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Local Artist Vanessa German Wins Big National Prize

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Vanessa German poses with one of her "power figure" sculptures.

COURTESY OF CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

The Don Tyson Prize is a big one, and for Pittsburgh-based artist Vanessa German, it came of the blue.

On Dec. 7, she received a phone call from Rod Bigelow, executive director of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, in Arkansas. German is known nationally for her impassioned spoken-word performances and striking sculptural work, and locally for the Art House, a grassroots community art center in Homewood. She is slated to speak at Crystal Bridges in April. Her work deals largely with racism and its effects, and her first thought was that Bigelow was calling because one of her artworks had upset somebody.

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Instead, Bigelow casually started telling her about the museum's Tyson Prize, awarded every other year to an organization or individual artist who is "pushing boundaries, taking risks, and changing the way we experience or think about art."

German hadn't heard of the award and didn't know why Bigelow was telling her about it – until he said she'd won, chosen from among 85 nominees by a panel of art experts.

"And I was like, 'Wow that's amazing. That's really humbling. That's an honor,'" says German. "And then he said it comes with a monetary prize. ... And then when he told me the amount that it was, I cried."

The cash prize is \$200,000.

"Vanessa's work is inspiring, socially relevant, and continues to have a great impact, not only on the Homewood community, but the contemporary art world as a whole," said Lauren Haynes, Crystal Bridges' curator of contemporary art.

The prize, announced today, comes at a great time for German, age 42. For years, her "power figures" – sculptures in the form of African-American infants, children or adults, adorned with found objects – have drawn praise in Pittsburgh. She says the works comprise "a community of sculptures that ... contend and reckon with the trauma and the violence of white supremacy and racism, and do that through experiences of joy and wonder and ritual, and invite people into spaces to connect with these communities of sculptures as a way of social healing."

German's work has been exhibited all over Pittsburgh around the U.S., and she's gotten press from the likes of "CBS Sunday Morning," NPR's "All Things Considered," The Huffington Post, and "O Magazine." And she's received other national prizes, including the 2015 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant, the 2017 Jacob Lawrence Award from the American Academy of Art and Letters, and the 2018 United States Artist Grant.

German is also in demand as a speaker and performer. And she's been acclaimed for the Art House, a colorfully painted residence, its façade decorated with mosaics. Anyone is welcome to come there and make art for free, and it's been a second home for children from the neighborhood.

But like many artists, German earns a modest income. And the three old houses that comprise Homewood's Art House need a bit of work – especially because creeping gentrification in Homewood has her feeling like developers are scouting her place as an investment property.

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*John Tyson, son of the award's namesake Don Tyson, giving Vanessa German the check.
CREDIT BILL O'DRISCOLL / WESA*

When she learned of the cash prize, she says, "I thought immediately, I'm going to be able to secure this [building] in a way that is unquestionable ..."

One priority is repairing a set of concrete steps on one of the three buildings.

German has other, less workaday plans for the money, too. She wants to complete work on The Museum of Resilience, a small venue on the grounds meant as "a place to reckon with the trauma and violence and transform that into a healing future of hope and love where our lives can be sustained."

She also plans a couple of initiatives involving nearby Westinghouse High School. These include starting a scholarship for a black female artist who is a student there, and buying passports for "the entire senior graduating class." German wants to give "self-care awards" to fellow activists under financial stress. And directly pertinent to her own artistic practice – her studio is in a house -- she'd like to have a doorway big enough to fit the increasingly large-scale work she's doing, like her room-sized sculptural installation that closed earlier this year at the Mattress Factory.

"I am dreaming of a place that has a garage door"

The Crystal Bridges Museum opened in 2011. The Tyson Prize is named for Don Tyson, the late former chairman and CEO of Tyson Foods. It is awarded to an organization or individual. The 2016 winner was the Archives of American Art.

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German, who considers herself a self-taught artist, sees the award as validation not just for her, but for all self-taught artists.

“I’m an artist that has actively received messages over the years that I would always be a certain kind of artist, relegated to the margins of a certain kind of visibility,” she says. “And so I want to affirm the work and the imagination of all the artists in our region, but especially the self-taught artists, especially the artists who are probably alone in their house, making poems or making sculptures or making paintings that they think that nobody would ever care to see, or that they think aren’t valuable because the world talks about art a certain way, and thinks about art a certain way.

“I want to say that your work is important, your life is important, and that we need you, we need the work that you’re creating. So be affirmed, and keep creating, and know that you matter.”