

Mural Arts Next Steps: Creating a Narrative of Community Art to Preserve Cultural History, Locally and Beyond

Jane Golden 25 May 2011

As we move into our next decade, we at Mural Arts have become increasingly proactive about challenging ourselves to do work that is both more innovative and collaborative. Increasingly we want to do our part to advance the ever-evolving conversation about muralism in the 21st Century—what will it look like and how will it remain consistent with our mission and vision to uplift the communities we serve?

As we have continued to move forward and take on new challenges, we are mindful of looking back at the same time. As important as it is to embrace new ways of looking at our work, it is imperative we remember where we came from, the work we have done around the city, and the stories told so beautifully by these large-scale works of art. It is just as important for us to not just talk about our older work, but to preserve it and interpret it. We want to curate and share it. In fact, preservation has become a central theme in conversations about the future of our

practice, revealing a growing urgency to conserve, restore and present these wonderful images for many more to see, appreciate and understand. Within the older murals are important stories from which nearly all of our work, and certainly our best work, is born. Talk of aspiration and struggle, the past and the present, upheaval and triumph—these walls reflect the resilience of the human spirit in ways that move and inspire.

The most gratifying result of this process of reflection has been the creation of two important mural collections. The Mural Mile, our inaugural collection of landmark Center City murals, and the Albert M. Greenfield African American Iconic Images Collection, together have formalized and legitimized what we have long considered to be the world's largest outdoor art gallery.

The newest collection, the Albert M. Greenfield African American Iconic Images Collection, gathers together 47 murals representing important aspects of Philadelphia's African American history, traditions and culture. Curated through a wonderful partnership with the African American Museum of Philadelphia, this collection was launched just a few weeks ago at an incredibly inspiring event hosted by the Museum. We believe this will be not only a source of great pride to the African American community for decades to come but also a valuable learning tool for all young people and adults alike. We believe it captures the rich African American experience, an experience that is inseparable from and synonymous

with the Philadelphia experience.

Over the years, we have created thousands of murals that pay tribute to historical figures and neighborhood heroes, document neighborhood migrations, and record oral histories. But before now we have only on occasion felt empowered to close the loop on these stories, which are so dear to these communities but largely unknown beyond neighborhood lines, by collecting and presenting them to the public. We wanted to give back to these communities by giving people here and everywhere access to opportunities that will allow them to discover or rediscover the everyday treasures unique to Philadelphia, uncovering the voices of the people who have inspired these projects or whose lives have been changed by them. We felt compelled to pay tribute to the African American experience in Philadelphia by interviewing, archiving and documenting a history told by those who have shaped it.

Murals, as beautiful as they are, are merely the conduit for the stories kept alive in the hearts of the people. Murals are an occasion for these important stories to surface, to occupy a physical space within a community when they might otherwise be lost within the folds of a neighborhood's collective memory.

The process of retrieving and recapturing these stories for this collection represented some innovative steps for Mural Arts. It changed the way we treat our murals as

educational tools. The collection features over 100 interviews with neighborhood residents, community leaders, sons and daughters of famous activists and local legends, African American scholars and local celebrities, all of which are available through downloadable audio tour, cellphone tour and guided tours that depart from the Museum. The educational possibilities created by this work are no longer restricted by geography. People everywhere, here and around the world, can study history through the lens of community-based public art.

This collection also reaffirmed the value and necessity of collaboration for Mural Arts. Coming out of the fiscal crisis that plagued our city last year, we knew from the moment we had this idea of an African American-themed mural collection that we would not be able to do this alone. We needed a strong partner in a top-tier cultural institution that would support this work. In the African American Museum of Philadelphia, we found the great partner needed to make this endeavor a success.

I have always believed that murals are a uniquely democratic form of art-making—art created for and by the people. This belief has been reflected in our work, and this collection is a natural outgrowth of a philosophy that has been our guidepost since day one. I am so proud that, with this collection, we have found a way to honor a community that has not only been the creative engine behind so many of our murals but on a daily basis is part of the heart and soul of our city.

