

Andrea Yarbrough, *Collective Steps*

Spotlight by
Danya Sherman
Deidra Montgomery, Congruence Cultural Strategies

Mural Arts Institute Leaders and Advisors
Cathy Harris
Joseph Iacona
Netanel Portier
Felix St. Fort

Southside Community Arts Center Project Team

Producer
Dorian Sylvain

Project Manager
Tianna Bracey

Address
3831 S. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL 60653

Dates
June - August 2023

Documentary Video
https://bitly.cx/S3Xt

Overview

"Collective Steps" is an homage to the scores of Black women committed to sustaining the South Side Community Arts Center (SSCAC), which is the oldest African American art center in the United States and is one of the only remaining community arts centers funded by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930's. Centered on mapping the stories of understudied Black women, Yarbrough developed a sculptural installation in the lot next to SSCAC utilizing materials redirected from the waste stream and adorned with collages community members created. Many of the collages focused on Fern Gayden, who was a leader, writer, and organizer. A founding member of the South Side Writers Group in the 1930s, Fern Gayden's long and diverse career included leadership roles in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and she served as the South Side Community Art Center president for 10 years.

Mellon Foundation

Selecting an Artist

A team at SSCAC selected Yarbrough through an open call to artists and creatives released in December 2021. The call was open to Chicagoland artists to create a participatory public art piece in any medium, ideally centered around the Bronzeville neighborhood where SSCAC is located. Yarbrough was selected because of her artistic and curatorial practice that focuses on Black history, care, and leadership, as well as her experience doing community-engaged, public work. She was born and raised on the south side of Chicago and still lives a few neighborhoods away from SSCAC. Yarbrough's practice reverses the dominant lack of focus on care for Black women. She works materially by taking items that are undervalued or will otherwise go to waste, and repurposes them as another form of care and redefinition of value.



Photo by Patrick Lentz

Artist Andrea Yarbrough in the woodshop of Chicago's Hyde Park Arts Center

“I'm drawn to public art because you don't necessarily have to dress a certain way or have a certain background or knowledge to be able to interact with it and engage with it.”

Andrea Yarbrough

Devising the Piece

Yarbrough began by wanting to elevate the under-told history of Black women leaders on the South Side and even with SSCAC itself. One of the incredible resources SSCAC is stewarding is its archives, and Yarbrough sought to make it more accessible. Among many storied moments, famous artists taught at the center through the years of free community art classes it had offered decades earlier. Yarbrough sought to bring this element of arts education back to the center, which has in recent years been more focused on gallery exhibitions.

Originally she thought of creating public ‘markers’ with stories. She later decided to find a medium that was more accessible and bottom up - as an invitation for participation. She landed on the medium of collage, which she noted “is super accessible to most folks, even if they don't consider themselves to be an artist.” The idea was to create a canvas for people to unearth and connect to stories.

Physically, Yarbrough also wanted to connect to porch culture in Chicago, and how that is related to Black women blurring lines between domestic and political spaces - porches are where people gather, eat, do hair, and talk shop. She landed on the idea of mapping Black women's under-told stories onto this physical manifestation of a porch, in an accessible form through collage.

Yarbrough wanted to engage people who are traditionally left out of mainstream art spaces in various ways. She wanted to draw people's attention to the piece, and provide an accessible arts experience to people who may not plan to or feel comfortable with entering a gallery.

Making art

Yarbrough began by delving into the archive at SSCAC, and doing her own research on Black women leaders at SSCAC and in general on the south side. She collected images, texts, and maps, and also began to see some trends. She noticed that many of the women were in the social sector - in education, or social workers. As she moved to the material phase, she wanted to connect to that history in some way.



Yarbrough Assembling the Piece

She went to the Creative Chicago Reuse Exchange, a warehouse that stores equipment and materials from Chicago Public Schools and other related items through donation. The founder of the space introduced Yarbrough to twenty metal carts that were going to be thrown away by the Field Museum, and Yarbrough saw that they could be repurposed as steps, in a reference to porches.

Yarbrough deconstructed the carts and created a sculpture of steps, which she then painted blue. She chose blue to be within the lineage of haint blue, a southern tradition where ceilings and bases of porches are painted a sky blue. The tradition originated in Gullah Geechee culture as a way to protect homes from evil spirits by tricking them into believing they've fallen into the water or sky. As Yarbrough said, "these markers are of Black women's histories... and a protection space... altars to Black women."

In May, Andrea co-hosted a collage workshop with artist Alexandra Antoine at SSCAC. The three-hour workshop invited participants to explore the archives and create homages to the Black women's stories they uncovered. No experience with art was required and participants were encouraged to bring mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends as a way to increase connection, as well as personal ephemera to include in the collages. The final pieces were installed onto the step sculpture.





Yarbrough finishing the piece; attendees at the unveiling

Yarbrough assembled the piece over the course of a month, longer than it needed to or would have taken in a studio, on purpose - she wanted to be outside SSCAC, encouraging members of the public to engage with her and with the piece - thereby extending the hours that people could come to the Center to experience art (the gallery is currently only open for very limited hours). The piece opened as part of SSCAC's Juneteenth celebration, and stayed up until August 2023. The closing was marked by a celebration featuring Yarbrough's work as well as that of Cecil McDonald, Jr., the first Catalyst artist.

Reflecting on the project's goals and impacts

The Catalyst projects in general were aimed at creating new socially-engaged artworks and supporting capacity building for artists and organizations. Yarbrough had additional specific goals for her piece, which were to: (1) do archival research to unearth stories of Black women leadership and community building, (2) create a stoop with visual cartography, and (3) educate people about these histories through a workshop. These goals were accomplished through the work Yarbrough and her colleagues did. Yarbrough also had the chance to work with a new material (metal), whereas she has in the past mainly worked with wood.

The project also helped move the needle on many of the broader intended impacts of the PACE catalyst projects (shown right), especially with regards to having art that reflected community cultural identities, strengthening potential cultural organizing, and supporting capacity building for artists of color.

Overall PACE Goals

Change in People

1. Build collective power of BIPOC communities
2. Generate & equitably redistribute communally held resources

Change in Places

3. Reflect community cultural identities
4. Strengthen community-based cultural organizing

Change in Practice

5. Support and break down barriers for artists of color
6. Increase accountability of organizations to BIPOC residents

PACE Reflection Agenda ©2024 Congruence Cultural Strategies..

Note: The indications of impact above were shared with PACE project staff and learning consultants. While longer-term impacts need to be tracked over time, many of the indications of impact relate directly to the goals PACE had set out for itself in terms of how it can impact change in people, place, and practice with the goal of creating more just and equitable cities through cultural and creative practice.

"The way I work is to take things apart to put them back together; to understand what pieces and materials you have and how it can be used in different forms. The work can live in many different iterations; it will continue to grow and evolve and be built on by other people. "

Andrea Yarbrough

Learnings

Yarbrough shared several reflections on things she might like to try next time, including wrapping the steps with a surface that could be painted on. She also shared wanting to have more opportunities to work with community members given the success of the workshop. Some of the challenges that prevented trying this for "Collective Steps" were miscommunications with the SSCAC as a partner and host site. It wasn't clearly communicated to Yarbrough how long the piece could be up, and what kind of administrative and project management support SSCAC could provide, especially given the limited hours staff are present and therefore able to help. Sylvain, as project manager and producer, was an enormous help in managing communication, as was support from Mural Arts Institute staff.

About the Artist

Andrea Yarbrough is a multi-disciplinary maker, curator, and educator based on the South Side of Chicago nurturing sites of care through a blend of urban agriculture, civic engagement, and art praxis. Her praxis is embodied through the collaborative placekeeping initiative in %: Black women (in care of Black women), bringing together writers, curators, farmers, mamas, dancers, organizers, teachers, cultural producers, youth, and visual artists, to collectively exhume the (in)visibility of care for Black women. Andrea's process transforms quotidian materials, slated for waste streams, into designed and utilitarian objects that serve as community resources, and incorporates the impact of solidarity and circular economies at the material, individual, and communal scales. By constructing functionally designed objects, cultivating land, archiving and documenting histories of Black women, and curating exhibitions and public programs, her socially-engaged practice exemplifies how communities can reclaim and reconstruct their surroundings while navigating agency and ownership over underutilized space.
incareofblackwomen.us

Note: Language included in this report is in some places adapted from previously written descriptions by Yarbrough, SSCAC, and the film *Collective Steps.* All photos are by Kayla Reefer, courtesy Andrea Yarbrough unless otherwise noted.



Yarbrough talking to attendees at the opening

Sharing Stories of Chicago's Black Women Leaders

The project also helped to share important and under-told stories of Black women on Chicago's South Side. Fern Gayden, in particular, is featured in almost every collage because her images feature so prominently in the archive. She was a social worker for 50 years, and then served as President and Executive Director of the SSCAC for almost ten years, beginning in 1960. She led the organization through a period of difficulty, reviving it as a community asset. Despite this leadership and service, there is no memorial to her anywhere publicly in the City.

To learn more about Fern Gayden, you can visit the Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research collection of Afro-American History and Literature, 9525 S. Halsted St., Chicago, IL 60628; the papers are described here: https://www.chipublib.org/fa-fern-gayden-papers-2/ Another resource to learn about the history of Black women leaders on Chicago's south side is *Lifting as they Climbed: Mapping a History of Trailblazing Black Women in Chicago.*

About the Public Art and Civic Engagement (PACE) Capacity Building Initiative

The PACE Initiative aimed to develop sustainable infrastructure to support the growth of socially-engaged public art in communities around the United States through a cohort learning environment which included mentoring, shared learning

experiences and resources, and funding for capacity and two Artist Catalyst Projects. After a competitive selection process, the three host institutions selected to participate in the cohort were the APANO Communities United Fund in Portland, Oregon; Louisville Visual Art in Kentucky; and the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago, Illinois. During the 30-month initiative, each organization worked with artists and community to create two works of public art in a civically engaged manner, including sending the artists for an immersion incubator program to Philadelphia. Additional goals of the PACE initiative were to strengthen a national network of socially engaged public art practitioners, and produce and disseminate research, case studies and useful advice to a national audience. The Mural Arts Institute hired Congruence Cultural Strategies to lead the research and evaluation work for the PACE Initiative.

About the Mural Arts Institute

The Mural Arts Institute (MAI) was established in 2017 as an initiative of Mural Arts Philadelphia, the nation's largest public art program dedicated to the belief that art ignites change. As part of Mural Arts Philadelphia, the Mural Arts Institute is dedicated to sharing knowledge, ideas, and experiences that have shaped our approach to community-centered artmaking. At its core, MAI seeks to build connections, sustain relationships, and share skills about the practices that have been instrumental in creating works of public art with Philadelphians. We work with artists, arts administrators, and community leaders across the world to align knowledge, amplify voices, empower change, and distribute resources that move us all toward a more inclusive and equitable future of socially engaged public art. www.muralarts.org/institute

About SSCAC

Founded in 1940, SSCAC is the oldest African American art center in the United States and is a Chicago Historic Landmark. While taking pride in our rich past, we today build on our legacy and innovatively serve as an artist- and community-centered resource with programs, exhibitions and events that inspire. SSCAC showcases established artists and nurtures emerging creators. Through educational and artistic programs, exhibitions, talks, tours, and more, the center strives to engage, educate and connect community members to African American art and artists. https://www.sscartcenter.org/