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Wednesday, Aug. 1, 2007

A voting arts 'Block' to highlight human rights

Public invited to choose pieces for public art project along garage entrance wall by Michelle Zenarosa | Special to The Gazette













Dozens of residents exercised their right to vote July 20. And thanks to them, the currently blank Kennett Street Art Wall will look a lot different.

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When local artist Tom Block was commissioned in June to install a public art piece along the entrance wall to the Kennett Street parking lot, he wanted to bring back the "public" into public art.

So he created a 78-piece art project that fused a variety of Eastern-inspired visual art with sayings from great humanists such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and Buddha. And along with the Gateway Georgia Avenue Revitalization Corp., he put together a one-night event that allowed community members to vote on which 13 of Block's pieces they wanted on the wall.

"The whole notion that this artwork is not something that got entirely planned in a closed studio by two or three people is exciting," said Roberta Buckberg, an employee at Montgomery College and a Silver Spring native who attended the event. "The whole wall was not planned by the artist and he had to bend his art for the public, which I thought was a remarkably brave thing for him to do."

Buckberg's 9-year-old son, Matthew, who also voted at the exhibit, said he had more fun than he did later in the evening at the "Harry Potter" book release party on Ellsworth Drive. After the party, he was fired up to go back and see the results of his voting.

"We have a very activist community in Silver Spring," Block said. "I wanted to engage the public in a positive way and cause them to think, but I didn't want to cause a ruckus."



Photo by Michelle Zenarosa Artist Tom Block holds samples of the final 13 Kennett Street public art pieces at his residence in Silver Spring

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The project, titled "Cousins" and slated to be completed sometime this fall, is Block's third major art project in the county. The title refers to the ideas in the pieces being interrelated, Block said.

Working as a professional artist since age 26, Block has been an artist-advocate for human rights.

His work has included those such as the Human Rights Painting project with Amnesty International and the Shalom/Saalam Project that reflected that Jews and Arab Muslims could live together in peace.

"I thought that his work combined art with inspirational text and that provided for the diverse community that Silver Spring is," said Patricia Shepherd, project manager for the South Silver Spring pedestrian linkages program that chose Block for the project. "It gave people a moment to read and feel inspired as they were walking through the alleyway."

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Currently a link between Eastern Avenue and Kennett Street, the wall will likely attract more viewers with the influx of new resident developments and ongoing nearby church activities.

"I hope passers-by are left with a desire to learn about wisdom masters and how wisdom traditions are connected at the roots," Block said. "A living, vibrant and contemporary [piece of] art should force an audience to question through beauty."

In creating the pieces, Block chose to stay away from what he deemed "politicized" works such as the Quran, Torah and the New Testament. Instead, he wanted to incorporate text from "wisdom masters" like Gandhi, King and Mandela, and show how they were all interrelated.

"It's exciting to be in a community that participates in an art project that would push boundaries culturally that others might not be open to," said Block, whose two young children also participated in the voting.

"With the commercialization of downtown Silver Spring, south Silver Spring has this opportunity to remain off-beat and different," Buckberg said. "Art and community life are so critical and they are kind of an endangered species."

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