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State Fair art exhibit shows a small portion of the state's artists

By [David Beard](#) on Sep 9, 2016 at 4:52 p.m.

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"Housing Development on Rouchleau Mine, Virginia, 2012" by Vance Gellert. (Photo: Tweed Museum of Art)

Every year, at the "Great Minnesota Get-Together," I visit the Fine Arts exhibit. For more than 100 years, the State Fair has showcased the finest in painting, textiles, ceramics, prints, photographs and more.

This year, I was excited to see a photograph I recognized from a Tweed Museum exhibit, "Iron Country" by Vance Gellert. The photograph, "Housing Development on Rouchleau Mine, Virginia, 2012," depicts new home construction on the edge of a disused area of a mine.

Gellert took third place. For a moment I felt local pride. Then I looked closer and remembered: Gellert is not an Iron Range photographer. He's displayed works at the Tweed, the Zeitgeist and in Grand Rapids, but he's from the Twin Cities.



A review of the 48 winners of the State Fair art competition shows a deep metro bias. Only three live an hour or more from the metro area. Two of those, painter John Salminen of Duluth and sculptor Albert Belleveau of Puposky, are from Northern Minnesota.

This is not because there are few quality artists outside the metro area. The submission system makes participation by outside artists an ordeal.

John Gregor, instructor for Two Harbors' Coldsnap Photography, has argued for years about the structural biases against artists from the Arrowhead. "Unlike the agricultural contests like the competitions sponsored by the 4H or FFA, there is unfortunately no network or organization that assists the artists or smooths the process for out-state artists," he said.

The submission process happens in two phases. The first is electronic submission for initial judging. The second, an in-person jury review, occurs on a single weekend (this year July 30-31). For an artist who lives a quick commute from the fairgrounds, delivering your work is easy. So is picking up the rejected work (Aug. 6-7). For an artist making two round trips from Duluth, delivery and return represents two days of lost work time and 600 miles of driving. For an artist from International Falls, double all of that.

No wonder the Arrowhead is more likely to be present in photos taken by metro artists like Gellert than in photos taken by artists born and raised up north.

According to Gregor, "The largest art exhibit in the state is effectively restricted to artists who can easily drive to the fairgrounds and drop off their work. It is a shame that, with all the Legacy money dedicated for the artists of Minnesota, that a portion of it cannot be used to make this uniquely Minnesota event accessible to more Minnesota artists."

Gregor refers to his two-year campaign as a board member of the Arrowhead Regional Arts Council to encourage ARAC to facilitate Duluth and Arrowhead participation in the art exhibit at the State Fair. Such a program would be a cost-effective way to bring Duluth-area artists before hundreds of thousands of eyes.

Perhaps a reader of this article will have a better idea, one neither Gregor nor I have imagined yet, to use Legacy funding to facilitate statewide participation in the fair. In any case, I would like, next year, to recognize my home, and recognize artists from my home, on the walls of the largest art exhibit in the state.



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