



CASE STUDY

Free Money

Artadia's unrestricted grants are about believing in artists

BY CLAIRE SELVIN

WHEN PEOPLE READ about artists receiving prizes or grants, they tend to skip to the numbers. In September, Colombian artist Doris Salcedo made headlines when she won the inaugural Nomura Art Award, which comes with a whopping \$1 million purse. The word “grant” calls to mind the MacArthur “Genius” variety, whose recipients get a generous \$625,000; last year’s lucky winning artists included Mel Chin, Jeffrey Gibson, Cameron Rowland, Sarah Michelson, and Walter Hood. But if you ask most artists, they will tell you the grants that mean the most are those smaller ones that come at a crucial point in their career—often early on.

For American artists, the gold standard for such a grant used to be the \$20,000 given annually by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Looking back through the annals of awardees, you find such



names as Glenn Ligon and Agnes Martin. When the NEA halted individual grants in 1997, at the tail end of the conservative backlash against artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, it left a gaping hole that art collector and financial analyst Chris Vroom determined to fill with an organization called Artadia, which he founded in San Francisco in 1999, to give artists unrestricted grants through an open-call application process. The gap left by the NEA “struck me as puzzling, given that artists are situated at the foundation of creative culture that we all derive so much benefit from,” Vroom said recently. Since Artadia’s founding, awardees have included such now prominent figures as Hank Willis Thomas, Catherine Wagner, Park McArthur, and Kahlil Joseph.

Last year, Artadia celebrated its twentieth anniversary—and took stock. In the past few years, the organization has

expanded dramatically, adding more cities to the program, and instituting a grant aimed specifically at immigrant and refugee artists. They’ve also put together data to counter those naysayers who believe artist grants should go toward specific projects, like the Future Generation Art Prize, which requires recipients to put \$40,000 of their \$100,000 winnings to new work. A 2018–19 survey conducted by Artadia, with data based on responses from 110 past awardees, revealed that a majority of the funds from the \$10,000 grants it has given—about 66 percent—have been used to support artistic production, with 14 percent of funds going toward studio rental, 9 percent to general living expenses, and 5 percent to debt relief. Carolyn Ramo, Artadia’s executive director, views the unrestricted grant model as one way the organization demonstrates its “belief in the person behind the artwork.”

Nick Cave won an Artadia grant seven years before his exhibition “Sojourn,” 2013, at the Denver Art Museum (pictured at far left).

Angelina Gualdoni, who made the 2019 painting *Impossible to Hold* (near left), used her 2001 Artadia grant to pay off grad school debt.

Vroom agreed. “I think it’s necessary to treat artists as individual creators who deserve respect,” he said. “They are perfectly able to decide how they can best utilize resources that will advance their careers,” whereas project grants that must support specific works or exhibitions “infantilize artists to a certain degree.”

To select their annual grant recipients in six U.S. cities, Artadia convenes a jury of three curators, including one who works locally, to review artists’ applications and compile a list of finalists. Shortlisted artists then receive studio visits from a second jury of local curators and artists, who pick three winners of \$10,000 each.

Chicago-based sculptor Nick Cave, a 2006 Artadia grant winner who has since joined the organization’s board of directors, said the funding enabled him to experiment with new materials and hire help for the production of work in the lead-up to a crucial early solo show at the Chicago Cultural Center. “It relinquishes some of the burden that comes with being an artist who perhaps is not coming from a privileged upbringing, and that allows them to do what it is that they need to do to resolve some things,” Cave said. The grant, he added, came at a critical juncture in his career and served as a “green light to keep moving forward.” Since then, Cave has shown with Mass MoCA, the Denver Art Museum, the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, and many others. His work is in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, and elsewhere, and his elaborate *Soundsuits* have fetched upward of \$100,000 at auction.

Painter Angelina Gualdoni received an Artadia grant in 2001, just after she completed graduate school, and she used it to pay off debt, work fewer hours at her day job, and buy materials. With more time spent in the studio, she secured her first solo show at Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago the next year.

“To have someone give me this award at a very early stage was a vote of confidence for what they felt my future might bring and for my ability to work in the moment,” Gualdoni said.

Courtesy Denver Art Museum

Courtesy the artist



Brendan Fernandes, an Artadia winner in 2019, showed in the Whitney Biennial that same year and put his grant funds toward procuring a permanent studio space and paying dancers in a new piece he's working on.

"When you're making performance work, you're always in different spaces," he said. "But just to have something that's mine that I can work out of and do many things from is really important. [The

award] allowed me to have resources to move my practice into a different space, scope, and scale."

In addition to affirmation and financial support, Artadia has provided its more than 300 grantees a network of institutional connections that can help them understand and navigate the art world, from securing gallery representation to meeting curators and collectors.

"We want to shine a light on all these

great cultural communities," Vroom said, "and make connections for all the people [who] make the ecosystem so valuable and vibrant."

Artist Marilyn Minter, who sits on the organization's board, said such post-award support systems are important. "The beauty of Artadia is it doesn't forget you—it follows up," she said. A 2019 awardee, Hadi Fallahpishah, expressed a similar sentiment when he said an Artadia grant



Brendan Fernandes got a grant the same year his performance *The Master and the Form* (above), was in the 2019 Whitney Biennial.

A new grant for immigrant and refugee artists went to Karen Navarro whose photo-based work *Subject #12* (2019) is shown at left.

Navarro: Courtesy the artist; Fernandes: Courtesy Monique Meloche Gallery/Photo Matthew Carassella

Courtesy the artist

"assures you as an emerging artist that you're not so alone."

From the beginning, Vroom's goal was to expand Artadia's geographic reach, with the Bay Area origin story evolving into annual award cycles for Chicago in 2001, Houston in 2003, Atlanta in 2009, Los Angeles in 2013, and New York in 2015. Through a new venture with the art-minded chain of 21c Museum Hotels, Artadia will give a \$10,000 grant in one of 11 American cities—including Louisville, Nashville, and St. Louis—on an annual basis.

"It's really about connectivity," said Ramo, who took the helm of Artadia in

2012. "Partnerships allow us to work together with those [who] are embedded in the community already."

Another new Artadia initiative is a Houston Fellowship, a series of \$2,500 grants for immigrant and refugee artists in the area. That program also pairs awardees with an artist adviser for support and guidance around the Houston art scene. "There was a real need for us to make sure that we were reaching new populations and the next generations of artists—those maybe outside the contemporary art community that can sometimes feel quite insular," Ramo said.

"In addition to affirmation and financial support, Artadia has provided grantees with connections."



Hadi Fallahpishah, another grantee, made the photograph *AMERICAMERICA* (2018).

Karen Navarro was named a Houston Fellow just a few years after moving there from Buenos Aires, and will be a mentor for the program in 2020; she said the arrangement serves an important purpose in one of the most diverse cities in America. "It's always good to have people who nurture your career," she said. "Having recognition from a prestigious organization not only gives you validation; it motivates you to keep working more, because you know that the work you do—if you work hard—pays off."

In December, the four nominees for the coveted Turner Prize in England, which comes with around \$52,000, threw a wrench into the prize-giving and grant-making community: they banded together to split the award among them in the spirit of collectivity. Such an event would seem less likely for a \$10,000 award, but Ramo defended individual grants in any case. "Artadia has reevaluated its criteria and its rhetoric around why we decide one artist is an awardee and one artist is not," she said. "However, the world is a competition, and it is important to spotlight individual artists. That allows us as a culture to learn from voices that might be stronger than others." ■