



The mixed media sculpture "Fingerprint DNA: A Portrait of an Arab American Family" by the artist Geraldine Ondrizek was part of RACC's Installation Art Series, which brings temporary exhibitions to the lobby of the Portland Building each month.

THE DEAL OF THE ART: PUBLIC ART COMES OF AGE

BY JOHN MOTLEY PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERMON JOYNER

The lobby of the Portland Building hardly resembles a typical gallery. A telephone rings endlessly at the information kiosk. FedEx workers cruise through with handcarts. Businessmen and women clutch leather briefcases, their noses buried in PDAs. But across from the kiosk is an unlikely space that, in the midst of so much movement and noise, is dedicated to displaying art.

At the moment, it features an installation by Geraldine Ondrizek, an associate professor of art at Reed College, called Finger Print DNA, A Portrait of an Arab American Family. Based on a series of paternity tests she conducted on family members of her Arab American husband, Ondrizek's sculpture is a series of five silken panels, each of which bears an enlarged image of the family members' DNA. Framed by cold steel that strongly suggests the scientific nature of her work, the silk panels are also run through with threads that originate from spools mounted on a loom-like structure and are anchored to the wall behind the sculpture. The bright lights above Finger Print DNA cast hard shadows — a geometric cross-hatching of the thread and metal bars — against

the wall. The piece, with its rigid contours, sleek metal and delicate latticework of threads, invites contemplation.

But is the impact of this installation lost on the workers who walk through the lobby? Do they stop to consider how genealogical makeup is, in fact, akin to a woven tapestry? Do they meditate on the acourant political implications of scrutinizing an Arab family's DNA?

Such questions illustrate the larger issues of how public art enhances an urban landscape and what it says about the community. In the words of Eloise Damrosch, executive director of the Regional Arts and Culture Council (RACC), "Public art provides free and accessible art experiences on a daily basis, just by walking down the street." For the artist, this work is "an image of our connectedness" that she hopes will urge people to "think about a bigger picture in the world."

The ultimate goal of Ondrizek's Finger Print DNA is in line with Damrosch's description of public art's function. "I hope that people have an aesthetic experience," explains Ondrizek. "That people have

a moment of looking at something and enjoying the formal qualities of the piece, such as color, light and the materials I used.”

Ondrizek’s sculpture is part of the Installation Art Series, which provides the Portland Building with a rotating presentation of “aesthetic experiences.” Each month, a new installation is exhibited in the lobby’s modestly sized space, engaging visitors and employees alike. Managed by RACC, an 11-year-old nonprofit agency, the Installation Art Series is just one reason that the organization has earned a national reputation among art councils for its creativity and innovation. RACC counters common perceptions of what constitutes public art and works to make the collections it oversees in Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties more relevant and engaging for the public.

“Temporary art is a wonderful way to conceive of public art — there are very few pieces of public art that don’t become dated within a decade,” said Ondrizek. “We live in a pluralistic society, in which artists are speaking from very different points of view. Why not give those voices a forum to be heard, instead of giving the public a single permanent, stereotypical version of what public art can be?”

While every county in the Portland metro region contains some public art — whether financed publicly or privately — it is, undoubtedly, Multnomah County and Portland, in particular, that boast the most extensive collections. Rural areas tend to lack adequate funding to invest in public art. Portland, on the other hand, has aggressively lobbied to make public art a high priority for the city through its Percent for Art ordinance. Initiated in 1980, this piece of legislation ensures that a portion of the budget for every publicly funded construction project within the city’s limits is dedicated to the acquisition, fabrication, installation and maintenance of public art. The City originally allocated 1% toward public art, but, just last January, the Portland City Council unanimously approved a revision to the ordinance that increased the designated allotment to 2%, while addressing other holes, such as project tracking. In addition to generating approximately \$140,000 in additional annual budget for the City, this

revision will also require that every publicly-funded construction project file with RACC — an amendment that will help keep potential projects from falling through the cracks.

“The recent action by City Council speaks for itself,” said Damrosch. “We’ve fixed the problem for tracking eligible projects. And more projects mean more art in the community and more work for local artists.”

When one thinks about public art, it’s hard not to imagine statues of political leaders or military heroes on horseback. George Waters’ bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln looms in Portland’s South Park Blocks. In McMinnville, a memorial statue of a World War I infantryman welcomes visitors to the Yamhill County Courthouse.

“When I came to Portland in the 80s, most public art was attached to a building, in front of a building or in a park,” Damrosch continued. “But now the whole notion of what public art can be is broadening. At RACC, we’re thinking of public art as permanent, site-specific, architecturally integrated, temporary installations.” RACC also is exploring artist-in-residence programs.

This evolution of public art has coincided with a period of surging vitality for the arts in the Portland



"Echo Gate," a collaborative sculpture created by the group RIGGA in 2001, is one of several public art works along the Vera Katz Eastbank Esplanade.



Manuel Izquierdo's publicly sited works, like "Spike Flower" located in Vancouver, Washington's sculpture garden, can be found in parks and universities across Oregon.

metro region. Within the past few years, this has been evidenced by the introduction of the annual Time Based Art Festival, eleven days of world-class performance courtesy of the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA); the Affair at the Jupiter Hotel, Portland's first art fair; and the brand new Jubitz Center for Modern and Contemporary Art, a new wing of the Portland Art Museum that seeks to present cutting-edge work. Local galleries are taking themselves more seriously and showing increasingly sophisticated work by local artists — and there's plenty of it. The 2000 U.S. Census estimated that more than 10,000 artists work in Portland, a figure that doesn't take into account the thousands more throughout the metroscape. Given that overwhelming evidence, it's clear that, in Damrosch's words, "Arts and culture are highly valued here as a quality of life." In fact, art is such an integral aspect of the region's cultural identity that it is woven into the landscape in the form of a nationally renowned collection of public art works.

From the Skidmore fountain — Portland's oldest piece of civic artwork, dedicated in 1888 — to the commissions that enliven TriMet stations across the region, public art is constantly engaging the region's citizens. Not only does it provide an encounter with art for those who would not otherwise seek out a gallery or a museum, it also locates an element of play or surprise in the midst of the cityscape. One can debate the aesthetic merits of Pete Beeman's

Pod, the stainless steel, bronze and titanium kinetic sculpture that sits at the intersection of Burnside Street and 10th Avenue, but the effect of encountering the hulking sculpture as it bobs in the midst of traffic, billboards and downtown buildings is a provocative contribution to city life.

Public art also serves an educational function, both in terms of local culture and history as well as the more erudite discipline of art history. For example, Northwest Portland boasts two works by interna-

tional art stars. Hidden in the tree-lined North Park Blocks, a haunt for dog-walkers, is William Wegman's Dog Bowl: a permanently sited bronze bowl with a bubbling fountain for parched pooches. It's a



Abraham Lincoln in the Portland Park Blocks.

quirky piece in the city's collection, but one that perfectly fits the personality of an artist who made a career out of photographing his pet Weimaraners. Kenny Scharf's neo-pop totems, Tikitotmoniki, border the Pearl District's Jameson Square. In these thirty-foot-high works, Scharf playfully riffs on a deep-seeded cultural landmark of the Pacific Northwest: the Native American totem pole. But in Scharf's version, electric hues and hard-edged geometry update the totem to signposts more consistent with the Pearl's chic eateries and boutiques.

While big names like Wegman and Scharf get plenty of attention, the region is ultimately a showcase for local talents, like Ondrizek. Public art commissions help support local artists through exposure, funding and an opportunity to build a legacy. The Spanish-born artist Manuel Izquierdo, a sculptor and professor emeritus at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, has done just that. Through more than a dozen local commissions, he has helped shape the community he calls home. Installed in 1979, Izquierdo's sculpture and fountain, Dreamer, has helped create a strong sense of place in Pettygrove Park. It's a transporting experience to discover this abstract sculpture, at once classical and futurist, nestled into an urban park: Its sleek and fluid contours pull a viewer's gaze along its bronze surface, which catches sunlight and reflects it in bright, white spangles.

Local sculptor Lee Kelly has had a similar influence on Oregon's landscape. Along with Izquierdo, Kelly played an instrumental role in fostering Portland's nascent art scene in the 1960s. Over the course of his long career, his works in metal and bronze have become familiar sites on the state's college campuses and in its parks. His Friendship Circle sculpture is one of the most memorable landmarks in Tom McCall Waterfront Park. Two steel



The neon-hued "Tikitotmoniki" statues by Kenny Scharf bring an updated version of the Native American totem pole to the heart of the Pearl District.