

The Power of SOS Art is Engagement

But a bit more order would help

By KATHY STOCKMAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In its eighth year, SOS Art is an event that invites artists of all ages, including poets and musicians, and the city to engage in a discussion about peace and justice. As an art historian whose scholarship focus has rested mostly in Latino art and critical race theory, I am always surprised to find that this discussion is not more prevalent in contemporary art. Few contemporary artists, especially those in Cincinnati, take on this topic, yet as by the wide participation and patronage of SOS Art and other local events has illustrated, sociopolitical debates remain strong and impassioned.

The visual component of SOS Art, which ran May 28-June 6, included a non-juried show of two- and three-dimensional art open to local artists. As a non-juried show, the discussion of peace and justice is an open forum for all artists who wish to express themselves and to honestly and effectively participate in this dialogue. The result is a presentation of objects that vary in medium, artistic style and ability, subject and perspective.

At times such a breadth of presentation overwhelmed this viewer. Moving from gallery to gallery throughout the two floors of the Art Academy of Cincinnati, which housed the exhibit, did not always invite the thoughtful

and perhaps even philosophical introspection these sociopolitical themes require. In one gallery, the viewer was met with national and local politics; the next topics included racism, feminism, homophobia; then the next was environmentalism. And sometimes all themes found a place on the same wall! Of course, all of these are integral parts to the overall discussion. However, a non-juried show, I think, requires special care that will successfully move the dialogue throughout the different spaces. Without careful presentation, the exhibition risks presenting itself as a catalogue of newspaper headlines. As it is, the show rested perhaps too heavily on the literary and performance components of SOS Art for the needed dialogue.

This is not to suggest that the point of the show and the themes were lost. The power of the artistic expression is certainly present in this diversity. Inviting all artists and visitors to engage in a sociopolitical dialogue is an invitation that should remain open. I believe artists and their art have a moral obligation to the community, and SOS Art provides a venue for artists to meet it. Yet I maintain that providing some kind of control or set parameters of a discussion leads to greater success. This becomes most obvious with the collaborative projects presented in the show.

Homeless Teens is made up of digital designs created by Mark Wiesner's ninth-grade students at Summit Country Day School. This collabora-

tive student work, with its obvious and narrowly set thematic parameters, packs a wonderfully powerful punch.

Just as successful is the collaboration between students at Chatfield College, Northern Kentucky University and the residency program at Miami University's Center for Community Engagement. This partnership resulted in the now well-known discussion about the Jim Tarbell mural in Over-the-Rhine (see "Gigantic Insult? Towering Tribute?," issue of Nov. 1-14, 2009). The piece enjoys a continued success that rests, I think, on the invitation to the viewer to participate in the conversation. In light of the recent reaction to a couple of Shepherd Fairey's murals, we can see here an example of art – mural, mixed media, sculpture, etc. – that engages through an open invitation to all to participate in a discussion.

It is education – through art's discussion that invites all to the conversation – that makes both *Homeless Teens* and the continuing discussion of the Tarbell mural successful efforts toward community engagement of sociopolitical issues. It is this open invitation – extended to diverse voices and eyes working to sharpen our dialogue, break our isolation, and strengthen our community – that is the fundamental principle of SOS Art.

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Sheri Besso created *Full Deck*, a commentary on "campaign madness." Vinit Murthy.



The Ungrateful Traveler by Jeff Casto. Vinit Murthy.



Saad Ghosn and his woocut print, *We Float, We Sink*. Vinit Murthy.



L-R, *Broken Fence* and *Pain Faces* by Kris Allen Courtney. Vinit Murthy.