Photo by Isabella Abbott

Sustainability and the Power of Public Art

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Pittsburgh is a city of the arts, from performances and paintings to public art. An often-overlooked facet of public art, however, is the role it can play in sharing an environmental message.

The purpose of public art is to enrich a community by making art accessible. The public art in the city of Pittsburgh is coordinated by the Office For Public Art. In 2021, it introduced the Environment, Health and Public Art Initiative, part of OPA's Civic Engagement Public Art Program, which featured works that focused on soil, air and water pollution.

The first version of the Initiative was responsible for the creation of three pieces of environmental art, the first of which, "Nine Mile Run Viewfinder" by Ginger Brookes Takahashi, involves several installations in Wilkinsburg.

Each installation features an ADA compliant metal grate, allowing viewers to view and reflect on the water beneath their feet. Each is accompanied by a short poem that can be accessed on the website.

The second installation, concerning air pollution, "How Did This Happen?" by Aaron Henderson consists of a series of projections displayed in various communities that consists of words accompanied by audio of community members sharing their stories.

"Dirt is Beautiful" by Mary Tremonte is an interactive multipart work that promotes soil health awareness and education. Consisting of Dirt Tales, a zine and SHEd, a mobile garden event resource cart containing information and materials to set up community gardening events. Dirt is Beautiful also promotes the creation and awareness of city gardens.

Divya Roa Heffley, director of the initiative, emphasized OPA's core tenets. "We believe artists are catalysts...change agents, that have the power to build awareness, to build advocacy," she says. "We also believe that community members are powerful voices of change. They are experts in their neighborhood and what matters to them most."

Part of what makes Public

Art special is its ability to speak to the culture of a community. The Duquesne Ring sculpture on campus is one example. The ring, an icon of the university, is also presented as a point of pride and admiration for viewers, and presents a way to connect to the culture of community Duquesne seeks to cultivate. "We believe the most powerful works...come into being because they speak to the people who have to live with it," Heffley says.

"We do an open call for organizations and for [this] Initiative, it's organizations that have environmental health at the heart of their mission"

OPA Research and Events Associate Tess Wilson says that when choosing organizations, it's important to keep an open mind. "They weren't all art organizations, one of them...was the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Justice," she says.

In addition to blending academia and art, OPA puts considerable effort into working with diverse organizations that represent the project's goals and the communities that would host the art.

"[We wanted] to make sure all the regions are well represented...more that we aren't picking three organizations from downtown." Heffley says.

Through the work done in both editions of the Initiative, the lives and lived experiences of the communities OPA works with are always top priority.

One major goal of the work is to be "additive, not extractive, not even in the smallest way." Heffley says, which emphasizes that OPA's work should make community members feel they are part of the process, and not subjects to be studied and then discarded.

Independent artists also have a role to play.

Originally from Los Angeles, artist and community member Christine Wheeler creates unique pieces by utilizing objects found in nature such as plants and animal remains.

"My art is dead things." Christine says. "I make art with ... anything that's biologic."

Wheeler explained her art primarily consists of plants, teeth, claws and even bones. Nothing is off the table ... if it can be found.

"I will never kill something ... to make art with ... if I find something [dead] ... I'll give it a proper burial so that the remains go back to the Earth and work as fertilizer." Sometimes, after the animal has fully decayed, Wheeler will come back to collect remaining material for her art, often jewelry or dioramas.

"Artwork is supposed to have a positive impact," Wheeler says. "When working with art sustainably, you're making a positive impact on people who see your art and the environment. I don't think that art ... can be called art if you're making any kind of negative impact."

Elizabeth Dawn, a multimedia artist, also has performance and writing credits to her name, with her current project being editing her memoir and working on her personal site, "Memiortisrty." When working in visual mediums, Dawn employs the Three R's: Reduce, Reuse and Recycle.

"I get a lot of used books and I'll cut them up and put them into my work," she says.

Dawn emphasized that being aware of how much one uses is just as important as what one uses. "I'm very particular about how much paint I use, and I don't buy what I don't need."

This allows Dawn to create with a cleaner conscience, and it's more cost effective to be sustainable. "I know people don't want the starving artist thing to be a thing, but it is...and so what has allowed me to continue progressing in my art is getting really creative with what I have."

Public Art is essential for the overall feeling of a community. According to Dawn, "it gives a sense of community, and there's a welcoming feeling about it... when I don't see [public art] then I typically don't feel safe in a community."

Wilson, of the Office of Public Art, agrees: "Art can reach into parts of humanity that research and data can't necessarily on its own."

Editor's Note: All information on work and artists involved with Environment, Health, and Public Art Initiative courtesy of OPA's website. More information is available at opapgh.org. ●