

Austin American-Statesman

by: Claire van Ryzin
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Live, before an audience, an art competition picks a winner

It's part "Top Chef"-style creative competition show, part live art critique class.

And for the winner of "Eyes Got It," an annual art competition that dovetails with the East Austin Studio Tour, the prize is an elusive yet crucial milestone for any emerging artist: A solo gallery exhibition.



Installation shot of Gracelee Lawrence's solo exhibit "Mouthfeel" at Grayduck Gallery.

Gracelee Lawrence won last year's "Eyes Got It" competition. And now the University of Texas graduate student is reaping the benefit with "Mouthfeel," her solo show at Grayduck Gallery through Oct. 19.

Salvador Castillo — arts advocate, chair of the city's Art in Public Places panel and well-known blogger and social media connector of the Austin visual arts scene — started "Eyes Got It" five years ago. And yes, it's a spin on the short-lived Bravo network show "Work of Art: The Next Great Artist," as well as other creative competition reality shows.

Not that Castillo has really seen many such reality shows. "I actually don't have cable" television, he said

recently, at Grayduck Gallery.

But it seemed like a clever way to spin the event, and so Castillo went with it. What he wanted to do is take the process of selecting an exhibit — something that's usually conducted behind closed doors — and put it in front of an audience.



Installation shot of Gracelee Lawrence's solo exhibit "Mouthfeel" at Grayduck Gallery.

Which artist is selected for which exhibit or prize and how that selection happened remains a constant topic of chatter and speculation in any art community.

"I always tell artists that really there's a lot of consideration that goes into what a jury or panel decides," says Castillo. "And a lot of that discussion is really interesting critical comments that most people don't get to hear but that offer a lot of insight into contemporary art. You can learn a lot by listening to what these judges say."

"Eyes Got It" is open to any artist 18 or older living within an 80-mile radius of the Texas Capitol or an 80-mile radius of the geographic center of San Antonio. (Castillo includes the San Antonio community in order "to build a better a dialogue between the arts communities in both cities — something that's never been great," he says.)

Castillo assembles a four-person jury made up of a combination of curators, critics, gallery owners and, always, an artist.



"Eyes Got It" organizer Salvador Castillo, artist Gracelee Lawrence and gallerist Jill Schroeder of Grayduck Gallery.

During the "Eyes Got It" presentation, an initial first round finds slides from all the entrants shown in a quick-moving presentation during which the judges reveal their picks for the top 10. In the second round, the judges critique the top 10 and whittle the selection down to four finalists.

Then each of the four finalists gets a few minutes of stage time in what Castillo describes as a little like a "live studio visit." The artist has the opportunity to show actual works of art, not just slides, and judges and artists engage in lively conversation. The judges then discuss their final

decisions among themselves, yet publicly, then reveal the winner.

Castillo serves as the show's host.

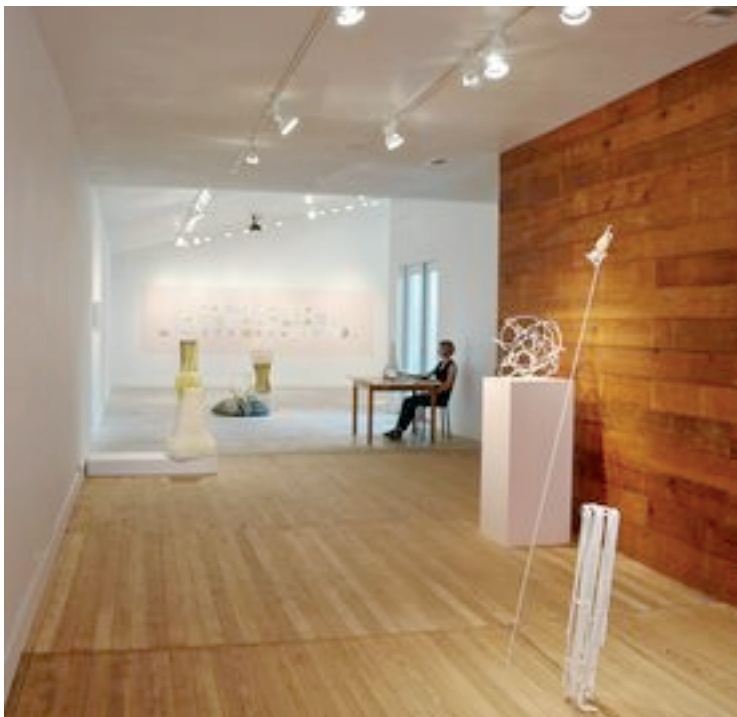
This year's "Eyes Got It" show is Nov. 8 at the East Austin Studio Tour headquarters.

"This is sort of a crash course on what happens in the art world," says Castillo. "A live, public crash course."

Lawrence, a North Carolina native who is primarily a sculptor, was fairly new to Austin a year ago, in her first semester of graduate school. "Eyes Got It" seemed, she says, "like a great introduction to the Austin art scene."

And no, the event's reality television inspiration didn't make her wince.

"I'm pretty good on my feet and feel fairly comfortable talking about my work," she says. "The whole thing sounded like fun for me."



Installation shot of Gracelee Lawrence's solo exhibit "Mouthfeel" at Grayduck Gallery.

Filled with allusions to food, consumption, sensuality and ritual, her sculptural objects often incorporate video seen only by peering into an orifice-like opening. Her twisted, colorful organic forms are made of powder coated steel, rubber, fiber glass, terrycloth or foam. One gallery wall is filled with small drawings — the starting creative points of Lawrence's mostly human-size sculptures.

If her current exhibit at Grayduck is not her first solo showing, it is Lawrence's first in Texas. And since winning the 2014 competition, other solo exhibit opportunities have come her way. Lawrence has a show next year at a Houston gallery.

For Grayduck Gallery owner Jill Schroeder, hosting the "Eyes Got It"

winner's exhibit each year brings a fresh batch of artistic talent to the foreground. The competition "always turns up artists I didn't know about," she says.

For the last couple of years, Schroeder has curated "Group Hug," an exhibit featuring the 10 semi-finalists. Earlier this year, "Group Hug" showed at San Antonio's 107 Gallery and at Austin's Pump Project Gallery.

Castillo enjoys how after five years of "Eyes Got It" he can see the career's of past participants — regardless if they're finalists or even semi-finalists — pick up traction as their artwork pops up in more exhibits and is selected for more galleries.

"That's the best part," says Castillo. "Getting more eyes on more people's work."

"Gracelee Lawrence: Mouthfeel"

When: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, noon to 5 p.m. Sundays through Oct. 19

Where: Grayduck Gallery, 2213 E. Cesar Chavez St.

Tickets: Free

Information: 512-826-5334, www.grayduckgallery.com

For an online slideshow of Gracelee Lawrence's exhibit, see www.austin360.com/arts.

"Eyes Got It"

What: Open call to all artists 18 and older, living within 80 miles from the Texas Capitol or 80 miles from the center of San Antonio.

Deadline: Oct. 26

Cost: \$13

Information: eyesgotit.wordpress.com