

COLUMN: ART SAFARI

DEBBIE HAGAN

Committed to the Arts

Cambridge's public art, open studios, and festivals shape life into art

Underground at the Kendall Square T station, kids run up to the sculpture, *Pythagoras*, situated between the rails of incoming and outgoing trains. They pump the handle and watch the row of teak mallets swing back and forth, gaining momentum until they strike the long row of aluminum tubes. The mallets don't clang, but ring melodically in B minor. The tone reverberates down the tunnel, to the platform where the kids squeal. Where else can they play with sculpture, hit bells with mallets, and not be punished? The answer is decidedly few places, including most museums. But in Cambridge, a city so independent in its thinking that locals call it "The People's Republic of Cambridge," city planners invest in art that they hope to make a natural part of public activity and city life.

"Nurturing the arts" is the slogan of the Cambridge Arts Council (CAC), a city-run organization responsible, since 1974, for meeting this objective. In the 1980s, the council worked with the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority when it expanded the Red Line from Park Street to Alewife. The CAC commissioned artist-created murals, tiles, sculptures, architectural features, stained glass, benches, and more for the subway stops and platforms. At Kendall Square, Groton artist Paul Matisse (grandson of Henri Matisse) created a three-part, interactive sculpture known as *Kendall Band* (of which *Pythagoras* is a part).

One may ask why a city would invest so much time, effort, and money in art that will exist mostly underground and in places where people are running to catch trains? "A person who is visiting Cambridge for the first time wants to go to Harvard Square,"

says Jason Weeks, executive director of the CAC. "We want that person to immediately encounter art. These works are portholes into the history and fabric of the Cambridge neighborhoods." That goal of exposing Cambridge visitors to art is the guiding principle of the CAC, which has commissioned 185 public art-

works in total, making it the largest contemporary public art collection in the region. According to Weeks, the city of Cambridge owns more artworks than the DeCordova Sculpture Park and more contemporary, public works than Harvard University.

Funds and initiative for these works come



Krzysztof Wodiczko, Robert W. Healy Public Safety Building.

100 FROM CAMBRIDGE: A PREVIEW EXHIBITION FOR CAMBRIDGE OPEN STUDIOS

Cambridge Arts Council
City Hall Annex • Cambridge, MA
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Through March 12, 2010

from the city's percent tax ordinance. Lillian Hsu, director of public art at the CAC, explains that whenever the city has a capital improvement program, one percent of the project's funds must go to public art—whether the project is a new bridge or a water treatment plant, art must be included. "In a time when cities are

someone is having an unrelated conversation. That's all part of the experience."

Public art is scattered throughout Cambridge's six square miles. The works include Judy Kensley McKie's *Alley Cats*—whimsical benches shaped by the famed furniture artist to look like cats—in the Valente

bathes the façade of the new Robert W. Healy Safety Building in brilliant greens and blues.

Hsu points out that public art can use non-traditional media, be temporary, or have a performance element. For example, when the West Cambridge Youth and Community Center opened last summer, it featured *The*



Above left: Judy Kensley McKie, *Alley Cats*, Valente Library Garden. Above right: Nancy Selvage, *Water Wall*, Photo: Lillian Hsu.

contracting, Cambridge has been expanding," says Weeks. "It has been wonderful to play a role in that."

In commissioning art for the city, Hsu says that the CAC receives proposals from artists all over the world. The ultimate decision on who receives the commissions rests not just on the art's creativity, artistic merits, and viability, but how the work complements the social, political, and historical life of the neighborhood in which the piece will exist and relate to its residents. "Life is so entwined with all of these things," says Hsu. Thus, the art has to be site-specific. "You can't talk about public art without talking about public space," says Hsu. "You can't experience it in a separate world, such as a white box gallery. You're standing there, and the wind is blowing your hair, and

DOMESTICATED: MODERN DIORAMAS OF OUR NEW NATURAL HISTORY

Photographs by Amy Stein
Harvard Museum of Natural History
Cambridge, MA
www.hmnh.harvard.edu
Through April 18, 2010

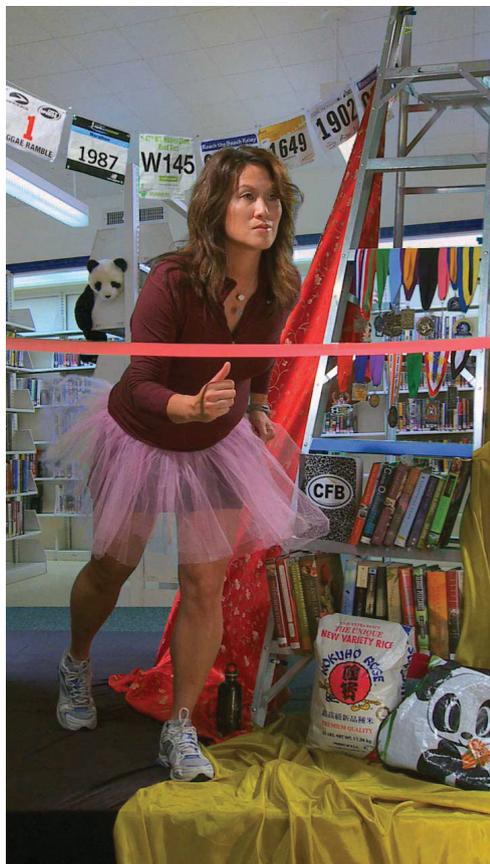
Library Garden. Artist Nancy Selvage created a curvilinear wall, *Water Wall*, for the city's new, 3,600-foot Trolley Park. The wall is made of perforated stainless steel, which frames a circular meeting spot within the park and provides limited shelter. Krzysztof Wodiczko, an internationally recognized outdoor installation artist, created an LED lighting system that

Cantabrigians, a video installation created by Michael Oatman. Residents of the neighborhood sat for Oatman, posing with their favorite things and in environments that showed their involvement with the community. One of the twenty-three portraits that made the final cut was of Audrey Huang, a forty-two-year-old lawyer and long-distance runner, wearing jogging shoes and a pink tutu. She's on a women's running team, the Go-Go Girls, that runs 210 miles each September, from Cannon Mountain to Hampton Beach, while wearing tutus. An avid reader, Huang chose for her background one of her favorite spots in Cambridge: the Boudreau Branch of the Cambridge Public Library. Oatman's video portraits updates the way neighbors used to meet, across backyard fences. The videos are

permanently installed at the Youth Center and are seen in rotation on three large monitors. To see this, or any portion of the CAC's public art collection, simply go to www.cambridgema.gov/cac/public_art_tour/ and print out a self-guided tour map.

Cambridge is widely known for its innovative artistic expression—from street performers in Harvard Square, to poetry readings and film screenings at the universities and colleges, to open artists' studios. In 1998, Harvard's Museum of Natural History opened when three of the school's research museum centers—comparative zoology, herbaria, and minerals and geology—unified into one facility. Here, one can see the university's famed glass flowers—3,000 models created by a father and son, Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka, from 1886 to 1936. In addition, gems, meteorites, fossils, and animal dioramas are on view.

In one of the museum's two special exhibit areas, work by New York photographer Amy



Michael Oatman, *Video Portrait of Audrey Huang*, part of the *Cantabrigians* series, for the West Cambridge Youth Center.

Stein is on display until April 18. *Domesticated: Modern Dioramas of Our New Natural History* depicts wildlife driven out of its natural habitat and at risk of starvation and/or violence. These unsettling images give viewers a moment of pause to consider the tragic impact humans can have on nature. The series earned Stein the Saatchi Gallery/Guardian Prize.

Playing a significant role in the Cambridge art scene are open artists' studios. These events began twenty years ago when Cambridgeport artists

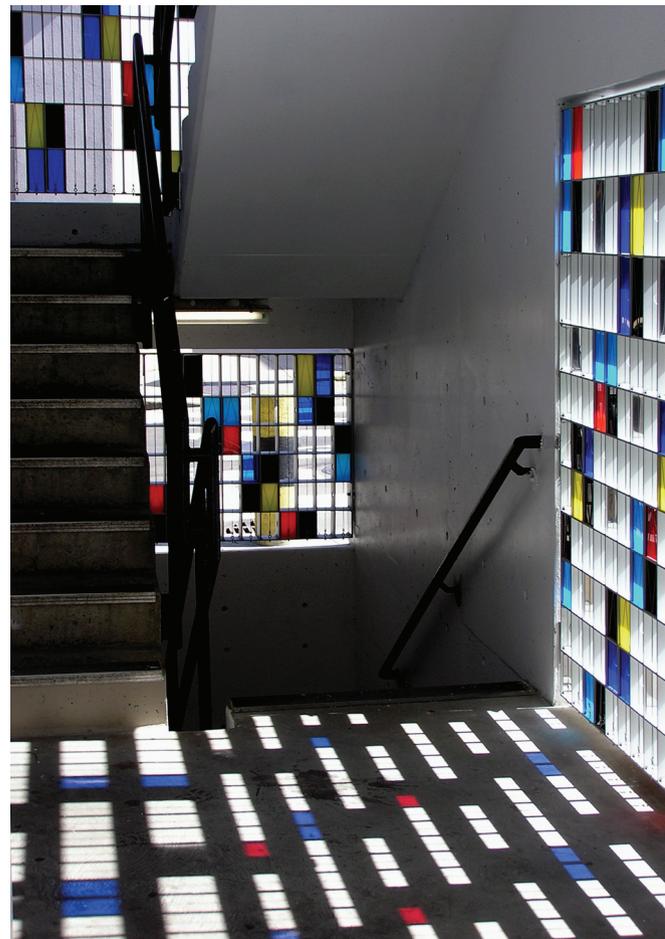
decided to throw open their studio doors and invite in the public.

The concept caught on and other Cambridge art groups soon joined in. Two years ago, the CAC stepped in to help publicize and organize these events within the city's different neighborhoods.

This year, the open studios are staggered over three weekends: April 24–25; May 8–9; and May 22–23.

A preview of the open studios' exhibits is now offered at the CAC. An exhibit, *100 from Cambridge: A Preview Exhibition for Cambridge Open Studios*, is up from now until March 12 at the CAC gallery in the City Hall Annex and includes paintings, jewelry, fiber arts, ceramics, film, and mixed media.

Of course, the Cambridge City Hall Annex is a destination in and of itself—it is a great place to see how the CAC strives to organically blend daily life with daily function. The annex is a brick grammar school, built in 1871, that has been re-purposed as an environmentally conscious municipal building. Inside, the atmosphere is anything but institutional. Murals of flowers and



Edwin Andrews, *Green Street Garage*.

vines and people reading cover the walls. Artist Mike Glier carefully researched the government branches in the building and brought them conceptually together through art—the flora-filled images not only echo the “greenness” of the building, but allude to the flow, transparency, growth, and pleasure that emerges from the city's different governing branches.

Even if you arrive at the annex in a bad mood, say, to pay a traffic ticket, Weeks claims that the atmosphere in this building uplifts you, and you may find that the circumstances don't seem so bad after all. That's the power of art.

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