MUSEUM SCHOOL ARTISTS SHAPE PUBLIC ART ACROSS THE COUNTRY

War heroes and ducklings. Tumbling gloves. A giant head. Conjure your own iconic images of public art and you'll begin to define your community's environment, its identity, its social self-conscience.

Because public art exists outside precisely lighted galleries and atmospherically controlled museums, it is vulnerable. It is exposed–to the elements, the public, and the changing world of politics, social values, and critical expectations.

The spectrum of public art, therefore, continues to evolve. Once we referred to a tight realm that included commissioned memorials and long-dead men on horses. Now we include kinetic sculpture, uniquely embellished pigs on parade, subway walls, gardens, people, and playgrounds. But more than a change in media and form, contemporary public art reflects a greater view of artists and their motivations.

Artists who create public art are drawn to it for reasons that vary as greatly as the media and expression they choose. A unifying theme persists, however: to make art that affects the daily lives of a broad and changing audience.

Don Gummer (Diploma '69, Fifth-Year Certificate '70), **Primary Compass**, 2000. Stainless Steel and Stained Glass, 20 x 23 x 18 feet. Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

Public art should grow from a need, and function as a force for people to unite around. JOHN WILSON

"Art is part of what makes culture alive and societies healthy and well," says Marge Rack (Diploma '80, Bachelor of Fine Arts '95). "Art can be a catalyst for positive change."

For Rack, a sculpture faculty member of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, public art projects with young people provide an outlet for community activism. She created *Youth-Art-in-Action*, a Museum School program that combines art with youth development programs. Its premise is that youth-at-risk, if engaged in substantive art explorations in the context of well-coordinated youth mentoring, will do better in school and in their communities.

The program's current project is in Dorchester, Massachusetts where Museum School students and Vietnamese and Cambodian youth work side-by-side making ceramic tiles for a community garden. Rack found a Cambodian master ceramist to teach traditional carving techniques to the students and youth. On the tiles they inscribed a Vietnamese proverb translated into four languages: "Dear squash, please love the pumpkin. Because even though you are different, you live on the same trellis."

"This is a model for how to work respectfully in a community and learn from each other," Rack says. "If we can bring people together to work on a neat, fun project, they will stay together to work on thorny issues. It deepens our understandings and connections."

Public art in collaboration with communities–young people, adults, community leaders, activists–gives everyone a chance to be heard, to have a voice, and an expression of art. "Collaboration is a ritualistic way to bring together a community," says Mark Cooper (Master of Fine Arts '80) especially when neighborhoods lack ties and are hindered by cultural and communication differences.

Cooper, a Museum School ceramics and graduate faculty member, worked with five Boys and Girls Clubs around Boston to teach kids to look at and create art. Museum School faculty and students taught the youth about silk-screening, photography, printmaking, collage, and painting. Each group made one piece of a five-part puzzle, joined at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and then returned to each of the Clubs. "These Clubs had never come together before in such a substantial way," Cooper says. Through art, he says, they learn a common language and common skills.

Cooper says it is vital for each master artist working on a community project to maintain his own voice in its final expression. But the ultimate reward for any artist, he says, is witnessing a new sense of self–an awareness of community–growing in each participant.

Sometimes it is the artists who experience changed perspectives in respons to their surroundings, culture, or society. This belonging–or perhaps detachment and estrangement–grows into the art. "Artists shape the pieces they make to reflect their own feelings about being part of a community," says John Wilson (Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art Education '47). "The public wants an artist to be true to his vision, but public art should also grow from a need, and function as a force for people to unite around."

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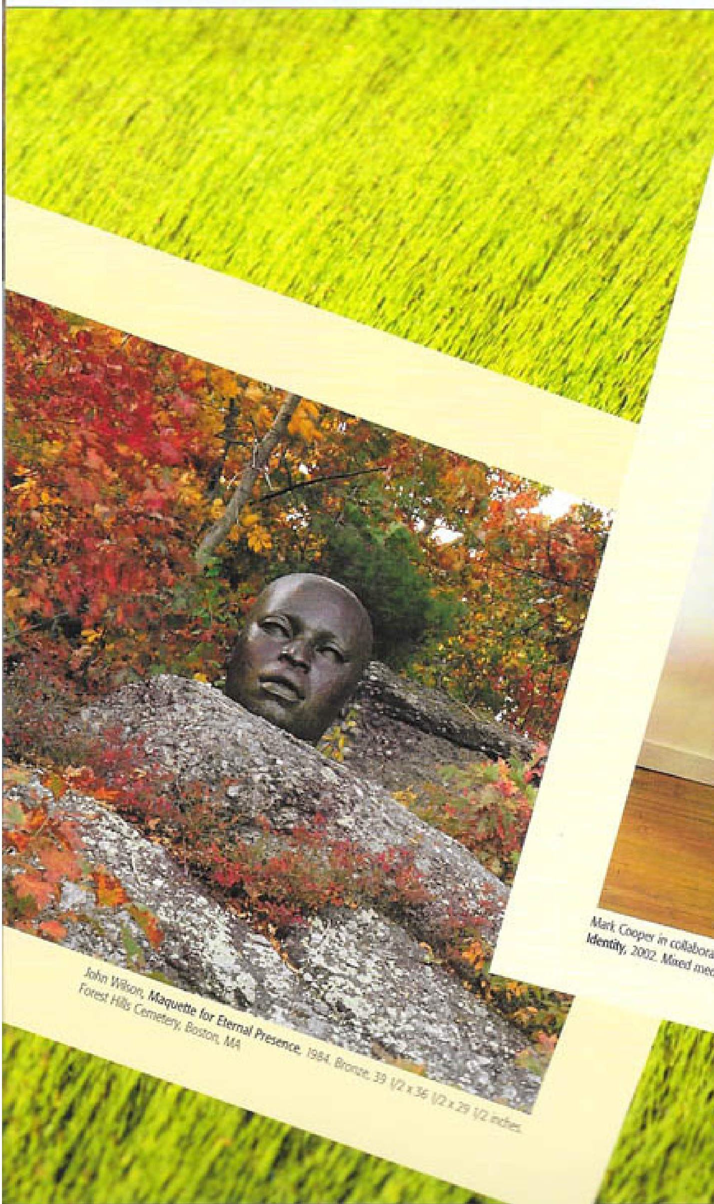


John Wilson, **Maquette for Eternal Presence**, 1984. Bronze, 39 1/2 x 36 1/2 x 29 1/2 inches. Forest Hills Cemetery, Boston, MA

Mark Cooper in collaboration with the thirteen 8th-grade classes at Southeast Middle School, **Unity-Hope-Identity**, 2002. Mixed media, 7 x 4 x 3 feet

Eternal Presence, Wilson's seven-foot-tall bronze head that stands outside Boston's National Center for Afro-American Artists, embodies what he says is a symbolic black presence and universal humanity. His pieces grow from his ideas, but also "work communally," by motivating social action. Sculpture allows Wilson to express his feelings in "3-D energy and universality."

In August, video faculty member Mary Ellen Strom will demonstrate her passion for large-scale projects in *Geyser Land,* a living sculpture along railroad tracks between Livingston and Bozeman, Montana. The project combines her attraction to technology and the environment. "Artists have a lot to say and I like to make statements in big, strong ways," says Strom. "Hopefully, public art will alter people's opinions about what artists do or are. We are positioning the artist as a worker among workers, not a removed observer."

Geyser Land invites the audience to board a train for an hour-long investigative journey of industrial, economic, social, artistic, and mythic forces that shaped the West more than one hundred years ago. The tale will be told through video projections on rock-face walls and narratives by local people on the train. Strom says her pieces "create a dialogue about the history and contemporary culture of a place."

For Mags Harries, a sculpture faculty member, inspiration also comes from the environment and its inhabitants. "I want to reveal what is there," she says, "to make places resonate with history and possibilities." Harries spends a great deal of time learning about a site–an urban riverway, an elementary school, or abandoned tennis court–and thinking in ways that encompass more than her own artistic impulses.

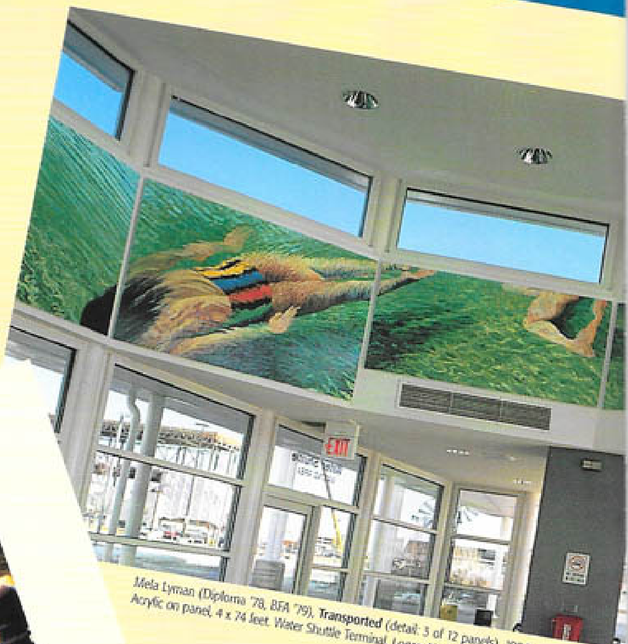
"This kind of work is different from working in the studio, where you create your own problems and create your own solutions," she says. The public artist has to bridge the gap between the art, physical environment, and different constituencies. "You have to have many skills and be a certain kind of person," Harries says. "You have to be interested in sharing ideas, and be an educator in conversing about those ideas." The real trick with permanent public art, Harries says, is to be both timeless and profound. "It has to endure time, to speak to a generation or two ahead," she says.

Temporary installations, because of their limited lifespan, tend to be more political, Harries says, more risqué, and offer the artist more freedom. "If there's no controversy, I wonder where I went wrong," Harries says. "I do not know what ideas will evolve during a commission, and the committee and community must be willing to be part of my process," Harries says. "People who commission my work have to take a jump, and trust me."

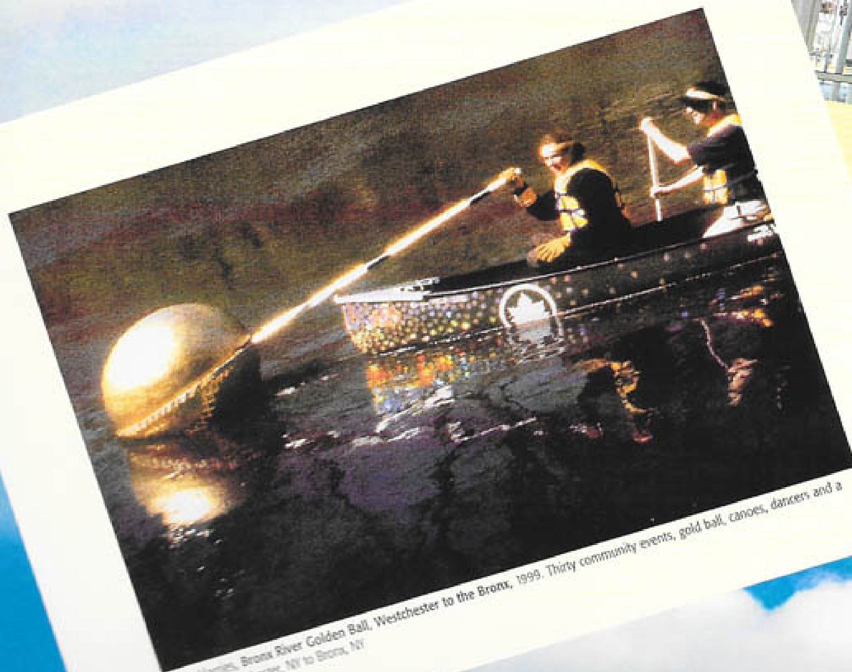
Knowing that a sculpture, billboard, or performance will eventually go away is critical to some artists–and their audiences. Morgan Schwartz (Master of Fine Arts '02) says his action-oriented work allows him to be timely and responsive to political action without being bound by the implications of permanence.

Schwartz created the Hope Project in response to the events on September 11, 2001. Volunteers distributed postcards marked with the word HOPE to people on the streets of Boston at the same time a skywriting airplane spelled out HOPE. The project elicited a range of reactions, but the fleeting nature of the art allowed people to react, and then move on.

Sometimes a public wound calls for expression in equally public art, through stories that elicit smiles and even tears. "Public art is very complicated," says Nancy Schon (Diploma '53). The client should be happy, she insists, but the artist has an obligation to tell a message, and tackle the bigger issues. Art also has to be approachable, so Schon uses animals as metaphors. Her *Make Way for Ducklings* on Boston's Public Garden teaches the importance of family, she says, and the ducks are child-height to encourage interaction and accessibility. Her stolid *Tortoise and the Hare* in Boston's Copley Place, near the finish line for the Boston Marathon, shows perseverance and endurance.



Mela Lyman (Diploma '78, BFA '79), **Transported** *(detail: 3 of 12 panels), 1994. Acrylic on panel, 4 x 74 feet. Water Shuttle Terminal, Logan Airport, Boston*



Mags Harries, **Bronx River Golden Ball, Westchester to the Bronx**, 1999. Thirty community events, gold ball, canoes, dancers and a musician. Westchester, NY to Bronx, NY

Ralph Helmick (Master of Fine Arts '80) and Stu Schechter (Attended '89–'94) believe their public art–characterized by twisting metal, glass, and undulating installations–must be approachable for shifting audiences and repeat customers. In a recent project at the Salt Lake City Public Library in Utah, 1,400 moving butterfly sculptures rest on small cast metal books suspended from the ceiling to form a head-shaped sculpture. Their work rewards people who are content to pass with just a glance or watch the sculpture change and reveal more of itself with each encounter. "We're making art for that segment of the public that is visually curious and intelligent," Helmick says. "When we're successful, it's often by creating something people didn't know they wanted."

Today's public art has become a true mirror of our neighborhoods, and that trend is likely to continue as the art is shaped and chosen by artists and our diverse communities. "Public art should reflect its community thoughtfully and evocatively," says Sarah Hutt (Diploma '82, Fifth-Year Certificate '83), director of public art for the city of Boston. Yes, it has to contend with issues of financing, placement, and acceptance, but public art is more than art that's outside. The future of public art is up to the community, Hutt says, and will reflect the artist and the people around the art.

Hutt's role is to educate the people who want art and expose them to a wide variety of artists and styles. "They need to see the options so they don't wind up tied into the same old stuff," she says. "Our mandate is to get new art around and let people see the possibilities." ■

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Morgan Schwartz, **Hope Project**, 2001. Skywriter, dimensions variable

Nancy Schön, **Tortoise and Hare**, 1995. Bronze on old Boston cobblestones, 3 x 15 feet. Copley Square, Boston, MA