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Detroit Receives Inaugural Kresge Eminent Artist Award



What does Artist Charles McGee think of the Kresge Foundation investing 8.8 million dollars into metropolitan Detroit's creative community? "It's huge!" He says. "It's like injecting a vital and sorely needed infusion into the veins of the city. The only requirement is to be creative. This is very unusual." As he does in his work he is using nature to discuss the community. It's not a reference to the \$50,000 that he just received from Kresge Arts as the first ever Eminent Artist Award recipient. He sees that as the fortunate result of his insatiable hunger for understanding and the love, devotion and total commitment to what he's been doing for over sixty years. He is referring to a program designed to develop and financially support individual artists, arts and cultural organizations and arts-infrastructure groups in the metropolitan area. Eighteen Kresge Artist Fellowships of \$25,000 each and one Kresge Eminent Artist award of \$50,000 will be awarded each year. Arts and cultural organizations will receive operating support. "Creative contributions to a community are like fertilizer, it grows and is enriched", he said.



Portrait of the Artist with artwork, Regeneration, 2007 Ultraviolet cured inkjet paint on Dibond, 78" x 264", Commissioned for Henry Ford Hospital, Detroit, Michigan
Photo by: Ray Manning

“Charles McGee exemplifies what it means to be eminent and what it means to be a Detroit,” says Rip Rapson, president of the Kresge Foundation. “He is an artist of international renown who in his life and his work is energetic, passionate, always probing and eager to reinvent. It is fitting that he be named the first Kresge Eminent Artist.” He has also spent his life nourishing his community as he is nourished by it. In 1969 Detroit Artist Market asked him to curate a show. Seven artists were chosen who evolved into Gallery 7. They taught, exhibited and raised funds for World Medical Relief for ten years. He is a mentor, teacher, and community arts advocate who also founded the Charles McGee School of Art, and the Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit (CAID).

There are plenty of reasons to invest all this time, energy, money and talent in the city of Detroit according to Mr. McGee. First, it’s economically feasible; space, materials and other resources are readily available. Green spaces are cropping up all over the city that attract artists, art and audiences. It provides an opportunity to create a community or a culture in which art becomes useful. It’s spread out so you can find time to yourself while creating energy that denies boredom. “Detroit is a blank canvass ... it offers itself as a Mecca for creativity. Thriving communities are the way to eliminate war and mayhem”, he said.

At 84 years old McGee has had a distinguished career that includes hundreds of exhibitions in the United States and abroad as well as many important contributions to Detroit’s cultural and educational community. His paintings, assemblages and sculptures are in prestigious national and international collections, and are permanently installed at local institutions including the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. “Life and nature created an artist. I was ordained by nature to do what I do, I can only be whole if I make art and that art is the structure in nature” he said.



Time Frames

Timeframes, 2007, Mixed media collage on Dibond, 60" x 84"
Collection of the artist
Photo by: Charles McGee

“The Kresge Foundation, through Kresge Arts in Detroit, acknowledges the individual artist as a potent force in bringing about the change Detroit needs and deserves. We are proud to administer the Kresge Eminent Artist Award and believe that engaging the creative community is key to revitalizing the region,” said Richard L. Rogers, president of CCS and co-chair of the Kresge Arts in Detroit Advisory Council. “Charles McGee serves as an example to all aspiring artists with his exceptional work and ongoing commitment to our community. We are honored to announce him as the inaugural recipient of the Kresge Eminent Artist Award.”

Nominations for the award are made by the Kresge Arts in Detroit Advisory Council, a 19-member volunteer group of leaders in the Metropolitan Detroit cultural community who provide external oversight to Kresge Arts in Detroit.

The award recipient is selected by an independent review panel comprised of well-respected and knowledgeable artists and arts professionals in the local cultural community. The 2008 review panel included Gerhardt Knodel, artist and former director of Cranbrook Academy of Art, Dennis Alan Nawrocki, art historian and author of the recently published third edition of *Art in Detroit Public Places* (Wayne State University Press), and Dr. Cledie Taylor, founder and director of Arts Extended Gallery.

The Kresge Eminent Artist Award is unrestricted and given each year to one artist who has lived and worked in Wayne, Oakland, or Macomb Counties for a significant number of years, has a distinguished record of professional achievement in the arts, has made a significant impact on their chosen art form, shares their talent and expertise with the broader arts community and community at large and has contributed generously to the growth and vibrancy of Detroit’s cultural environment.

To commemorate Charles McGee’s work and share it with the community, The Kresge Foundation has published a monograph that will be distributed to arts organizations and institutions, and libraries in the region, including the Library of Michigan.