

9/17/2001

Painting the town

Convergence Street Painting Festival raises money for N.Y. rescue efforts

By Emily Kimball

Herald Staff Writer

The Brown Daily Herald

Artists of all ages and backgrounds transformed the black asphalt of South Main Street into a canvas of vivid color during Saturday's Convergence Street Painting Festival.

In its second year, the day of street art was not only a celebration of creativity and a gathering of community members, but was transformed into a collective memorial to the recent tragic national events.

A joint effort by the Printing Industry of Rhode Island and CapitolArts Providence, the festival generated thousands of dollars for the International Association of Fire Fighters Emergency Fund to support the families of fire fighters who lost their lives in rescue efforts at the World Trade Center.

Beyond the financial contribution, the art itself reflected a widespread sense of loss and a search for peace and stability in America and around the world.

The images depicted in the rows of squares on the pavement ranged from flaming buildings and dark monsters to serene vistas and doves of peace.

Weaving through many of the chalky canvasses were the stars and stripes of the American flag.

Festival Director Bob Rizzo said of the shifted emphasis of the event, "it's a natural thing to have happen, and the reason we didn't cancel the festival."

He commented on the healing power of art and said "artists have been the commentators in society forever. Today shows the amount of freedom we have in the United States."

A separate section of the street was designated as an area where anyone could pick up chalk and add a contribution, with a focus on reflection on the tragedy.

"You watch TV for 10 hours a day and you can start to feel so helpless and hopeless," Rizzo said of the press coverage concerning the terrorist attacks. "As artists this is the one thing that we can do to help."

Gerard Dewan, a New York City fireman and cousin of the festival's associate director, is still unaccounted for, and he offered another inspiration for the event, Rizzo said.

"He was a real direct connection to us who brought it much closer to home," he added.

The overflowing pail of votes for a work depicting a firefighter releasing a flurry of stars-and-stripes butterflies into the air reflected the communal awe for the efforts of such newly recognized national heroes.

The artists themselves spoke of the resonance of the recent events in their work, even their influence was not immediately visible.

Chloe Cumbow, an art teacher at the Attleboro Museum, created a pastel view of the Statue of Liberty and the Twin Towers rising out of a misty bay.

"I wanted it to be peaceful and beautiful and maybe even uplifting," she said.

Eight-year-old Caleb Fechter, visiting Providence from Ohio with his grandparents, created a raw primary-colored canvas of a green, fire-breathing monster looming over dark city buildings.

Four juniors from Barrington High School — Laura Bilodeau, Annie Daly, Bailey O'Donnell and Laura Kaplan — chose world unity as their theme, with a rising sun over a globe.

Framed by the sun, a female figure was encircled by symbols from different world religions and an American flag.

They placed a double rainbow over the image as a "symbol of hope for the future," Bilodeau said.

Providence artist Todd Ingham also described a quest for cross-cultural understanding in his depiction of a rescue scene with a victim, doctors, a firefighter and onlookers, all of different races, based roughly on a photo from People magazine.

"I wanted to depict a multicultural environment," he said. "There are loads of Middle Easterners who came down with the World Trade Center as well."

Jillian Weiss, a junior at LaSalle Academy, chose to stick to her initial plan to draw a scene from the Edward Lear poem "The Owl and the Pussy-cat."

She said she started drawing the Capitol building but then decided to paint something "innocent and carefree that people could enjoy to get their mind off that."

Local businesses sponsored the individual squares, allowing the profits from tokens — used to place votes — and food sales to go toward the firefighter fund.

Initially, most of the proceeds from the event had been destined for Printing Industries of Rhode Island.

Philip Olivira, executive director of the group, estimated that Saturday's event, which culminated with WaterFire, drew more than 20,000 participants and visitors.

Convergence Festival is a three-week arts festival organized by CapitolArts that includes a range of cultural and artistic performances across the state. Other upcoming events in Providence include jazz performances next Friday and Saturday at the Rhode Island School of Design Auditorium and a weeklong festival of short independent films at the Cable Car Cinema. A full schedule of events is posted at www.caparts.org.