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City Hall hosts rare display of West Collection contemporary art

BY PETER CRIMMINS

A major collection of international contemporary art lives in Oaks, Pa., 25 miles from downtown Philadelphia. The privately held West Collection can be seen only by appointment inside the U.S. headquarters of SEI, a financial services company.

In a rare Center City exhibition, a selection of the collection's new acquisitions is now on display in Philadelphia's City Hall.

There is an image of a military cargo plane made entirely out of adhesive duct tape ("I Drop Bombs...Help Is On The Way," Joe Girandola), historic portraits of 19th century Southern aristocracy re-created on crushed beer cans ("White Trash," Kim Alsbrooks), and a larger-than-life photo-realistic drawing of Arnold Schwarzenegger in full "Pumping Iron" pose, by Mark Stockton.

"We specialize in large installation work that seems to translate with either the material being recognizable or the image being recognizable," said West Collection curator Lee Stoetzel. "In other words -- if it's an abstract work, it's constructed out of material people would know -- old tires, or some kind of recyclable."

Alfred West and his daughter Paige have been aggressively collecting cutting-edge contemporary art for years and housing it at the SEI campus, where Alfred West is CEO. It acts as a corporate collection; employees are encouraged to interact with it. It is only open to the public by appointment.

Four years ago, they established the West Prize, a \$100,000 competitive process that buys new work from artists. Over those four years they have received more than 11,000 submissions.

For the 2012 prize, they renamed it "West Collects," and bumped up the acquisition funds to \$300,000, with \$100,000 reserved exclusively for Philadelphia work. All 10 artists now on display in City Hall are the most recent Philadelphia-based winners of the acquisition prize.

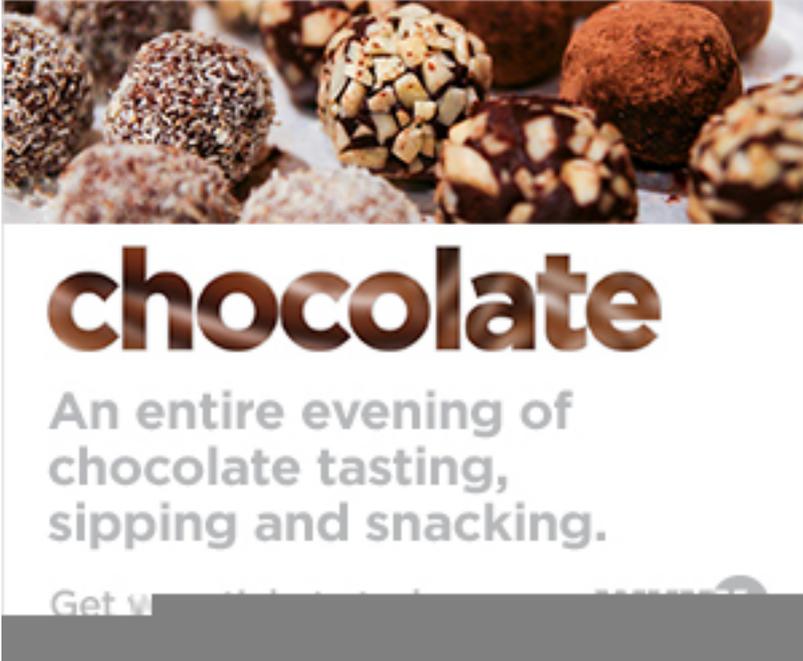
"Our mission is to showcase exhibitions that tell a larger story about the arts and design within Philadelphia," said Gary Steuer, Philadelphia's chief cultural officer. "The West Collection is based out in Oaks, Pa., so they don't really have a presence in the city."

Steuer is talking with the Wests about how to bring their collection to Philadelphia on a more permanent basis. Plans have not been established for where it would be, or what form it would take.

"Us being at City Hall is evidence of this -- the accessibility factor for artists, for art schools, for the public," said Stoetzel. "It's just so great to be in the center where people can access it."

Works by the 20 artists selected for West Collects in 2012 (http://www.westcollection.org/West_Collection/Home.html)-- 10 national and 10 international artists -- are now on display at the SEI building in Oaks, by appointment.

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