the money but because

the prize represents an affirmation of the vitality of the Detroit scene. McGee has spent his entire career stumping for Detroit -- and against the idea that if wasn't happening in New York, it wasn't happening.

"There's art here that's as good as any you'll find in the world," he says. "You know, we need to be much more giving and we'll get that much more in return."



McGee is a compact man with a long, expressive face, hunched posture, salt-and-pepper whiskers and a gentle manner that belies a fierce independent streak born of the winding journey of his life. Divorced, he's the father of two grown daughters.

Born in rural Clemson, S.C., he was raised initially by his grandparents and was already working in cotton fields when, at age 10, he was sent to Detroit to live with his mother. Unable to read or write, McGee, who had never attended school, was tossed into fourth grade.

By age 16, he was working in Detroit factories; later he would work as a cartographer for the government. McGee, who had shown a propensity for art at a young age, studied formally at the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts (now the College for Creative Studies) for a decade beginning in the late '40s, and his best early work consisted of charcoal drawings of black urban life.

A turning point came in 1968, when he moved to Barcelona to live, study and explore. For the first time, he had time to consider his craft. Suddenly, he began to see art less in terms of particular subject matter than as a set of fundamental elements -- form, line, shape, color, value, texture -- that an artist manipulated into content.



"Some people look at a coat hanging on a chair and just see a coat," McGee explains. "But others will look and say, 'Look at all the spaces and sections that comprise the coat and how this shape is echoed by that shape.' You start breaking it down into its lowest common denominator."

McGee's art took off in all directions. He embraced abstraction, leaving behind the realistic drawings of his youth in favor of a diversity of mediums, materials and ideas. A look around his studio reveals his aesthetic

sweep. There are minimalist-like sculptures of aluminum and steel, densely layered mixed-media works bursting with energy and color, quiet hieroglyphic-like drawings that even include dirt in the mix.

There's also a human-scale model for a proposed 19-foot sculpture for the grounds of Wayne State University, whose interlocking shapes and syncopated, black-and-white repetition suggest dancing figures.

"Charles sees nature as a kind of overpowering force," says Myers, who will curate a retrospective at EMU scheduled for late 2009 or 2010. "He feels there is no hierarchy in nature, that we all have our part to do. He'll say things like, 'The guy who fixes my pipes is equal to Michelangelo.' His work is nonhierarchical, too."

McGee is as busy as ever, working on several pieces at once and preparing for his retrospective. On Sunday he was scheduled to attend a dedication for his newly installed sculpture, an elegant tangle of painted white aluminum, outside the EMU Student Center. He's also working on his golf game. He keeps clubs at his studio, where he hits a plastic ball into a pad, and he practices putting at home.

Mostly, however, he's making art. "My duty at this point is to obey my calling," he says. "When I make a work of art, I'm making my life. It's a statement about how I understand the world."

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