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Art



The Sidewalk Connoisseur

| By Chea Waters Evans

Living in South Florida means serendipitous moments of art appreciation are there for the taking. All you have to do is keep your eyes open.

Coming across a piece of public art is like finding money in the pocket of last winter's coat – a fun little surprise in the midst of an ordinary day. Public art can lift one's spirits as she walks to work in the morning, or it can elevate the mood of an entire neighborhood. An ordinary staircase becomes a vibrant mosaic; a brick wall springs to life with colors and shapes that turn a street corner into an art gallery.

It could be the climate, the intermingling of eclectic cultures or just something in the air ... whatever the reason, art in public places belongs here in South Florida just as certainly as a palm tree or a pelican.

In these tough economic times, one can argue that spending money on art might be frivolous. Elayna Toby Singer, administrator for Palm Beach County's Art In Public Places program, couldn't disagree more. "Now, perhaps more than ever before," she says, "artistic experiences are needed to help put people's attention on positive things that make us feel good about being alive."



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Robin Hill, photographer and host of PBS's Art 360 says not only is there an aesthetic reason for public art, but it also can be seen in the black-and-white terms of simple economics. Citing Roy Lichtenstein's "Mermaid" outside the Jackie Gleason Theater of the Performing Arts in Miami as an example, Hill says public art can be a good investment. Not only does he love the piece, Hill adds that, "now that Lichtenstein is a major artist, it's worth a lot more money than what the city paid for it ... another good argument for public art economics."

Nestled under a group of trees in Pineapple Grove in Delray Beach stand "The Parking Meter People" by David Gouchenour (1990). These delightful metallic "people" are made of spindly pipe bodies, parking meter heads and hands and feet cast from real gloves and high-top sneakers. Podiatrist Elizabeth Reilly sees them from her office, and has become friends with them over the years. "The best part is that everyone loves them," she says. "Every day somebody stops and takes a picture. And I get to see people enjoying "The Parking Meter People" and seeing them make people happy." The city of Delray Beach commissioned a wide variety of arts projects from murals to sculptures, fountains, decorative benches, gardens and walkways.

Killing an hour or two in the airport is now a globe-trotting aesthete's dream, thanks to art installations at the Palm Beach International and Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International airports. The Palm Beach airport always features artwork exclusively by artists from Palm Beach County, though it rotates pieces periodically. The current display, "Ar(t)chitectural Attitude," highlights various landmarks and landscapes in Palm Beach County, from Mar-a-Lago to a breezeway in Lantana. This multi-media display is in the second-floor concession area until Feb. 4, 2009.

Commissioned visual art exhibits abound by the county-run Broward Cultural Division at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport throughout its four terminals, the Rental Car Center and the entrance greenbelt area. Since the mid 1980s, the airport has been a major participant in Broward County's Public Art & Design program. You'll find numerous sculptures, paintings, murals, prints, quilts, photography, lighted collages, sound art, eye-catching terrazzo flooring and more welcoming passengers to the Fort Lauderdale area.

According to Mary Becht, the director of Broward's Cultural Division and 31-year-old Public Art & Design program, "We currently have 230 pieces of art in 72 locations throughout the county from the airport and port to parks, streetscape projects, libraries, ArtsParks and more." Several Broward public art exhibits have been named as some of the best in the country, including Christopher Janney's "Shadow Boxing" at South Regional Library, the Broward Light Project (interactive park lights/lasers) at Huizenga Plaza in downtown Fort Lauderdale and the fountain at Young Circle in Hollywood.

Turnberry for the Arts adds some culture to consumption with a program that brings contemporary art to the Aventura Mall. The commissioned works, constructed specifically for the mall space, surprise shoppers with their whimsy and proximity. Jaume Plensa's "Florida's Soul" is a striking sculpture of a man sitting on stone, which rests in the middle of a koi pond. His body is constructed from steel letters.

Fabiola Santiago, the Miami Herald's visual arts writer and author of the new novel, "Reclaiming Paris," is a fan of all the artwork in the mall, but feels an affinity for the sculpture. "I'm a word person and so I love the idea that he has created a body form out of words," she says. "The fact that he uses steel to create his man-word sculptures tells me that, like me, he believes in the power of words to define the man, or the woman, of course."

Also featured in the Aventura Mall are two larger-than-life LED screens by artist Julian Opie. "Suzanne Walking in Skirt and Top" and "Julian Walking in T-Shirt and Shorts" depict two slightly slouched people, walking with fluidity at a leisurely pace, over and over across the screen, mirroring the progression of mall shoppers. Santiago says watching people enjoy the art is just as enjoyable as the pieces themselves. She reports that while shopping, she will "often stop to rest and observe people's reactions to the artwork." Opie's digitalshoppers add another dimension to the art/shopping combination. An observer can watch the subject in actual life and its artistic representation at the same time.



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A fine example of public art's ability to serve as an uplifting force in a community is the West County Courthouse in Belle Glade. The facility underwent a transformation in 2006, changing from an ordinary civic building into an urban oasis; regular concrete columns were turned into a shimmering mosaic using more than 8,400 pieces of glass. Benches and mosaic stepping stones outside the courthouse were designed by children from the Belle Glade Boys & Girls Club, reflecting the town's history by incorporating traditional Seminole symbols into the design. Titled "Glades Legacy for Life," the natural and agricultural images depicted in the mosaics were chosen collectively at a community meeting. "There's a great sense of ownership and community pride," says Singer, "especially among the youth and their families."

Transcending the ordinary sculpture-garden-in-a-park is the ArtsPark at Young Circle in Hollywood, a collaboration between Broward County and the City of Hollywood. Combining artist studios, live art demonstrations and interactive workshops, sculptures, a playground and a performing arts stage, the ArtsPark offers a full artistic experience in the community. The main installation, commissioned through the Broward Cultural Division's Public Art and Design Program, is Japanese artist Ritsuko Taho's innovative work, "Millennium Springs," which marries art, technology and the environment. Visual components are made up of a sweeping spray of water and a wave sculpture, while technology comes into play through a baobab tree surrounded by sound poles. Biorhythms produced by the tree were recorded and then transformed into an audio representation made up from harp notes, ocean sounds and the wind. The fun doesn't stop there at the ArtsPark – even the children's playground is no ordinary jungle gym, as Miami art star Romero Britto's "Butterfly" sculpture alights on one end.

"Many people might recognize these landmarks but don't realize they're public art, such as with the seating elements along the New River or the stairway at the bus terminal," says Becht. "I think it's good -- these art projects are marking a sense of place in our community and they're servicing the mission of our Cultural Division."

Miami hums with a colorful energy, and the Arsht Center for the Performing Arts makes attending a performance a saturation in the arts as a whole. Patrons are greeted at the door with Lichtenstein's "Mermaid," and the interior includes a colorful mural by Cuban artist Cundo Mermudez, as well as light and fabric-related installations. Even the building itself is a work of art. Robin Hill admires the way art and architecture come together even after visitors enter the building. "Inside the halls," he says, "Jose Bedia's opposing "hands" [floor mural] show a painter's touch in public art that works seamlessly with the architecture."

With an increased eye toward incorporating public art into daily life, art in public places programs strive to meld art with architecture, form with function and the unexpected with the mundane. The fruits of these endeavors benefit everyone who might walk down a street, go on a trip, or merely stop in a park to rest their legs for a moment. Here in South Florida, the world is our museum.

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