

'It Could Be You'

Artists' Fellowship provides emergency aid to artists and their families

BY AMANDA GORDON

When the realist painter Jorge Alberto learned that his increasing inability to see colors accurately was due to advanced cataracts, he sat in his doctor's office and cried. "I was terrified," Alberto said from his studio in Baltimore. "My eyes and my hands are my tools."

Alberto shows his detailed still lifes at Arcadia Fine Arts in New York and Troika Gallery in Easton, Maryland. After he underwent surgery, he was unable to work for months because of complications, and found himself worrying about his expenses as well as his eyesight. It was then that he decided to apply for assistance from Artists' Fellowship, a New York-based private charitable foundation that provides emergency aid to professional artists and their families. The foundation gave him \$1,000, he says, "which helped pay my mortgage. Having that help eased my anxiety."

Founded in 1859, Artists' Fellowship dispenses about \$175,000 annually to between 60 and 80 artists, in amounts from a few hundred to several thousand dollars. The organization has no guidelines for applying, but most of the aid requests it receives are for health-related problems. Its funds are generated by a \$4 million endowment, which is invested mainly in stocks and has grown with the help of bequests from artists or family members of artists who have received aid. The Fellowship has no employees and is based in the Salmagundi Club in New York—at no charge, so overhead costs are very low, according to Pamela Singleton, its treas-



urer and money manager for the past 20 years.

The Fellowship board meets once a month to evaluate requests. Applicants must submit tax returns and examples of their work, though an evaluation of the work is not part of the decision-making process.

Fellowship president Babette Bloch, a sculptor based in Redding, Connecticut, would like to raise more funds so that the organization can dispense more aid. "Health-care costs are a huge issue for older artists," she says. She is also recruiting artists to become members of the organization to create a greater sense of community. In addition to giving grants, the Fellowship has since the 1940s annually honored distinguished artists (including Jacob Lawrence, Jane Freilicher, and, last year, Robert Kipniss). It also honors other individuals and organizations that have contributed to the profession.

"The Artists' Fellowship has been very quietly helping artists for more than 150 years," says artist Will Barnet, a longtime adviser to the organization. "The help is very modest, but it's enough to make a person feel more secure. And it gives them a sense of being part of an institution."

For Celeste Collier, receiving aid from the Artists' Fellowship was a validation

▲ **Artists' Fellowship aid recipient Celeste Collier painting at the Grand Canyon, 2010.**

of her decision to pursue landscape painting full-time after a career in retail. "For me—being an emerging artist—it helped me more emotionally than anything else," she says. "It gave me the feeling my work is valued." Collier received \$1,500, after incurring \$20,000 in medical bills for cancer treatment.

Artists are particularly vulnerable to financial pressures, according to Jackie Battenfield, an artist herself and the author of *The Artist's Guide: How to Make a Living Doing What You Love*. Battenfield, who advises artists on how to become financially stable, says that "artists don't budget for the unexpected, so it's pretty easy for them to get into an emergency situation."

Even after more than 20 years with the organization, Bloch finds reading through applications extremely difficult. You can't help realizing, she says, that "with a certain turn of events, it could be you." ■

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