

# Art in Bloom

## Sculptors, painters create in public

By Ruth Sachs

The calendar tells us that spring has finally arrived, and as we blink our eyes in the sunlight and stretch our bodies in the slowly warming air, we admire the natural finery that has been hidden from us during the frigid months.

But it's not only nature's effusions that make spring vistas so appealing—there's some very human handiwork to appreciate. Public art in New Haven seems to be sprouting along with the greenery. Outdoor murals and sculpture found around town brighten dreary buildings and add color and aesthetic interest to the cityscape.

Outdoor art dates back to humanity's primitive beginnings.

In recognition of the value of public art, *The Advocate* offers a sampling of work that can be viewed in the area, along with some interviews with artists who created it. Two common strands run through these interviews: a commitment to art that is available to ordinary people, not just collectors or regular museum-goers, and a fear that lack of funding will curtail the flowering of this art.

### VIVIAN GREENE

"I'm a City Spirit Artist paid by CETA," says Vivian Greene. CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) is a federally funded program designed to give the disadvantaged the opportunity to develop skills and work experience.

In New Haven, artists have been employed to teach their skills to the community. Some of the artists train young people in the Summer Youth Employment

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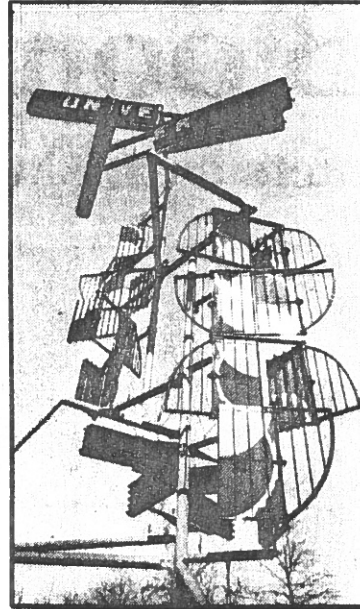


**M**ural at Cedar Street in New Haven bears the likenesses of a number of prominent Third World figures including Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Huey Newton, Roberto Clemente, Aretha Franklin and Bob Marley. (Virginia Blaisdell photo)



**R**uth Resnick puts finishing touches on the mural at New Haven's welfare office. (Virginia Blaisdell photo)

**B**ob Taplin's 20-foot sculpture catches the wind down at the New Haven harbor. (Virginia Blaisdell photo)



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Program. Greene works mostly in Senior Citizens Centers, setting up art programs for them.

People in the public sector of the community may request CETA artists for their projects, while CETA picks up the bill.

It's a system that has worked well for the artists, who are receiving a financial support of their talent; for the people in the community, who are developing new aptitudes and interests; and for the public at large, who can enjoy the colorful murals brightening up dreary buildings all over the city.

It was with CETA funds that Greene, along with Pattie Stone and Sal Naclerio, began a mural last October for the Yale New Haven Cancer Center. It is a temporary wall to protect pedestrians while the building is being erected, but it is 50 feet long and 14 feet high, and took the three artists about two months to complete.

The artists wanted to represent hope for the ill. Two figures are pushing the city together around scenes of doctors and nurses caring for the sick and examining cells. In the middle is a little girl, dependent upon the city and its medical forces to make her well.

"We sat down and made sketches," says Greene. "They were accepted by the people in charge, and then we started to work. We had no problem fitting our styles together. We knew just what the Yale people wanted.

"While we worked, we had lots of people

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stop and talk to us, telling us how they liked the mural. Some would just yell 'Nice work!' as they passed. It's very satisfying doing something for the community. I beautified an area that was dull and dreary, and I like to think I brought some happiness to people."

Unfortunately for Greene and her fellow artists, and for the community at large, CETA funds have been drastically cut back by the government, and art is feared to be low on a priority list of job training skills.

"CETA pays me for working in the community," says Greene. "As much as I love it, if my salary is cut off, I won't be able to do it for nothing. Artists have families like everyone else. We have to eat, no matter what our commitment to public art."

**DAN DADDONA AND TONY FALCONE**

In Hamden, 25 feet in the air, is a giant aquarium, filled with monumental inhabitants of the sea. The artists who painted it, Dan Daddona and Tony Falcone, began working together five years ago, incorporating their styles and ideas until, says Daddona, they became "one painter, with two brains and four arms."

They have done a number of large-scale murals and paintings, but all are dwarfed by their 1977 effort, the gigantic aquarium that encases the walls of the Cinemart Theatre in the Hamden Mart. The artists spent three years trying to raise enough money to be able to paint the building that seemed to cry out "aquarium" to them.

They made hundreds of phone calls, and eventually received part of the money needed from the corporation that owned the Mart, and the rest from Warner-Elektra-Atlantic Records, a national recording firm.

In return for the record company's investment, Daddona and Falcone agreed to incorporate portraits of rock stars in the pebbles in the bottom of the aquarium, an effect which they now feel enhances their original design.

The two men painted the top half of three outside walls around the theatre, two of the walls measuring 150 by 50 feet, and a third measuring 90 by 50 feet. It took them four months, working 14 hours a day, to paint the 10,000 square feet.

Every day they had to crank up a scaffolding to get to the section they wished to work on, and in order to turn a corner with the scaffolding, all of their friends had to be called in for aid.

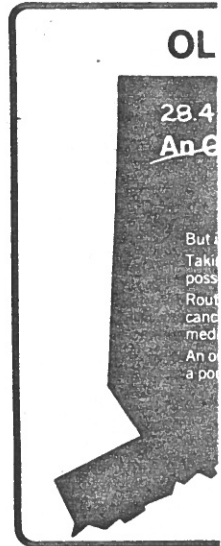
Nevertheless, Daddona and Falcone recall that they were exuberant. They had surmounted the challenge of organizing the project, and here they were, 45 feet in the air on a two-foot-wide platform, like "two little kids in a treehouse."

The mural was finished just before Christmas. The vertical metal beams of the flat and rectangular building divide the walls into panels, like a fish tank, and on each side of the building is a separate painting of the ocean depths as contained in an aquarium.

There are sharks, porpoises, whales and numerous whimsical small fish swimming among sea fauna and giant bubbles. When the mural is seen on a spring day, with the sunlight glistening off the walls, birds nesting among the painted fish, and the sky overhead only a shade darker than the translucent blue of the ocean, it is easy to understand the artists' enthusiasm for painting out of doors.

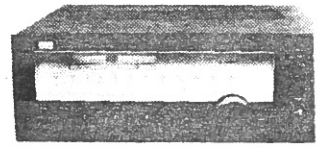
"Some people call our stuff illustrations," says Falcone, "but to us it's art. We're presenting it to people who can see it on their way to work, driving or walking by, people who might not hassle

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## **SPECIAL SAVINGS (** **COMPACT WITH EVE**



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with going to a gallery. We're not into galleries, where just the rich people go. The art world is deformed from that."

**TERRY LENNOX AND RUTH RESNICK**

Terry Lennox and Ruth Resnick, community artists with CETA of New Haven, produced a written statement after the public unveiling of their last mural at the New Haven Welfare Department.

In part it said: "As muralists, we are committed to the growth of public art. We believe that art can be an integral and accessible part of the community. . . . For over two and a half years we had both worked in various programs as directors of group murals in New Haven. . . . Our commitment to the community we live in has been strengthened. . . we have been inspired by our team members who (through the murals) have grasped the confidence to effect positive change in their personal lives and in the community. . . and we have been inspired by the enthusiastic support of the community whose walls we paint."

In conversation with artists Lennox and Resnick, "community" comes up more frequently than "art." They stress the value of art as a project that is accessible to and integrated with the community.

"For the people we've worked with, mural painting reinforces their feeling of worth. The team members learn to put themselves on the line, to express themselves publicly. At the same time they—and we—learn to trust the people they're working with, to submerge their own possessiveness to create a mural that belongs to everyone."

The two women's most recent outdoor mural is the 1977 painting on the Lee High School Gymnasium, done with a team of 28 young people in the CETA Summer Youth Program.

"It took us two weeks to figure out what the theme would be, to try and have everyone on the team agree what would be really significant to them. They decided to call it Path of the World, and to show a neighborhood—or a life—changing in a positive way.

"Once the ideas were set, they had to be formed into imagery that would express

**A**rtist Bob Lehman works on his 11-foot abstract structure located at the corner of Boulevard and the Post Road in New Haven. The 3,000 pound piece is made of steel, concrete and lumber, and was built on site with a CETA grant.

(Virginia Blaisdell photo)




them. We showed them work of the Mexican muralist Siqueiros, who believes that a mural must have different areas of focus as the viewer moves by, creating a really dynamic piece of art. We taught them how to mix colors, to distort perspective to emphasize a point."

Finally the mural was conceptualized. A huge orange man holds back a life he doesn't want, filled with gambling, prostitution and crime. And a boy reaches towards a woman who offers a life of love, while a row of people in the front symbolize the qualities that can help people obtain goals: love, education, voting power.

"Some of the kids knew how to draw

Pappagallo

**"The New Espadrille"**



Pappagallo purposefully opens the tip on this classic espadrille, to let ten polished toes shine through. Yummy shades, too. peach, junale green, red navy

well, and if they could, they did. Other kids posed; we remember two guys demonstrating how to pick the pocket of a third, so it could be painted in the mural. We tried to stress that every part of making the mural was essential, and that everyone, even the clean-up crew, was making a contribution."

The mural at Lee High School is bold, dramatic and colorful, successfully weaving together the symbols of the surrounding neighborhood. It has brightened the building and the street. But more important to Lennox and Resnick, it brightened the lives of the young people who painted with them, and the community who watched it grow.

#### **BOB TAPLIN**

A 20-foot-high structure of steel pipe, festooned with painted aluminum veins and open work of steel, rotates merrily in the wind at Long Wharf's New Haven harbor. Dangling among the veins are metal signs bearing the words "Universal" and "River" on one side, and "Works" and "Bros." on the other.

"The wind sculpture is loosely based on commercial art forms," explains its creator Bob Taplin. "It's like a rotating Esso sign, but instead of advertising a product, it's got words on it instead." Why these particular words? "They're just words I like. You see them in a commercial context all the time, but when you think about them, disentangle them from commercialism, they have meaning and you can relate to them."

Taplin has just completed this sculpture with the help of Arts Jobs II, a grant from CETA and the Connecticut Commission on the Arts.

"This was unique for CETA," says Taplin proudly. "They usually give money to artists for teaching or community involvement. But they awarded this to me and three others in the community just to do our art. We had a lot of hassles setting it up and pushing it through. But I think the results are more interesting than the rest of what CETA sponsors—this is pure art."

Taplin had to find his own site for his sculpture, and he had difficulties persuading the Redevelopment Agency to allow it to be constructed here. But he was determined from the beginning to have the sculpture at Long Wharf.

"There's an enormous amount of sky and sea here," he notes. "The structure is etched against the sky, everything is silhouetted. It can be seen easily. There's also a steady breeze from the sea to keep everything in motion. This is the last view of New Haven for many people. Most of them will just get a glimpse of the sculpture as they ride past on the highway. But some will get off the road to look again. And they'll be the ones to get the words."

"The kind of work I make is complicated. However you approach it, you ought to get something out of it. In order to put something out in the public, you must accommodate your work to the different levels of interest and the varieties of reactions that are out there."

"Bureaucrats sometimes underestimate the public. But I don't. My sculpture is an obscure ruse, setting up expectations of an advertisement and then denying them. The public will understand it and enjoy it."

#### **BOB LEHMAN**

At the corner of Boulevard and the Boston Post Road stands a piece of sculpture. It is 35 feet wide and 11 feet tall, and is made of 3000 pounds of concrete, steel and construction lumber. To one side of it is the edge of the city of New Haven, with its urban congestion, and to the other are undeveloped vistas of limitless space. These juxtapositions helped mold the creation of the sculpture.

The abstract structure was made entirely on the site by Bob Lehman, through another grant from Arts Job II. The piece rests on 22 concrete piers, and everything else had to be built on to the piers. The form of the construction is similar to that of a house, but only its skeleton is visible.

It's a strange sculpture, and Lehman says, "Everyone who goes there has some experience seeing it. The piece is about having an experience."

Lehman knows that he himself had an experience building it in public. "Several hundred people stopped to talk during the four months I was there," he says. "Quite a few of them came back and became my friends. It made it a richer experience for me. Having sidewalk superintendents has its positives and negatives. People watching had strong feelings about the sculpture, and there was lots of give and take. One of the passers-by even named it: 'Hey, man, that's the Z-house,' he said, and that is what I called it."

Lehman is a painter as well as a sculptor, and for him, the traditional boundaries between the two mediums are artificial. "In

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this piece, part is structural, which is a sculptor's domain, and part is color, a painter's domain. In working abstractly, the advantage of sculpture is that the material itself can speak; forms made of material have more substance and importance than those that are painted on a canvas."

Lehman is grateful for the opportunity he had to build a public sculpture, for he feels "it allowed me to grow as an artist in a true way." For this reason he thinks it is very unfortunate that CETA funds are being cut, and that the reduced monies will be spent on training the hard-core unemployed for more hireable jobs.

"I've been making art for 10 years, ever since I finished college," he remarks. "I'm not unemployable, but I have no other skills. If there are no public funds left to support artists, not only will we lose out, but the community will lose the benefits of our efforts as well."

## BOHDANNA MELENDEZ

Bohdanna Melendez will not take full credit for painting the playground at the Martin Luther King School in New Haven; she insists that it was done through her efforts and those of the children of the school.

"I worked after school," she says. "And there must have been a lot of mothers cursing me, because the children would come by, begin to paint, and get carried away. It's hard to paint on the ground; they would forget and bend down, and get paint all over their knees."

Melendez was asked to do the playground through her association with the New Haven After School Program, which funded the project. The area was very large, and had been painted years before by another group. Most of the original work had worn off, and to cover it completely or to ignore it and do something next to it was difficult. So Melendez decided to build on what was there.

"There was one strange shape, we rolled paint on it and covered where the design showed most, and when we were done, it looked like a map of Africa. Then there were some dots left over; we covered these



**D**etail from the gigantic aquatic mural by Dan Daddona and Tony Falcone which covers the walls of the Cinemart Theatre in Hamden. (Virginia Blaisdell photo)

in bright colors and called the whole thing Tagland."

"When I work with people on murals, I think of it as a form of dynamic communication," she explains. "I perceive it, feel it as communication, and when it is done, we have a pictorial dialogue."

"I like people to see art being created, to think of the artist in action. Art is not performed in a vacuum. It has a context in the community, a relationship to people. What really gives me satisfaction is bringing art out in individuals who are watching or participating. And it always works; the people you least expect have insight and understanding, and when they discover this about themselves, they feel great and so do I." □