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LocalMotive: Public Art Off the Beaten Path

By Mary Bucci McCoy

The historic 1859 Gas and Light Building in Lowell, the permanent home of the Revolving Museum since 2002, is surrounded by the canals and old brick mills now preserved as the National Park Service's Lowell Historical Park. Temporary outdoor public art installations along the network of unused canals, railroad tracks, and even alleyways around the museum, some of which are part of the park, extend the curatorial space of the museum beyond its walls, thereby superimposing an agenda of collaborative, community-based empowerment through art over the historical, preservationist curatorial culture of the Historical Park: "I think that this is the art revolution," says the Revolving Museum's artistic director, Jerry Beck. The permanent commemorative stone and/or metal public art pieces installed during the 1980's and 1990's along the Historical Park's Canalwalk stand in contrast to the temporary works of more humble, ephemeral materials (paint, wood, fabric) presented by the museum. This rich juxtaposition highlights critical issues of place, voice, and ownership.

The outdoor component of the Revolving Museum's second exhibition in Lowell, LocalMotive: Public Art off the Beaten Path, follows the museum's practice of presenting works by individual local artists as well as community groups collaborating with artist. Works by individual artist are often more tightly focused than the collaborative works, which must unite a variety of viewpoints and skill levels. Castro-Yves Arboite's powerful, large-scale mural Taste of Haiti in Lowell (2003), painted on the wall of a building in the alleyway behind the museum, transplants the colorful imagery of his native Haiti - the past that is always with him - to his current home, Lowell. Images ranging from a crying flag to a man selling flavored ices represent both the universal and the personal. The mural is surmounted by the sculptural figure Silver Surfer (2003) by Arboite and Bobby Mongillo. For the artist, the figure represents the city of Lowell overcoming obstacles, metaphorically riding a wave into the twenty-first century. Situated as it is behind the museum, across the street from the park's visitor center, these works are easy to miss. There are plans for turning the alleyway into a more formalized exhibition space, but for now it is mostly raw and unmediated.

In a plaza across the street from the museum, graffiti artist Caleb Neelon (a.k.a. SONIK)'s storytelling tower, Amihoutornaut (2003) is a roughhewn wooden cart surmounted by a tall, vertical structure to which he has affixed his collection of signs. This totemic work shows vernacular influences such as folk art, advertising, even graffiti; the signs are boldly painted with images, including shoes, elephants, a bull, and a crab, outlined in black and juxtaposed with phrases such as "Until the money runs out," "Sunshine Indulgences," "Addict of the Truth," and "Whatever Gets You Out of Bed in the Morning." Presenting this work in the context of a formal exhibition privileges the often-marginalized voice and visual language of street art. It's for the viewer to connect the pieces into a meaningful whole.

The temporary nature of the Revolving Museum's public art, with a new exhibit approximately every seven months, gives fresh opportunities for groups to explore their place in the community and to find their voices through collaborative art making. LocalMotive is no exception: The collaborative works are bright, raw exuberant, and often poignant records of this empowering process. Like the works by individual artist, these pieces energize their spaces. Some of the temporary works have structures that can be reused or expanded upon, suggesting that art is a renewable resource, a process rather than a thing.

Artist Laura Mayotte worked with students from nearby UMass Lowell to create a 16' by 4' mixed media wheel piece, Endurance: Work Inspired by Lowell's Textile History and Its Immigrant,

Past and Present (2003). A reusable aluminum framework serves as a physical and metaphorical structure for the collaborators to work within: It transforms and focuses the latent energy of the students who made it into something new. One flat face of the wheel uses black fabric quilted with images addressing home, immigration, and identity. The center strip is made of fabric with numerous appliqued representations of immigrants in their native dress, an endless circle of new beginnings wheeling through time. Mayotte covered the other face in an abstract pattern of blue waves and knots to tie together the imagery of the students and to act as an overarching visual "framework," poetically representing all the people of Lowell. Monumental in scale if not materials, Endurance is a powerful presence as it balances prominently in a wooden plaza of the Canalwalk, in front of brick arches erected to commemorate where the Merrimack Street Depot once stood.

A nearby painted wood mural, Dream Locomotive (2003), by artist Nora Valdez and the Lowell Community Charter School, is similarly powerful. Mounted on the fence in front of an exhibit of an antique Boston and Maine train, the brightly colored images and shifting pictorial spaces of the mural's train cars contrast sharply with the concrete historical presence of the actual train. The imagery includes art from the European art historical canon, Lowell's textile industry, mill workers, a colorful welter of national flags, the word welcome in many languages, and ornately detailed Cambodian immigrants. The idea of adding cars onto the train rather than taking it down has been raised; this would transform it into a renewable structure of expression, with subsequent groups building on earlier work.

The permanently installed public works along the Canalwalk and the temporary works of LocalMotive address some of the same issues; mills, immigrants, water, textiles. The permanent works offer a fixed viewpoint, while the temporary works are statements in an ongoing dialogue. By empowering some two hundred artists and students to make and exhibit their art in the downtown area, LocalMotive gives the city's current inhabitants ownership of their history, their voice, their vision, and their city; in the context of the Lowell Historical Park, the Revolving Museum offers a powerful alternative that embraces the past and fluidly incorporates the ever-changing present.