Creative Assets

A two-year-old partnership between The Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation is expanding creative opportunities for solo artists, while filling in funding gaps to support their work. By Christine O'Toole. Photography by Noah Purdy

Just as scientists look for genetic patterns using the flowering weed Arabidopsis thaliana, Natalie Settles turns to this plant for inspiration for visual motifs.

Natalie Settles

VISUAL ARTIST

As her own practice in drawing evolved, Natalie Settles jumped into projects that satisfied her keen curiosity about the natural world. She looked for a partnership that would expand her work and found an opportunity in the lab of Stephen Tonsor, a University of Pittsburgh evolutionary biologist. The National Science Foundation supports Tonsor's work and encouraged extensions that would broaden its impact. Settles' artist residency was designed to assist both of them in achieving their goals. The collaboration even played a role in Settles' selection as assistant curator for The Andy Warhol Museum's acclaimed Factory Direct show in 2011.

"Steve examines change within plant populations [in response] to the particularities of a site over time," Settles explains. "My wall drawings respond to site architecture and viewer traffic—essentially the particular conditions of a space over time, and how viewers respond to the work.

"The collaboration itself is a social sculpture, inspired by the work of artist Joseph Beuys, and based on evolutionary theory: When two practices are put into contact, they alter the mental space of each practitioner and the trajectory of the fields."

The $35,000 grant Settles received through the Investing in Professional Artists initiative supported the second year of her residency, during which she produced the prototype for interactive, wallpaper projections. Motifs touched most by viewers contribute their genetic "offspring" to the wallpaper, driving the evolution of the design. The project is planned for several different site-specific installations later this year.

Here's a 21st-century portrait of a young artist.

In an earlier era, Natalie Settles, slim and nervy, might be lugging a sketchbook as she unlocks the basement door to her latest residency. Instead, she's armed with a digital drawing tablet, just one piece of the high-tech, high-touch work she's doing with The Tonsor Lab Plant Evolution and Ecology at the University of Pittsburgh. Amid a cluster of greenhouses, grow lights and microscopes, she's getting inspiration from plant biologists to create "evolving wallpaper," a visionary art project that already has received coverage in Science magazine.

Settles, a 36-year-old visual artist, set her drawing practice aside for the opportunity to explore and define space in a new way: in the context of time. She has created a set of large-scale, digital wallpaper projections with motifs that behave like a population of organisms, changing their patterns over time in response to viewers' interaction with them through touch.

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Working with Steve Tonsor and his research staff has pushed Settles to broaden her artistic boundaries. "Biology and art speak truly different languages," she says. The evolving wallpaper project cuts across these two worlds, intending to elicit both intellectual and intuitive responses.

Settles' project might not have been completed without the support of a $35,000 grant through an innovative program that helps Pittsburgh artists bridge the gap between dreaming and doing. The Investing in Professional Artists: The Pittsburgh Region Artists Program was launched two years ago by The Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation. The limber funding resource has led artists, organizations and the participating foundations in unexpected aesthetic directions.

Other local programs that receive philanthropic support hone artists' marketing and business skills. Together, these initiatives serve an artistic population in the Pittsburgh area that is large for the region's size and, according to analyses by the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council, one of the nation's fastest-growing arts communities.

For several generations in southwestern Pennsylvania, both the Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation have been the modern-day equivalent of the Medici family in Renaissance Italy—stalwart arts patrons whose millions helped theaters, symphonies and museums flourish. But until recently, the Endowments avoided making grants to solo artists.

"The problem was the issue of judging quality and managing demand," says Janet Sarbaugh, senior director of the Endowments' Arts & Culture Program. "Moving to funding individuals is a major step, and, previously, we had not identified the right mechanisms to evaluate hundreds of applicants fairly and appropriately."

The National Endowment for the Arts stopped awarding grants to individuals in 1995 after some members of Congress criticized decisions to fund controversial artists and questioned the value or quality of certain works. That left American artists, particularly those at the beginning of their careers, with reduced support.

Nationally, cultural leaders such as Grantmakers in the Arts recognized that philanthropies needed to devise ways to fill the gap. New foundations, such as Creative Capital and Fractured Atlas, emerged and focused on individual artists. Regional donors, such as Minnesota's McKnight Foundation, upped their giving to state arts councils, asking the established organizations to make decisions on worthy individual artists.

The Endowments experimented with other options. It joined the Laurel Foundation in supporting the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust's annual creative achievement awards, which were established in 1991 for outstanding new and established artists. The recognition program is now under the direction of the Investing in Professional Artists initiative as the Carol R. Brown Awards, named for an Endowments board member and the Trust's founding president. In 2002, the Endowments launched the Creative Heights program, encouraging arts

Mark Clayton Southers

PLAYWRIGHT

Mark Clayton Southers has written 15 plays in the past 15 years. But the one he finished this year, a racially conscious adaptation of August Strindberg's "Miss Julie," was only the second he has completed with the support of a grant. Southers, who heads Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company, is working with British actor Lenny Henry to further develop the at adaptation of the 1888 play through workshop performances in London for possible broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

"When you run an organization, your individual art can suffer," Southers says. His 2013 Advancing Black Arts in Pittsburgh grant of $15,000 allowed him to tackle a project he had pondered since a 2008 trip to Dublin, during which he saw a production of "Miss Julie" set in rural Ireland.

Southers adds that the grant funding also was timely because he was laid off in March 2013 from his position as theater initiatives director at the August Wilson Center for African American Culture, and his unemployment compensation ran out in December.

"I invested in my art," he says. "Not being distracted allowed me to tap into these characters and unearth really great dialogue. Now that it's finished, I'm really proud of the work."

Southers considers Pittsburgh native August Wilson as both an inspiration and a mentor. He first met the late Pulitzer-winning playwright in 1998 at South Africa's Grahamstown National Arts Festival. "[Wilson] was completely focused on writing, honing his craft," Southers says. "That's why his plays stand the test of time."

Strindberg's production of "Miss Julie" examined power dynamics surrounding the relationship between a count's daughter and a valet who was a senior servant in the household. Southers calls his version "a remix" of the classic. Set on a Virginia tobacco plantation, the adaptation reinterprets the original play's theme of class struggle as one reflecting racial strife, which Southers expects will resonate with contemporary audiences.

As a personal muse, Mark Southers often wears an ancient Greek theater mask pin—he owns dozens—on his lapel. The pins symbolize tragedy and comedy. "I'm always looking for them in different places, and I also give them away," he says.

Julie Sokolow

FILMMAKER/COMPOSER

As an independent artist, 27-year-old Julie Sokolow is naturally drawn to examine the artistic and personal struggles of other solo practitioners. In her current documentary, "Aspie Seeks Love," the filmmaker found a compelling subject—David V. Matthews, a Pittsburgh artist in his 40s who has doggedly pursued love through a 20-year performance art project. Sokolow chronicles Matthews' recent diagnosis with Asperger syndrome and his poignant search for companionship.

"I was always passionate about intimate character studies, particularly of artists on the outskirts of mainstream society, but I had never tried to do a feature before," Sokolow says. The $10,000 grant that she received in 2012 to begin the project was one of the first Investing in Professional Artists grants awarded. She previously had benefited from a Flight School fellowship, a professional development program for independent artists, so she knew that applying for a grant would be a key step to beginning filming.

"Grant funding was essential in helping me break into an industry that's not particularly welcoming to women directors," she notes.

With filming complete, Sokolow is now seeking an additional $36,000 for post-production and distribution for "Aspie." The price tag on the project has risen because of a stroke of good fortune: Danny Yourd, who produced the 2013 Sundance Film Festival documentary prize winner "Blood Brother," signed on as executive producer for her film. His Pittsburgh-based company, Animal Media Group, will market the film through other international festivals and venues.

"Connecting with Animal Media Group made the project much more serious, with more ambitious goals, so there are increases in costs," Sokolow explains. "But it's a real vote of confidence that can help us get through the next stages of editing and distribution, so there's a long-term effect."

organizations to partner with solo artists on projects. The foundation also outsourced grants for longer residencies through the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

During this period, The Pittsburgh Foundation funded fiscal sponsors—existing nonprofits that accepted legal responsibility for administering grants to individual artists. But during conversations with artists, both foundations heard that the bureaucratic processes involved in obtaining support through third-party organizations didn't fit many artists' professional agendas.

Endowments staff worked with Germaine Williams, senior program officer for arts and education at The Pittsburgh Foundation, to create a funding collaboration that would allow the two foundations to pool resources to directly support individual artists. A program was designed to take advantage of The Pittsburgh Foundation's role as a community foundation that engages in different types of grantmaking to benefit the community. The Pittsburgh Foundation established the objective process for disbursing funds to artists, and the Endowments achieved the same goal by making grants to its philanthropic partner.

Julie Sokolow does a lot of walking in the city in search of inspiration beyond the confines of her office—and always with a black Moleskine notebook in hand. "Having a notebook you are really attached to helps you value what you write in it," she says. "You can hold onto your ideas and revisit them and notice common threads between them."

"The thing about Pittsburgh is that people see the need collectively, and they fill the need."

Jen Saffron, spokeswoman, Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council

The Investing in Professional Artists program that debuted in 2012 now awards more than $220,000 a year. It enlists previous grantees as resources and asks other grant recipients to serve on a regional funding panel. Each year, a group of local artists begins the two-stage process that culminates in a group of national arts leaders selecting finalists.

"It brings a high level of credibility to a very subjective decision-making process," Williams says.

Investing in Professional Artists also complements other professional and creative development opportunities. They include grants made jointly by the Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation that support artists individually or in groups through the Advancing Black Arts in Pittsburgh program and the Small Arts Initiative. All three programs employ peer review.

Among the efforts funded by the Endowments and other foundations, but administered elsewhere, is the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council's Artist Opportunity Grants program. The small-scale funding for travel and study assists dozens of artists each year, with a maximum award of $2,500. GPAC also has built a menu of professional development programs for individual artists.

As part of another initiative, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts immerses promising artists in an eight-week program that further develops their ability to direct and expand their careers. Dubbed Flight School, the program has graduated three 15-member classes since 2012. In addition, the Brew House Association, an artists' collective housed in a former brewery, pairs experienced artists and newbies in its Distillery mentoring program.

The synergy of the different programs is evident in the proposals reviewed by Investing in Professional Artists. "To date, 63 percent of Flight School fellows applied to the IPA program, and 12 percent of them have received grants—they were very competitive proposals," Williams says. "So, there's an awareness of funding opportunities."

Looking back, the Endowments' Sarbaugh believes that the evolution of programs at disparate institutions was beneficial.

"Pittsburgh's programs for individual artists have evolved organically," she explains. "Flight School and the Artist Opportunity Grants emerged because of specific interest of the sponsoring organization. I like the idea that there are a lot of voices and perspectives. That's good for artists. The next step, hopefully,

"Welcoming artists is a bellwether of community well-being."

Janet Sarbaugh, senior program director, The Heinz Endowments

will be that all these programs will start to coordinate their efforts."

To Ruby Lerner, founding president and executive director of Creative Capital, an all-fronts approach to sustaining artists is the future of arts philanthropy. "Maximally flexible and tailored to each artist—that's where we need to be going," she says. "It is not enough in a competitive environment to offer a travel grant or distribute funds. These things need to follow the individual with counseling and conversation with artists."

GPAC spokeswoman Jen Saffron agrees. "The thing about Pittsburgh is that people see the need collectively, and they fill the need," she says. "That's very common here, but uncommon elsewhere. Artists will gravitate toward resources because we need them to produce our work." Just as important, she adds, the increasing amount of support for artists in Pittsburgh helps the region retain many creative individuals who might leave otherwise.

In fact, Pittsburgh's creative community is growing. The number of people ages 20 to 24 living in the city jumped more than 22 percent during the past decade, including a new generation of artists looking for inspiration and support. According to annual surveys conducted by GPAC, Pittsburgh now has 249 artists per 100,000 in the population, compared to an average of 148 among peer cities across the country.

Young artists are more likely to try crowd-sourcing their fundraising, and some locals have had success with Kickstarter and Indiegogo campaigns. GPAC also sees demand growing for its opportunity grants; last spring's application round—one of three each year—attracted a record 68 applicants.

GPAC's data for 2012–13 showed that Pittsburgh's growth in artist employment led most of the nation, ranking sixth among American cities. And artists hope to stay: 78 percent of artists in Pittsburgh are optimistic about their futures here, a higher rate than in the organization's previous surveys.

To Sarbaugh, that's a trend that the city must encourage. "The solo practitioners can seem largely invisible, but they add to the fabric of the arts community," she says. "We want to be more of a mecca for creative people. Welcoming artists is a bellwether of community vitality."

This type of supportive environment also gives artists the freedom to explore new ways to develop their craft. The Investing in Professional Artists grant that funded the second year of Settles' residency in the Tonsor Laboratory allowed her to embark on a self-taught crash course in software coding. That additional knowledge is helping to bring the evolving wallpaper project to fruition.

"When the science and the art come together and harmonize," she says, "the work feels alive." *h*

Miguel Sague III

AFRO-LATIN MUSICIAN

Miguel Sague III's professional career began at age 8, when he started performing with his father's salsa band, Guaracha. After graduating from the Pittsburgh High School for the Creative and Performing Arts, the city's arts magnet school, he expanded his repertoire to other forms of Afro-Latin music. A $15,000 grant from Advancing Black Arts in Pittsburgh allowed him to create the Afro-Latin Time-Cruiser, a musical production that serves as a primer on the African roots of Caribbean music.

"Lots of African melodies and words are well known to Cubans, so they came down to me like nursery rhymes," he says.

Sague's production includes singing in Yoruba and other African languages and introduces the cross-cultural roots of rhumba, conga and other Caribbean cultural expressions. He designed his show to appeal to both students and public audiences.

The Oconcolo is one of the three Bata drums of the Yoruba people in Nigeria. Each drum denotes a family member: the mother, the big brother or the little brother. As the little brother drum, the Oconcolo is inspirational to and within Miguel Sague's work because it represents the children in his audience and pays homage to 500 years of Afro-Cuban music preserved by Cuban people.