
Cambridge artist makes a South End restroom a place to reflect

Posted by Your Town

January 21, 2011 08:59 AM

The restroom is an uncommon place for public art. You come, go, and within minutes what just transpired quickly becomes a distant memory. But Cambridge artist Douglas Kornfeld has created a self-reflecting experience for restroom-users.

The iconic male and female stick figures that are synonymous with restroom signs have taken on a new meaning at the South End's Boston Center for the Arts (BCA). Kornfeld has been working with common symbols from street signs for the past 15 years to illustrate his perspective on the world and its inaccuracies.

"I am a person who is interested in symbols, as well as the diversity and uniqueness of the human spirit," said Kornfeld.

With the BCA restroom as his canvas, Kornfeld used his imaginative sense of humor to show how people choose to identify themselves.

"I don't know anyone who would walk in there and not chuckle," said Kornfeld. "Serious art doesn't have to make people frown. By merely smiling, you are participating in the experience."

The experience at the "Who Are You" exhibit begins the moment you step into the bathroom. For a first timer, the moment is best described as an unexpected confrontation with the self. What do you do?

Several of the stalls and urinals are marked with a variant form of the iconic stick figure – tall, short, curvy, just to name a few.

Are you the tall guy who identifies with the elongated figure? Or, are you the curvy type with a spontaneous attraction to the thin stick figure? It's pretty much your call. Visitors can use a stall that they feel best describes them. The BCA intentionally left some of the stalls and urinals unmarked for those who don't indentify with a particular icon or choose not to participate in the experience.

"We are unique individuals who come in all shapes and sizes," said Kornfeld. "Our characteristics and qualities vary and as people we must embrace that."

Kornfeld's bathroom project came out of a proposal for a new program that the BCA had debuted in 2010, "Temporary Art on the Plaza." The program was made possible by a public art grant that offered artists the opportunity to create a temporary piece to be featured on the BCA campus during the summer and fall months. It was through conversations about Kornfeld's bathroom proposal that the BCA decided to go with it as an addition.

"We have been trying to think of ways to show-off our resident artists," said Nate McDermott, BCA Manager. "What better use of our talent than to showcase them in our own space."

Unlike a museum or art gallery, the exhibit's foot traffic doesn't come in droves. Events like the Boston International Fine Arts Show, which drew thousands over the course of four days in November, tend to attract larger audiences.

"People may or may not tell others about it when they leave," said Kornfeld. "Either way, I win. Breaking into people's consciousness and getting them to think is more satisfying."

If there is any feedback or dialogue about the exhibit, it's quite private and personal. Yet on occasion, McDermott will encounter an assumed soul or two.

"A few times, I've come across people in the midst of laughing or indecisively choosing a stall," said McDermott. "It just shows how much you do or do not pay attention to your surroundings."

The exhibit is up and ongoing for as long as it can last. Public hours are Monday-Friday between 9 a.m. and 5p.m.
