

12/31/2008

VISUAL ARTS

## Cash flow

The Kresge Foundation fends off artist starvation and fuels the creative class



Charles McGee with one of his creations.

BY **KELLI B. KAVANAUGH**

In a city where buying groceries is often a struggle and the general populace cares more about the Lions than Lascaux, a skilled artist with some ambition can't be faulted for dreaming of greener pastures.

Who could blame them?

And while many artists over the years have found their muse in Detroit, it's common — even in more prosperous times than these — to attend their farewell parties at some local bar because waitressing and selling the occasional piece at an art fair just wasn't cutting it for them.

But now there's some incentive to keep them here: The Kresge Artist Fellowships, which will annually award 18 local artists \$25,000 — no strings attached.

Announced in October, the first round of applications is due on Feb. 27. A recent information session about the application process and the awards themselves saw an estimated 250 artists in attendance, so the word's getting out.

The fellowships are one part of an \$8.8 million overall commitment to arts and culture in the tri-county area made by the Kresge Foundation (which is a \$3.5 billion private foundation, established by Sebastian Kresge in 1924, "that supports communities in the United States and around the world by strengthening the nonprofit organizations that serve them.") And each year, the Kresge Foundation will also recognize a living legend with a \$50,000 Eminent Artist Award (see sidebar to learn about this year's awardee, Charles McGee) and there's also Kresge Arts Support which will fund arts and cultural organizations.

The fellowships are unprecedented in this area, although templates, like Minnesota's McKnight Fellowships, do exist. What stands out about the money is that it can go toward living expenses, travel, studio space ... or pretty much anything. The only stipulation is that the artists must have lived in the area for two years and remain here for the one year term of their fellowship.

The program's director, Michelle Perron, says the fellowships aim to "fuel the artist's life, keep artists here and retain artistic talent — and maybe even attract people to the area."

For those who haven't yet had Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, parroted to you, the concept behind such an idea is this: Creatives are the sparkplug to a stagnant economy. And there's certainly some evidence to support this — but most governmental, bureaucratic initiatives tend to try to harness artists with lots of rules and regulations. Kresge, on the other hand, wants to ensure that artists eat and have some place to crash.

This year and every odd year, the fellowships will fund 18 visual artists only — the even years go to performing and literary artists. A second information session is scheduled for Jan. 14 and the first 18 recipients will be announced in June. Visit [kresge.collegefor-creativestudies.edu](http://kresge.collegefor-creativestudies.edu) for more information and to apply.

**Kelli B. Kavanaugh is an arts critic for *Metro Times*. Send comments to [letters@metrotimes.com](mailto:letters@metrotimes.com).**