

He Did It!

Doug Kornfeld's Public Art Commission: Completed

by Jane Ingram Allen

This is a follow-up to my November 2001 *Art Calendar* article titled "I Finally Got One!" that told about Doug Kornfeld's commission for a public art project. Doug won a national competition to create a 7'x50' ceramic tile mural for the Civic Center bus station in Denver, Colorado. Although Doug has been a professional sculptor and designer for many years and has completed several temporary public art

projects, this was his first commission for a permanent public artwork. He was selected as a finalist in July 2001, presented his design proposal in September 2001, was notified soon after that he had won the competition, and began work on the project immediately.

This summer, Doug installed his work in Denver during two weeks in August 2002. A public opening was held on August 23, 2002, making it almost a full year from start to finish on the project.

Doug's mural for the Denver bus station depicts two hands reaching out to shake hands and symbolizes the moment when a passenger is

transformed by a greeting from an anonymous traveler into a unique person at the beginning or end of a journey.

Each of the 3,400-plus individual tiles in the mural has a



human figure glazed onto its surface. The background of the mural is made up of shiny gold tiles, each with the "universal symbol" for man or woman. These represent the anonymity of a traveler. The two outstretched hands are made up of turquoise tiles, each with an individualized figure — thin, heavy, tall, short, young, and old. These represent the traveler transformed from the anonymous "everyman" to a unique individual when he reaches the end of a journey and is greeted by an outstretched hand.

In general, things went very well with the fabrication and installation of Doug's work. The only thing

Doug says he might do differently on his next public art project is add a little more to the initial materials budget. Often, during the long course of public art projects, prices change, products may no longer be available, or the artist might need to use different materials.

When he was awarded the commission and began looking again at all the tile possibilities, Doug decided to go with a different tile for the gold section in his design. Doug chose a more expensive tile because of

its light reflecting qualities, and he wanted to make sure the piece would look its best. This change in tile resulted in less profit than he had originally anticipated. Luckily, he was able to make up for some of this by reducing other project costs.

Doug said the only reason he made any money on this project was that he was able to stay with his parents during the two weeks of installation in Denver. However, he did have to pay for plane fare from Boston to Denver, and during the two weeks he had to take time off from his part-time teaching job and from his usual studio work. Sometimes artists do not think about how

these details can affect the profits they make from a commission.

Budgeting — dealing with money issues — is nearly always the most difficult thing for artists. As Doug emphasizes, “Budgeting *was* the challenge. I spent many hours working with the various suppliers to make sure the project would stay on budget. I also spent a great deal of time working with the client and the contractor to get it installed on time and on budget.”

Doug said he did the creative part of the project in a few days, but he spent almost a year being a project manager, dealing with the production and budgeting aspects of the work.

In addition, Doug was fortunate to have an architect friend he could call on for advice and help. This friend, Joe Levi of Oz Architects in Denver, helped him find a local contractor, checked his construction documents, and gave him moral support during the design and installation process. Doug was indeed lucky to have a friend who would do all of this without taking any money for his help.

The RTD (Regional Transportation District), Denver’s metropolitan transit authority, administered the project and was easy to work with. Brenda Tierney, coordinator of art projects for the RTD, put Doug in touch with whomever he needed and made sure he received his money on time.

Another thing that made the project go so smoothly was the expertise and dedication of the tile workers Doug worked with during the installation. Victor Cano and

Fernando Lorenzo Atonaga of Wilson Tile and Terrazzo, Inc., Northglenn, Colorado, installed the 3,400-plus tiles that made up the piece. Doug said they were very skillful and seemed to enjoy doing something a bit different. They were exacting and careful to make sure everything was done exactly to Doug’s specifications.



Many artists, including Doug, report that the installation of one’s first public artwork is an exciting career milestone that is almost unequaled in any artist’s life. There is something tremendously rewarding about seeing one’s creation finished and on display for all the world to see in a public space.

Doug said the public’s response to his work was extremely gratifying. During the two weeks of installation at the bus station, people were very interested in the artwork going up and often stopped to talk and offer comments about the piece. All the visitors responded positively to his work and asked thoughtful questions as he explained the project.

It’s always great to get some positive feedback on your work, and there’s nothing like working in a public space to initiate a dialogue.

Completing the Denver

commission has encouraged Doug to continue entering public art competitions. It has also provided some money to support an installation of his art at a gallery in Somerville, Massachusetts; the show opened in November.

Who knows when his next public art commission will come, but having this one completed successfully gives Doug a significant edge in any future competitions. He now has photos of an impressive public work permanently installed to present for other juries, and he will be able to name the public art administrators he has worked with as references. Also, Doug now has experience and contacts with

contractors and suppliers to more easily manage any future large-scale public projects.

But most of all, as Doug says, “The piece resulted in tremendous personal satisfaction in seeing my art placed into a public place without compromising my artistic ideas.”

It doesn’t get any better than that: following your own personal vision, making something you really want to make, and getting paid to make it.

Jane Ingram Allen is an artist and writer living in upstate New York. For more information about her work visit her Web site, www.janeingramallen.com. Doug Kornfeld’s Web site, www.awaka-inc.com, has complete information about his work including documentation of the daily progress of installing the tile mural at the Denver bus station.