

Outside the gallery

By: Whitney Warne - The Daily Iowan

Posted: 5/13/08

Art is everywhere. You might have passed it in the form of a wagon filled with flowers on the street, in a trail of pink Hostess Snowballs planted in the campus landscape, or in fabric embroidered with political sentiments sewn on a bench. Perhaps you've passed these oddities without notice or noticed but refrained from stopping, wishing not to disturb the strange piece created by something so unusual. Maybe you've talked to your friend about art without knowing it, saying, "Hey, guess what I saw" or "that does not belong there." Maybe you've participated in art and not known it was happening.

"Guerrilla art," or art done in public, takes place anywhere. There are no set studios, no predetermined media, and no specific audiences in mind. The goal: to make art accessible to anyone who cares to pay attention.

After touring a Hostess factory, UI intermedia graduate student Katie McGowan received a large donation of sugary Snowballs to imbed in her future artwork. The project started in Tijuana with 650 snowballs glued to the walls in a gallery. When she moved to the UI for graduate school, she continued installing her snowballs, this time opting for public, non-permissioned venues. Since her arrival, the fluffy treats have popped up around the sculptures outside the Art Building, by the UI Power Plant, and along the Iowa River trail.

"[Placing the snowballs] is like looking through the frame of a camera," McGowan said. "I like finding a place where you can have an interesting perspective on the snowballs, and it warms my heart to see things that are overtly whimsical and playful."

After years of practicing fine-arts photography, UI intermedia graduate student Megan Berner came to the UI and began "guerrilla gardening," a far more peaceful endeavor than the name implies. She started experimenting with different ways to get locals involved in her planting projects. The first involved community members planting seeds and following the progress of their plants online, each plant being tagged for easy identification. Berner raised the sprouts, tracking their progress and then transplanted the mature social experiments into in-laid boxes along a human-trampled path behind the Art Building.

"I [plant my gardens] to make people realize that art is a part of your everyday life," said Berner, who was later asked to remove the flowers because of a newly defined public-safety hazard. But the growth had already begun. She transferred the flowers to a wagon and took them around town to different community events, bringing the now-blooming socialites back to their intended audience.

"Art doesn't just exist in galleries," she said. "It's an integral, essential part to everyone's life, whether you're an artist or not."

UI intermedia graduate student Jill Baker sits on public benches, often in politically charged atmospheres, embroidering names onto pieces of army-green fabric that contains a list of United States senators that voted to pass bills supporting the current war. People,

mostly older women, stopped to ask what she was doing. While some were shocked to see the names of their senators on Baker's counter-commemorative textiles, others were just curious.

"You end up having to define what art is," she said. "[I consider my art successful] anytime the line between the artist and the audience is blurred."

The world of "guerrilla art" is one of political gesture and peaceful whimsy, pushing for social change and awareness through attention to detail and community involvement. But it is not a world filled with monetary rewards; in fact, most artists involved in this type of community art never plan on making a living on their projects.

"Nothing I do makes any money, but I think it's an important philosophical gesture," said McGowan, who started as a painter. "I struggled with the idea of being sold as a commodity, so I embrace [not being paid] because I don't want to be a part of the capitalist push in the art world."

E-mail DI reporter Whitney Warne at:
whitney-warne@uiowa.edu

© Copyright 2008 Daily Iowan