The Los Angeles Times
June 17, 2009

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE ARTS

James Irvine Foundation rewards the innovators

Pablo Mason, MCASD

LA JOLLA: A Nancy Rubins work at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.

The Hammer Museum is among recipients of a new round of Arts Innovation Fund grants.

By Susan Emerling

June 17, 2009

Some time next year, a seeing-eye dog may guide visitors -- even those with no vision problems -- through the galleries of the Hammer Museum in Westwood to a pre-selected painting. In San Francisco, young actors in training may be found rounding up an audience for a play staged in a bar or in the rec room of a juvenile detention facility. Visitors to a museum in Oakland may be asked to tell the curators how they'd like to interact with the art, while in downtown San Diego, they may bump into an artist completing a work in progress.

These are all projects that are being supported by the James Irvine Foundation's latest round of Arts Innovation Fund grants to be announced today, six- and seven-figure morsels of capital the foundation is doling out to arts organizations in the state.

The foundation, endowed by Orange County rancher James Irvine in 1936, is one of California's largest philanthropies, and the state's largest multidisciplinary arts funder. With assets of $1.4 billion, the foundation will give out a total of $70 million this year, $20 million to the arts; $3.35 million of this will be in the form of innovation grants, which CEO James Canales characterizes as "risk capital" to spur a strategic rethinking of the way these organizations deliver art.

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The grants grew out of a series of conversations Canales had with some of the foundation's major grantees after he became CEO in 2003. A consistent theme was that

these organizations had large subscriber bases, but operated on narrow margins, making it difficult for them to take risks. But through its research, the foundation knew that changing demographics, technology and audience expectations would have a dramatic effect on how art museums, theaters, symphony orchestras and opera houses would run their establishments -- and this was before the current recession.

The public's needs

Beginning in 2006, the foundation awarded seven recipients the first round of multiyear innovation grants, which ranged from $600,000 to $1 million. Since then a total of 18 have received funding.

This year, the Oakland Museum of California, devoted to the state's natural and cultural history, is one of two organizations that are in the enviable position of receiving a second innovation grant to continue work they began in 2006. The grant will enable it to research new ways to reinstall the permanent collection of California art using techniques from outside the art-museum field.

"In the past, people were satisfied with merely experiencing objects on the museum's terms," says curator René de Guzman. "But now, the public demands compelling experiences that relate and respond directly to their lives."

Research showed that the museum's visitors wanted places to sit and contemplate works of art and informal gathering places in the galleries to read catalogs and congregate. In the redesign, the museum is adding what museum director Executive Director Lori Fogarty refers to as "loaded lounges," places where visitors can focus on a single work while listening to an audio guide or using building blocks to understand an abstract sculpture.

Floating ideas

The Hammer Museum is also a repeat recipient. The museum will continue its artist council and artist-in-residency programs and begin an artist-run visitor services program to address a chronic unfulfilled need to help visitors navigate its awkward space. Mark Allen, founder of Machine Project, will be the first artist to tackle the problem, holding the position for a year.

"This is a person of immense generosity of spirit. He's very imaginative, but he's understated," says Director Ann Philbin. "We do not want the visitor to feel accosted, or pressured to do something they don't want to do."

So far, everything is hypothetical, but some of the ideas that are being floated by Allen include guide dogs, a hot-air balloon watch, and teaching visitors to create their own forgeries and then leading them on a treasure hunt to find one that is hidden among the Hammer's masterpieces. For Allen, who is largely a conceptual artist, "It is an unprecedented degree of engagement between a museum and an artist."

The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego needed to meet an entirely different challenge. The museum was founded in 1941 as the Art Center in La Jolla. Its focus shifted to contemporary art and in the late 1980s it opened a second location 12 miles away in downtown San Diego, eventually finding a permanent home in the old depot of the Santa Fe Railroad.

MCASD is now the longest continuously operating contemporary art museum in Southern California, and is facing a problem that Director Hugh Davies says will present itself to every contemporary art museum in the country: "How does an aging contemporary art museum become venerable without losing touch with its roots and core audience? You have to be cutting edge and open to new artists and commission them to create new work. But after some 70 years of being in business, this museum also has a great collection of Warhol, the minimalists, Rothko, De Kooning and Bacon."

The museum will use its AIF grant of $750,000 to more sharply distinguish the identities of the two locations. "In La Jolla we have a wonderful oasis to contemplate culture and convene and have a discussion," says Davies. "Downtown is gritty and urban. Rather than trying to make them more homogenous, we are deliberately bifurcating."

Two missions

The two sites will now be referred to as "the lab and the forum." The downtown space will house new commissions, site-specific installations, premieres and even a studio for an artist in residence, which has been inhabited for the last two years by light and space artist Robert Irwin. In contrast, the La Jolla site, with its pristine, white galleries, will be refocused to house the museum's permanent collection.

The lone performing-arts grantee this year is the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, a large regional theater with a highly regarded master of fine arts program in acting. ACT will undertake a radical change in its curriculum to address some of the hard realities of earning a living in live theater.

"Actors can no longer expect to grow by getting a job in a company," says Melissa Smith, director of ACT's conservatory program. "They need to be entrepreneurs and find ways to create work and get seen."

This is where ACT's proposal also addressed a systemic problem of live theater -- the aging and dwindling audience. "The innovative thing that we were funded for," says Smith, "is a plan to make students not only responsible for devising more work of their own, but also for producing some of that work and finding an audience of 20- to 30-year-olds -- an audience of their own peers -- for whom they are going to perform."

To do this, ACT is supplementing its core acting classes with classes in producing,

marketing, cultivating donors and generating an audience of peers. "There isn't a model for this," says Smith. "It's risky in an artistic, pedagogical and resource sense."

Irvine is fully prepared that not everything that it funds will work. "Because it is risk capital," says Canales, "we know there is going to be failure. Ultimately, we're most concerned with what an organization is learning and what might be shared more broadly with the field. It's a long-term effort. Some things will bear fruit over time."

calendar@latimes.com