

24 Community Culture

*"Cabo Verde" mural by the
Jamaica Plain Youth Mural Program
and Cape Verdean Community Unido at
Dudley St. and Clifton St. in Dorchester*

Random Acts of Art: Community Murals in Boston



Some of today's most powerful art does not occur inside the walls of museums and galleries, it occurs on the walls around us—those of hospitals, tunnels, schools. It sits beside you on the park bench, playfully inviting your eye. The art that pervades our lives, creating the visual landscape we witness unconsciously, is the art made within our communities, by community members themselves. Community art warms the cold surface of the city, representing to us the possibility of connection with our heritage, with ourselves, and with each other. And in the act of creation, community art moves beyond paint to create relationships, to make contact with what heals and unites.

Three painters in the Boston area—Alex Cook, Tova Speter, and Bren Bataclan—are linked by their initiatives to create work that boldly and prominently engages the community. Cook, also an art educator, decided to create the Jamaica Plain Youth Mural Program after noticing that his high school students were unable to pursue their creativity due to financial restrictions or social pressures to find a more conventional vocation. His program counters the notion that fine art does not directly contribute to society, that it's somehow separate from daily life. Cook states, "Art at its best speaks about life, about what we're feeling...and a compelling mural breaks the silence by opening a dialogue within the community." He believes that artists have a responsibility to create something that draws us from our shells into an honest, examined view of the world. Cook brought community groups and local businesses together in the shared agenda to support student artists. With their donations, he paid stipends to selected students who then spent the summer collaborating on murals with him.

As the summer progressed, the muralists received affirmations from the communities in which they painted. Passersby would often stop to comment or talk, or to offer their appreciation. The artists also collaborated with youth from the Cape Verdean Community Unido program in Uphams Corner, Dorchester, together creating a mural whose lush

imagery recalls the tropics and rich culture of Cape Verde. To complete the project, students interviewed community members with Cape Verdean heritage, gaining insight into the images or aspects of life residents found most significant. This process made the final mural one that forged connections between the youth and their communities, as well as resulting in an image that resonates deeply with those who live in the area. For more information about the Jamaica Plain Youth Mural Program (now called Art Builds Community), see Cook's website at www.stonebalancer.com.

Tova Speter, a Somerville artist with a background in art therapy, is also well-versed in the community-building and healing power of artwork. Her first project to receive funding from the Somerville Arts Council developed organically from work with a classroom of students at the John F. Kennedy Elementary School. Since many students struggled with learning and behavioral difficulties, Speter identified the need for an outlet for their energy that would directly show both the community and the students themselves their ability to make positive, successful contributions. Students chose the mural's theme—"underground"—for a walkway that connects two streets beneath the tracks of the Commuter Rail. Their work on everything from conceptual design to artistic technique helped to develop students' self-confidence and uncover hidden strengths. Speter and Cook have both noted that in each community mural they've facilitated, participating artists often expressed hesitancy and disbelief about their ability to create art, but all learned that they have talents to offer. The mural-making process increased self-knowledge and led to empowerment, both from personal achievement and its well-received results. Speter's Somerville students flourished when parents, teachers, and even the mayor came to celebrate the unveiling of their work.

After witnessing the positive effects derived from mural-making, Speter sought out The Art Connection, a nonprofit that places art in community organizations, usually through artist donations. She initiated

a collaboration in which art could be brought to agencies through members of the community making the art themselves. The first mural project made possible by The Art Connection occurred at the Friends of the Shattuck Shelter in Jamaica Plain. Speter facilitated meetings among five homeless men, assisting in creating sketches and developing technique for the unanimously chosen theme, "recovery." Obstacles stand atop the incline of the mural's landscape, emblazoned with a quote from Thoreau: "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams." One artist struggling to overcome addiction stated that the mural was the first project he had ever completed, start to finish. The muralists' work resides in prominent view over the dining hall, inspiring others to act with similar determination, and affirming Speter's belief in art's inherent capacity to change lives and create healing. Additional mural projects led by Speter and The Art Connection, with funding from the New England Foundation for the Arts, can be found at the Children's Advocacy Center and Roxbury Youthworks. For images of these murals and others, see www.tovaspeter.com.

Bren Bataclan, a Cambridge artist and former graphic designer, relinquished a dot com career to take up the work he began at age two—the creation of unique characters, each with its own charming and disarmingly quirky demeanor. Out of desire to connect with the city around him, and as a sort of impromptu experiment, Bataclan began leaving his paintings on park benches and bus seats, in ATM vestibules and museums. He attached a note asking the finder to keep the work and post an entry on his website sharing their impressions (www.bataclan.com). A visit to the site reveals a host of happy responses and photos of finders proudly holding their new painting. Some state that the painting completely changed their day or reaffirmed their faith in serendipity and human kindness.

After receiving this feedback, Bataclan began The Smile Project, named for its ability to transform an oftentimes stony Boston exterior, and he expanded the scope of his effort to include other states and countries. When the popularity and notoriety of The Smile Project grew, Bataclan began receiving mural commissions in Boston schools and hospitals. He recently collaborated with students at the Trotter Elementary School in Roxbury, where children designed characters that Bataclan implemented in a mural over a heavily graffitied wall. He found that students valued the sense of ownership they received from helping to create art in their community, and that the wall ceased being graffitied. His characters also dally cheer patients at the Boston University MRI Center, their wacky expressions helping to lighten a sometimes difficult ordeal.

Bataclan frequently gives talks at schools in the Boston area, showing students how to create their own characters and helping them derive a sense of satisfaction and empowerment through art. Through The Smile Project and by extending his artwork to others, Bataclan found his calling in Boston, and his own sense of community in connection with others. Community art infuses the city with color and life often concealed behind walls, drawing us together and changing the shape of lives and the neighborhoods we live in.