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For MacArthur Grants, Another Set of ‘Geniuses’

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A papermaker dedicated to preserving traditional Western and Japanese techniques; a scientist developing theories of global climate change; and a journalist who helps uncover details of unsolved murders from the civil rights era are among the 24 recipients of the \$500,000 “genius awards,” to be announced on Tuesday by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

While many of the fellows are known mostly among their peers, others — especially those in the arts — have won renown. They include Edwidge Danticat, a 40-year-old writer who has won critical acclaim with her depictions of Haitian immigrants in works like the novel “The Farming of Bones” and the memoir “Brother, I’m Dying.”

“It felt incredibly, wonderfully surreal,” Ms. Danticat said in a telephone interview from Miami. “What artists crave and need most is time. It will definitely buy some time. It’s wonderful to have a sense of security, especially in these economic times.”

This year’s MacArthur fellows range in age from 32 to 69 and are evenly divided between men and women. As in years past, most live on the East or West Coasts, but a photojournalist is based in Turkey and an infectious-disease physician in Sudan. All will receive \$100,000 a year for five years, no strings attached. Since the inception of the program in 1981 and including this year’s fellows, 805 people ranging in age from 18 to 82 at the time of their selections have been named.

Besides Ms. Danticat, other winners in the arts who have received public recognition are the documentary maker James Longley, 37, who explores Middle East conflicts with portraits of communities under stress; Deborah Eisenberg, 63, a short-story writer; Mark Bradford, 47, a mixed-media artist; Camille Utterback, 39, a pioneer of interactive art installations; Heather McHugh, 61, a poet known for her syntactical twists; Rackstraw Downes, 69, a realist painter of urban landscapes; and Lynsey Addario, 35, the Turkey-based photojournalist whose work in war-torn countries has appeared in The New York Times and National Geographic.

Another journalist fellow, Jerry Mitchell, an investigative reporter at The Clarion-Ledger newspaper in Jackson, Miss., who focuses on cold-case murders from the civil rights era, said he would use the money to help write a book on the subject. “I never in all my life expected this,” Mr. Mitchell, 50, said of his award.

While all the fellows are accomplished, the MacArthur grants are distinctive because they reward the expectation of future achievement, said Robert Gallucci, who became president of the MacArthur Foundation this summer. “We’re looking for you to continue in a creative way, without anyone looking over your shoulder,” he said.

Daniel J. Socolow, the director of the fellows program, noted that while about half the fellows are technically in the sciences, their work often touches on other areas. “We focus on the work, not the field,” he said.

As examples, Mr. Socolow cited L. Mahadevan, 44, an applied mathematician at Harvard who investigates behaviors like how flags flutter and how skin wrinkles, and Theodore Zoli, 43, a bridge engineer who works to protect transportation infrastructure in the event of a natural or man-made disaster. Timothy Barrett, 59, a papermaker at the University of Iowa who studies the impact of books on society, also has a résumé that is hard to categorize.

“For a lot of us, walking between the boundaries of disciplines and a bit off the beaten path, it’s good to get a confirmation that people think highly of your work,” said John A. Rogers, 42, a professor of material science and engineering at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Rogers invents electronic devices that, according to the MacArthur citation, “lay the foundation for a revolution in manufacture of industrial, consumer and biocompatible technologies.”

Beth Shapiro, 33, an evolutionary biologist at Pennsylvania State University, called the MacArthur “a great opportunity to follow some research avenues that might be too risky for traditional funding sources.” Dr. Shapiro examines fossils, dirt samples, biostatistics and other clues to reconstruct what happens to certain species.

The multidisciplinary approach can be seen in the work of two fellows with law degrees, Elyn Saks, 53, and Rebecca Onie, 32. Ms. Saks, a law professor at the University of Southern California, has written of her own mental illness and fights for the rights of the mentally ill. Ms. Onie was a sophomore at Harvard when she founded Project Health, a clinic-based program that addresses the connection between poverty and ill health.

“The award is probably most significant because it ties in so powerfully with the current health care debate and conversation,” Ms. Onie said. “This gives us a platform to participate in that conversation.”

Other winners in the sciences were Maneesh Agrawala, 37, of the University of California, Berkeley, who studies how design principles can improve the effectiveness of computers’ visual displays; Esther Duflo, 36, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who analyzes the forces of poverty in South Asia and Africa; Lin He, 35, a molecular biologist, also at Berkeley, who researches cancer treatments; Peter Huybers, 35, a climate scientist at Harvard; Richard Prum, 48, an ornithologist at Yale who draws on developmental biology to examine questions about birds; Jill Seaman, 57, an infectious-disease physician working to treat infections in remote, war-torn areas; Daniel Sigman, 40, a Princeton biogeochemist investigating the ocean’s fertility and the earth’s climate; and Mary Tinetti, 58, a geriatric physician at Yale studying risk factors that contribute to fatal falls.

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