

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Eileen Neff – Philadelphia Style Magazine

Summer 2015

FUELING THE FIRE

LOCALLY MINDED PHILADELPHIA ARTISTS, BOTH NEW AND ESTABLISHED, ARE PERPETUATING THE VIBRANT ART SCENE IN THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE. BY JOANN GRECO

From Thomas Cowperthwait Eakins to Horace Pippin, the Philadelphia region has gifted the world with a long history of distinguished artists. A handful still at work—such as Brandywine-based Jamie Wyeth, son of Andrew Wyeth, and Nelson Shanks, the Bucks County-based painter of presidential portraits—have gained national renown. Meanwhile, the region is rich in more locally focused artists who have built solid reputations and are dedicated to keeping the area’s creative juices flowing. These include the young street-smart stars of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program and treasured local arts leaders like Charles Burwell (see our cover story profile on page 94) and Eileen Neff

(eileenneff.com), who has exhibited recently at both Bridgette Mayer and Locks Galleries.

Although Philadelphia-born Neff, 70, majored in English before pursuing her MFA in painting at the Tyler School of Art, it’s photography that has long been her chosen mode of expression. With nature as a favored subject, her literary and painterly training is evident in such limpid images as *The Ordinary Day*, a work that at first seems to depict billowy clouds rolling over a murky sea. A dark band that evenly divides the landscape is a clue that all is not as it seems to be. The bar is actually a piece of molding from the window of Neff’s 29th-floor Center City apartment, through which she’s viewing the sky. And the “sea” is really a startling reflection bounced onto her tabletop.

“I’m very attached to the weather,” she says. “It has a great metaphorical component—it has moods. And I’m very lucky to have this amazing view.” In *Good Night Rain*, she photographed the raindrops that had collected

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

on her window. Look closer, and it's clear that each drop contains an inverted picture of the landscape beyond. "I was taken by how they were functioning like little lenses," says Neff.

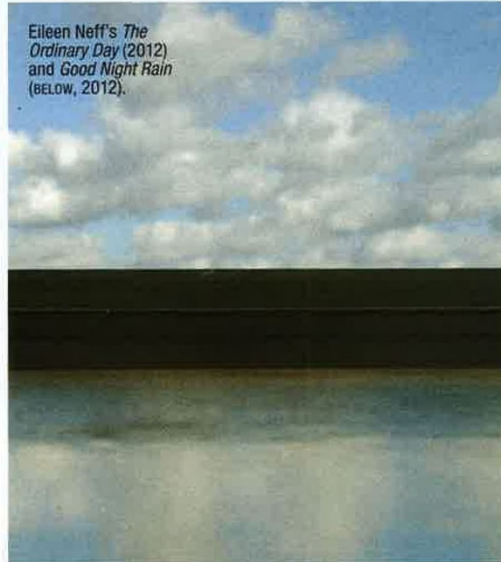
As a child, Neff indulged in long hikes through Pennypack Park with her father. Now, she often gets her nature fix from inside, borrowing plants, sculptures (including some made by her dad), and, of course, that view for inspiration. "Paying attention is at the heart of what I value," she says. Now, some of that perspective has found a permanent home, as her *Leaf Wall Installation*, featured in her recent solo exhibition "Traveling into View," was acquired by the Philadelphia Museum of Art this spring.

Making the ordinary—like blank walls and train tracks—extraordinary lies at the core of the Mural Arts Program (muralarts.org). That's especially true throughout the summer, as 14 international artists will immerse themselves in large-scale temporary public artworks as part of the invitational exhibit "Open Source: Engaging Audiences in Public Space." The results, curated by Pedro Alonzo, one of the country's leading curators of street art, will be unveiled in locations all over the city in October.

Working with chalk spray and stencils, visual artist and muralist Michelle Angela Ortiz—one of five of the selected artists who are based in Philadelphia—retells the intricate and intimate stories she teases from Latin American community members who have suffered the effects of deportation. The dozen or so works of "Familias Separadas (Broken Families)" range in size and location, from a North Philadelphia stoop to a crosswalk on Washington Avenue. An accompanying blog provides further images and documentation, while each piece includes a QR code that takes viewers to an audio version of the tale depicted. "It's really important for me that people hear the voices involved in the story," Ortiz says. "It's important to me that the stories, and the memories, of those who no longer live here live on after the stencils fade."

Steven and Billy Blaise Dufala—a Philly-based brother duo—are also pursuing the idea of "living on." But they do it by shining a spotlight on the *things* we throw away and how we might be able to recycle them—or their parts—into useful objects. Like much of their work, the team's project incorporates aspects of sculpture and performance. "We're interested in going way back to the raw material," says Billy Dufala. "Most likely, we'll be working with aluminum. We'll collect it, sort it, process it, and then fabricate new items from it." Part open air (the grinding, melting, and welding of metals) and part indoors (the exhibition of the finished products), the project is purely educational and won't involve audience participation.

That's not the case with Ernel Martinez & Keir Johnston, another Philly-based duo who often work together as part of Amber Art & Design, a five-member local public art collective. Their project is transforming the exterior and interior of an abandoned, 10,000-square-



foot warehouse in North Philadelphia into a "place of art production," says Martinez. Through interviews and events series, the artists will document the cultural parallels between the African-American migration from the South to the North and the experience of those who came from Latin America and the Caribbean. Martinez and Johnston will then guide community members in interpreting those journeys through wall paintings, video projections, and found objects. "The idea is to use art to magnify and illuminate the connections and similarities between these populations," says Martinez. "Sometimes language can be a barrier—but it's not the only way to promote conversation." **PS**