

The Projects' exterior displays a Douglas Hoekzema mural.

Money for Art's Sake

The couple behind the Projects in FAT Village are looking to make good use of their new Knight grant.

By: Editor

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The end of 2014 was an eventful time for Leah Brown and Peter Symons. On November 26 their first child was born, and five days later it was announced that the Projects – their contemporary art space in FAT Village – was the recipient of an \$80,000 Knight Arts Challenge grant.

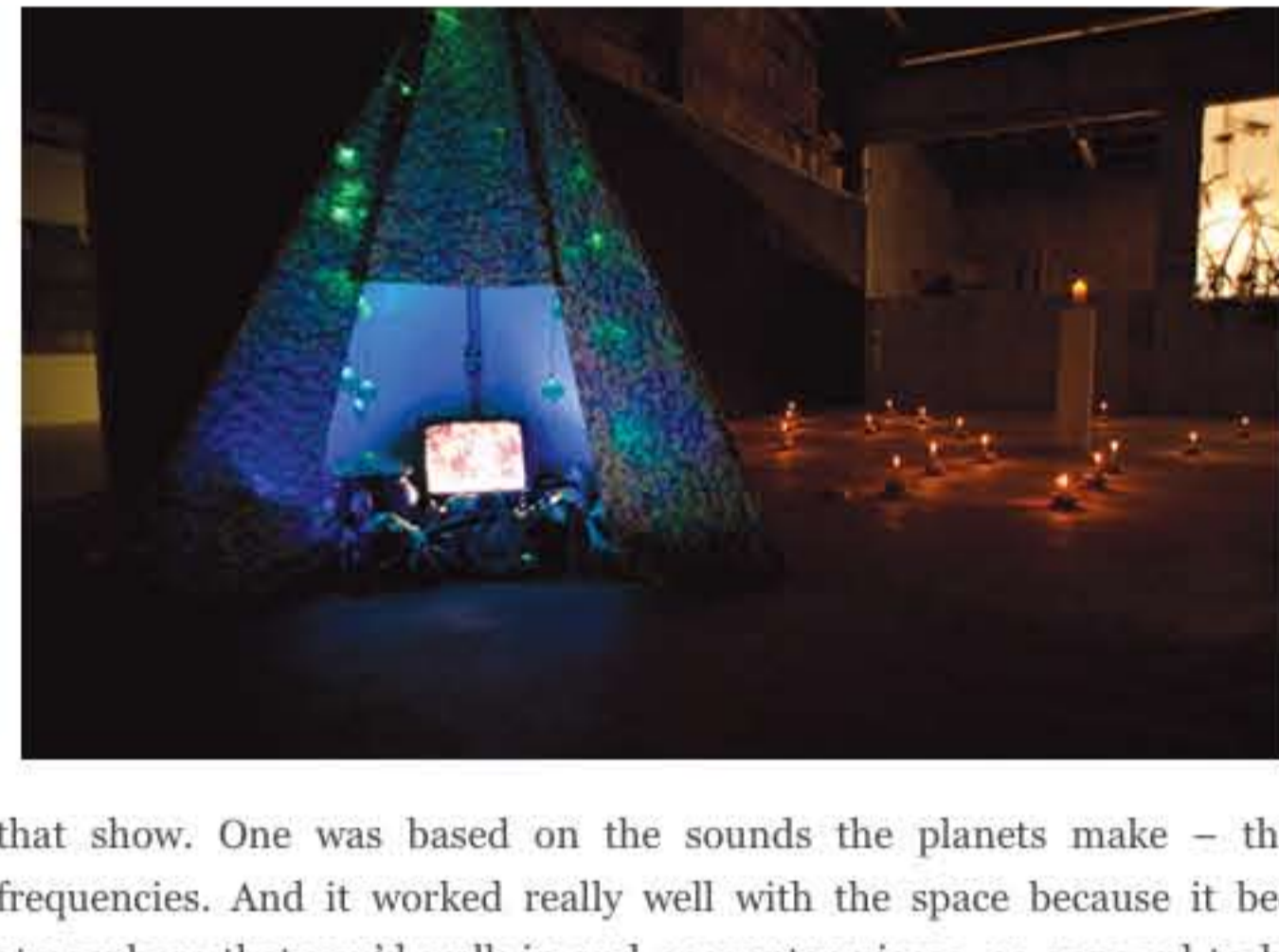
"It was a really exciting time for us," said Brown, sitting in the next door office with Symons, their new daughter Juniper and Doug McCraw, the owner of the 10,000 square foot warehouse and the mastermind behind FAT Village.

The couple met McCraw about five years ago. They had a place, 18 Rabbit Gallery, across from the bus station, in which they showed experimental, contemporary art. "Peter and I are both sculptors and installation artists," said Brown, "and we really like the cutting edge of art, the stuff that's not so commercially viable." The two Rhode Island School of Design graduates invited McCraw to one of their exhibits, and he in turn invited them to move to FAT Village.

"We were so happy not to be so isolated anymore," she said. "To actually move into a community of artists that was already established."

"We curated a show," said Symons, "and we said, 'Do you mind if we use some of those spaces that are not being used?' And Doug said, 'Oh, sure, go ahead.' So we had work all over the neighborhood in all of these random spaces that were not being used at the time. Of course now they're all filled up."

One of them was the building that is now home to the Projects.



"The first show Leah and I curated in this space was called 'Self-Lit,'" said Symons, "because we didn't have any lights. There were some really cool pieces in

that show. One was based on the sounds the planets make – their radio wave frequencies. And it worked really well with the space because it became this dark atmosphere that you'd walk in and encounter pieces, as opposed to how you usually expect to find art – on the wall and very well-lit. It became like an adventure."

If you've visited the Projects during one of the monthly art walks, you know what an impressive space it is, from the black-and-white mural on the outside wall – a work by Douglas Hoekzema – to the 8,000 feet of exhibition space, all of it free span and rising 19 feet to the beams.

"There's something about the specificity of the space that's really inspirational for the artists," said Brown. "They'll come in here without a clear idea of what they're going to do, and once they see what the possibilities are, and what the aesthetic is, then that informs the work."

"It's a lot of fun showing artists this space for the first time," said Symons. "It's just like shock and awe."

"I showed it once to an artist from Brooklyn," McCraw said, "and he was emotional. He wasn't crying, but he was teary-eyed."

"I don't know any other space around here that's like this," said Symons.

"Yeah," said Brown, "other than a museum. But we're not a museum."

"And a museum doesn't have this aesthetic," said McCraw.

That entails not just the building's size but its rawness. The previous tenant manufactured architectural flooring. Holes in the floor have long been filled in, and lighting has been added. More improvements are planned. "The idea is to get it into really top drawer exhibition space," said McCraw, making a point to note that its coveted raw quality will remain.

The number of shows will not increase. (In the last four years, Brown and Symons have put on more than 30.) But there will be regular hours during which the art can be viewed.

"That's new," said Brown. "That's what the Knight Challenge grant is giving us. And that's really the beauty of it. We've been putting so much time and effort into these shows, and so have our artists, that in a lot of ways it's a shame to have it open only one night a month, in a kind of party situation. You know, you're seeing your friends, and a lot of time it becomes about the social component rather than about viewing the artwork. So to be able to actually have those hours when people can come back and see the work and appreciate it is really huge to us."

At the time of this writing, specific hours had not been set, but they will probably be afternoons and early evenings around the middle and end of the work week.

"And we'll be able to have more programming too – workshops and artist talks," Brown said. The "Among Body Marks" show (which runs through the end of this month) is making use of lectures, film screenings, performances and panel discussions.

"Artists are interested," said McCraw. "It's sort of a salon type idea."

Because the Knighted funds are matching funds, Brown and Symons will be looking for corporate sponsors. "We think it's a good fit for corporate sponsorship," Symons said, "because on the art walks we get about 2,000 people coming through. And it's 2,000 people who would be recognizing this business that would be supporting the arts."

"We'll probably be doing a membership," said Brown, "a member of the Projects, or FAT Village, with a donor wall. We also do a lot with lighting effects, so we have projectors that can project really high quality logos. We want to make it worth their while to get their names out there and show that they are supporting a part of the community that is engaging people's creativity and inspires people."

"The grant is a big validation of the work that Peter and Leah have done," said McCraw. "It will make raising corporate funds very attractive. Certainly during the art walks we get a powerful demographic."

"Old people and families and hipsters and everybody," said Brown.

"It's a very welcoming neighborhood," said Symons. "It's a very 'oh-you-like-it? Come-on-in' kind of thing."

"There's a real sense of community here that I don't think you find in other art districts around Florida – or a lot of places," said Brown.

"It's a very collaborative environment," added McCraw. "I call it an 'arts and technology ecosystem.'"

And now one of its components has some money to work with.

