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## Lynn artist nets prestigious award

By David Liscio / The Daily Item

LYNN - A Lynn artist was among nine Tuesday to receive the state's highest honors in the arts, humanities and sciences.

Cambodian-born Thonah Ep, who arrived in the U.S. in 1991 at age 5, was winner of the Massachusetts Cultural Council's (MCC) 2009 Commonwealth Award. Ep won in the Creative Learning category, for demonstrating the importance of creativity and innovation to student achievement and success.

Ep said growing up in Lynn presented many challenges, including the threat of gang pressure and violence. He found strength and purpose in the power of art.

In 2000, he walked through the doors of Raw Art Works, an art studio in Central Square designed to embrace and guide at-risk youth. He quickly excelled.

Ep counts among these earliest memories the pain in learning about the traumatic history of his family and country, explaining that his father drew pictures while his mother provided the agonizing words. Now among RAW Art graduates, Ep is also a teacher at the program as well as its gallery coordinator. Many RAW supporters are familiar with Ep and his artwork, which commanded top bids at RAW's annual art auction at the BASH: Party with a Purpose.

"Thonah embodies RAW's mission to ignite the desire to create and the confidence to succeed," said Mary Flannery, founder of RAW Art Works.

The MCC has given the Commonwealth Awards biennially since 1993 to honor individuals and organizations that have made extraordinary contributions to their communities, the economy and the quality of life in the state. In accepting the award, Ep joins the ranks of past winners including Yo Yo Ma, author David McCullough, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Arts Boston and actress Julie Harris.

Raw Art Works was a 2005 Commonwealth Award recipient in the Community category..

Tuesday's awards were presented at the State House during a ceremony featuring stage and screen actress Elizabeth Banks, a Pittsfield native, and which honored recent MCC Artist Fellows in all disciplines. For more about the MCC, go online at [www.massculturalcouncil.org](http://www.massculturalcouncil.org).



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The Peabody Essex Museum in Salem was also among the Commonwealth Award recipients in the Creative Economy Catalyst category.

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