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## Three artists win Charlotte Street Foundation awards

By ALICE THORSON  
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After a short-lived bout on "Project Runway" last August, Kansas City's Ari Fish — the first designer booted off during the show's sixth season — has received meaningful recognition for excellence in her true métier.

Fish recently became one of three artists to receive 2010 Charlotte Street Foundation visual artist awards for artistic merit.

All three — the others are fabric artist Sonie Ruffin and painter Caleb Taylor — are richer in cash (\$10,000 each) and confidence.

"I feel like I'm living a dream," Fish said.

"For the last two years, I've been going through an identity crisis because

of 'Project Runway.' I'm not just a clothing designer. Whatever the medium, I'm interested in what can convey the power of the individual in the collective."

This year's artist selection panel reviewed the largest number of nominees ever, said Stacy Switzer, artistic director of Grand Arts and one of five arts professionals who chose the award winners.

"I think it's really wonderful that the Charlotte Street Foundation could recognize work such as Ari's," Switzer said. "In other circumstances, some might try to relegate it to couture fashion, but I would argue that it's so much more than that. It's not just wacky fashion; (there are) arguments about how to live in the world embedded in those garments."

Fish plans to use her award funds for new projects and is working with her mother on a business proposal involving the intersection of fine art and affordable, practical products.



**These shots show cotton garments created by 2010 Charlotte Street Foundation award winner Ari Fish for her "Spring/Summer Collection Berlin" (2009). "I'm not just a clothing designer," Fish says. "I'm interested in what can convey the power of the individual in the collective."**

“I’ve already built a prototype for a low-cost ‘life pack,’ a tent that goes into a backpack that you can also wear as a jacket,” she said.

Fish envisions selling the “life packs” as fine-art multiples and using the proceeds to underwrite the cost of distributing lower-price versions to people who could really use them.

“That’s the future of art and production,” she said. “If you want to make something that does right by society, market to those with money and would want to collect, and through that make something for the good of the people. It’s much more powerful and something everyone can have a piece of.”

## **Sonie Ruffin**

Last month, when Sonie Ruffin heard Charlotte Street Foundation associate director Kate Hackman on the line, she assumed the call was about a meeting.

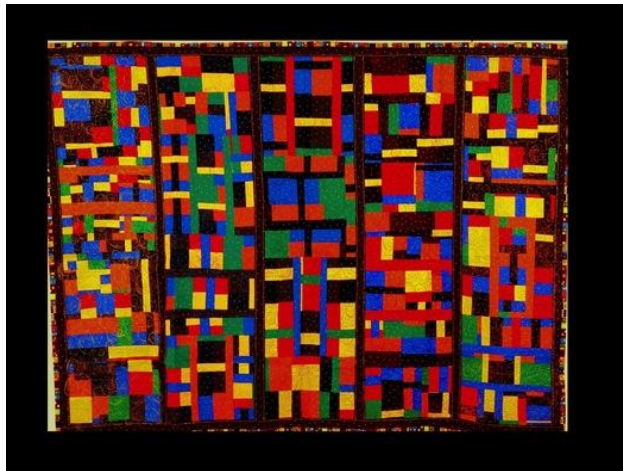
Instead, she got the \$10,000 tap on the shoulder.

“I cried,” Ruffin said. “I called my high school art teacher. She cried.”

When she was growing up, people around her viewed art as a luxury, Ruffin recalled. “I got a business degree because my grandpa said I had to get a job.”

But it was art that set her on the right path.

“Art saved my life,” Ruffin said. “That’s really what it does. It saves lives, it broadens your perspective and your world and puts you in a place where you’re looking in the mirror while you’re creating.”



**Award winner Sonie Ruffin is known for colorful quilts like this 2007 piece titled “Community.”**

Ruffin has been making fabric art since junior high, but she didn’t have her first serious show until 2003, when she exhibited fabric works inspired by African quilts at the Vine Street Studio.

Since then, she has taught fabric workshops at the Smithsonian and exhibited frequently in the area with encouragement from mentors and friends, including Jim Leedy, Dean Mitchell and quilt artists NedRa Bonds and Sherry Whetstone-McCall. In 2009, she had a solo exhibit of quilts at the American Jazz Museum.

Ruffin said she will tithe 10 percent of her award money and use some of it to help pay for a trip to Ghana in September.

She plans to invest some of the funds in her studio, where she is making new works that tackle issues from marriage to white slavery to AIDS.

“The “stories are layered” and “the pieces are layered,” Ruffin said. “I’m pushing those (traditional) techniques as far as I can push them. I use masks, cowrie shells, beads and crystals to tell a story.”

The judging process “was very collegial, very partisan,” said Maria Buszek, who had her first turn on the foundation’s rotating artist-selection panel this year.

Buszek, an associate professor of art history at the Kansas City Art Institute, joined returning Kansas City panelists Switzer and James Martin, an independent curator and art writer, and two out-of-town judges: Gregory Volk, a New York-based art critic and independent curator, and Russell Ferguson, chairman of the University of California-Los Angeles department of art and former deputy director/chief curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

“We all had our top choices, and we didn’t all get our top choices,” Buszek said. “There was a lot of discussion and a lot of debate. The out-of-town judges were very interested in our perspective on how the artists fit into the Kansas City art scene and quick to point out how these artists fit into international trends or issues — a bigger zeitgeist.”

“Both Ari and Sonie relate in different ways to the fiber community and the contemporary art world,” Buszek said. “Caleb (Taylor) engages the modernist tradition of abstraction, even as he defies it with busy underpainting.”

### **Caleb Taylor**

Taylor, a native of Maryville, Mo., decided to settle in Kansas City after completing his master of fine arts degree at Montana State University in Bozeman in 2008.

The Charlotte Street Foundation’s awards program was one of the things that influenced his decision to move here. Since 1997, the foundation has awarded \$477,500 to 76 visual and performing artists.

“I’ve had my eyes set on that for a long time,” Taylor said. “I’m thrilled to be part of it.”

He impressed the panelists with his large abstract paintings that mine the traditions of color-field and gesture painting. The works feature an underlayer of busy gestural painting, which the artist then overpaints — but not entirely — with a field of solid color or white.



**“Red” (2008), a painting by award winner Caleb Taylor responds to the traditions of Color Field and gesture painting.**

Stenciled areas offer a view of the gestural underlayer that evokes a pulsing organism beneath the surface.

Taylor conceives of the overpainted field, executed with arcing brushstrokes that convey a sense of volume, as skin and the underlayer as a “bulging body.”

“You can almost see the scars from the underpainting,” he said, “(like) blemishes, under the skin.”

Taylor works in a studio provided by the Charlotte Street Foundation’s Urban Culture Project studio residency program. When that ends in April, he plans to use some of his award money to rent a big studio.

Although the grant is unrestricted, he

said, "I don't know if I could live with myself if the money disappeared and I wasn't any further. I want to travel and make more work. I'm looking for a big space to make bigger paintings, and I'm thinking about some sculptures."

All three of this year's winners have a strong idea of where they're headed. They'll share their new projects next fall, in the Charlotte Street Foundation's 2010 award winners show at Grand Arts.