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Grants bring whirl of public art for Greenway

By Geoff Edgers



KEITH BEDFORD/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

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Earlier this year, the Institute of Contemporary Art got disappointing news: It would no longer be in charge of painting the massive Dewey Square wall mural, at the head of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway. The job would instead go to the more mainstream Museum of Fine Arts.

Jill Medvedow, ICA director, was not pleased. "Really?" she said. "It's walking distance to the ICA."

Other Greenway changes, perhaps more universally welcomed, are in the works. On Wednesday the nonprofit funder ArtPlace will announce a \$250,000 public art grant for the Greenway, a 15-acre network of parks in downtown Boston. That follows by just a few days the announcement of plans for a \$1 million public art expansion that will include the installation next year of a huge, billowing fabric work meant to hover over the park, by Brookline-based artist Janet Echelman. The Greenway is even hiring its own art curator.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Smith said she's thrilled to be working on a larger scale, particularly with a show opening across town at the MFA in August. Pictured, Smith's "Bright Matter."

It's an unprecedented burst of activity in a city not known for its public art. And the surge has not gone unnoticed.

"When I heard about the Echelman piece, I said, 'Wow, after so many years of waiting, it's happening,'" said Carole Charnow, Children's Museum director, who regularly walks along the Greenway. "The Echelman is audacious bold, visionary, and new."

Those are not terms traditionally associated with the Greenway's cultural plans. In recent years, four buildings proposed for the park — the YMCA of Greater Boston, a history museum, a new center for arts and culture, and a garden-under-glass — were dropped because of fund-raising struggles.

But Jesse Brackenbury, executive director of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, said that the Greenway has been steadily adding features. Art has also been a focus, he said, starting with George Sherwood's 35-foot-tall steel structure, "Botanica," installed in 2009, and continuing through a series of temporary installations.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



JANUS VAN DEN EIJNDEN/FILE

Janet Echelman's art was displayed in Amsterdam in 2012 to 2013. Her work will be installed in Boston next year.

The most influential space has been the Dewey Square wall, where the Brazilian twins known as Os Gemeos created a colorful, cartoonish boy in pajamas in 2012. The project, paid for in large part by the conservancy but overseen by the ICA, drew raves — and also some unexpected criticism, when commenters on a Fox Boston website questioned whether the figure resembled a terrorist.

For Pedro Alonzo, the independent curator who oversaw the installation and has worked on art projects around the world, the project was a huge success because of the art and the location. “Look, that is the best wall I’ve ever gotten for an artist,” said Alonzo. “That wall has set a new bar.” He is not the only one who felt that way.

The Greenway’s curatorial committee — which includes Nick Capasso, Fitchburg Art Museum director; Geoff Hargadon, UBS Private Wealth Management senior vice president; and Edward Saywell, Museum of Fine Arts head of contemporary art — decided earlier this year to rotate the wall to the MFA. Later this summer, New York-based Shinique Smith, who uses bright colors and anything from paint to stray pieces of clothing for her abstract works, will install a mural in collaboration with the MFA. Smith said she is thrilled to be working on a larger scale, particularly with a show opening across town at the MFA in August. “I hadn’t thought of it as a marketing tool, but that is true,” she said of the mural. “For me, it’s an extension of exhibition space. It’s a way to engage people who might not necessarily come into the museum. Even if they can’t get away to see the show, they can go see this.”

Smith’s work will replace Matthew Ritchie’s gray-and-white mural, a project overseen by the ICA. Medvedow said that the ICA had already approached another New York artist, Mickalene Thomas, about the wall before hearing of the MFA project.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

She said she understands why the conservancy wants to work with other institutions, though believes the ICA is a natural fit because it connects the downtown area to the museum's waterfront home.

"We pioneered a strong asset for the city," said Medvedow of the wall. "They've picked a wonderful artist, and I'll be eager to see how they develop that space."

Hargadon, who donated money to support the Ritchie mural and whose photographs of the piece are featured on the ICA website, said that there are also other places along the Greenway that he hopes the ICA and others will utilize for future projects.

That's part of Brackenbury's plan. He knows the city has long been viewed as stodgy when it comes to public art, a place where bronze statues rule and daring contemporary works rarely get shown. Critics point to Chicago, with large contemporary sculptures on view at Millennium Park, or New York's High Line, an elevated park built along a former railroad line in Manhattan.

Echelman's project will feature a canvas suspended hundreds of feet above the Greenway. It will be attached to buildings running along the park.

Echelman, who moved to the area more than 30 years ago to attend Harvard University, said she is excited to finally get a chance to create a significant piece on her home turf. Her friends often ask her about works she has installed around the world. "I walk my kids to school, and everyone says, 'I wish we could have one here,' " she said. Now they can.

Ricardo Barreto, a public arts expert who has taught at the Massachusetts College of Art and Boston University, hopes that the Echelman commission is not just an exception. He has long advocated that legislators devote a percentage of tax revenues to pay for public art, as happens in many other regions.

"It may be coincidental that all these things are happening, and maybe we're going to have one terrific year," he said. "What happens after that?"

Brackenbury says the money from ArtPlace, plus a second grant — \$500,000 from the Richard and Susan Smith Foundation — will do more than pay for one project. It is also meant to help fund the curator post, which he hopes to fill by the end of the summer.

The conservancy has also recently received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New England Fund for the Arts for public art.

Though he has heard criticism that the Greenway has been slow to develop, Brackenbury said it has only been five years since the nonprofit took over the park.

"We've got one of the oldest parks in the country and one of the newest," he said. "When the Greenway's as old as the Public Garden, I don't think anybody's going to be thinking of what was there in year four, as opposed to year five or six."

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The conservancy created a strategic plan in 2013 to add public art along the Greenway, and has been actively recruiting funders. The Smith Foundation, which is based in Newton, typically gives money to health and social service organizations, not the arts. But the foundation's trustees were excited by what Echelman's piece could bring to a public space.

Joyce Linehan, a Dorchester native and Mayor Martin J. Walsh's chief of policy, met with Brackenbury earlier this year to talk about his plans. She told him that if the conservancy needs any help from Walsh, just call. So far, he hasn't needed anything.

"As for Boston not having a great reputation for public art, I don't know," said Linehan. "All I know is what's going on right now, and I'm really excited. When I used to go down there in the early days, there was no one there. Now, when I walk down, it is brimming."



ESSDRAS M. SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

The Greenway has announced the installation of a huge, billowing fabric work by Brookline-based artist Janet Echelman.