

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

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At 30, Mural Arts sets a table for the city

By Natalie Pompilio, For The Inquirer

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"Together Moving Mountains" by Freddy Sam is at 161 W. Cecil B. Moore Ave. (STEVE WEINIK)

Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, and what better way to celebrate than a meal with 900 friends?

That will happen Saturday afternoon across from City Hall, when ticket holders selected by lottery gather on the Municipal Services Building plaza to enjoy a communal multicourse feast featuring heirloom fruits and vegetables.

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(Tuesday's federal shutdown forced a hasty relocation from Independence Mall, which means the planned 1,640-foot-long table will have to be segmented; otherwise things will go on as planned, with City Hall rather than Independence Hall as a backdrop.)

Mural Arts' executive director Jane Golden stressed this is more than a dinner party: The meal, decor, and even the diners are works of art in themselves.

"It's beauty, and it's also an opportunity to have great conversations," she said. "We feel everyone should have access to art and meaning."

The celebration of the city's internationally known public art program will continue throughout October, designated as Mural Arts Month. The calendar of events includes mural unveilings, artist talks, guided mural tours, and art-making opportunities. In November, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts will mount a show about the program.

"When we started, we had a vision of what art could do and mean to people in the city, but it was hard to get beyond the day-to-day work," Golden said. "We couldn't think about the future."

And now? The program is "dedicated to the social power of art. We're not just interested in using murals. It's about using art in a bigger, deeper way," Golden said.

When it began in 1993, Mural Arts was known as the Anti-Graffiti Network, but it soon became clear that was a misnomer, Golden said. "We weren't 'anti' anything. We were pro-art" - because art, she said, can play a catalytic role in positive change. "It's a sign that people care."

Under her leadership, Mural Arts has become a community outreach program that is much more than paint, touching the lives of truant youth, incarcerated adults, crime victims, and those with physical or mental disabilities. It has a workforce development program and works with aspiring entrepreneurs to make their dreams reality. It partners with community groups, city agencies, and other nonprofits to create safe - and often beautiful - spaces.

Internationally known artist Davide Perre, who collaborates with his twin brother, Raoul, under the name How & Nasm, worked on a mural on 13th Street in Center City last year. The brothers teamed with youth in the area to complete the project, giving them a chance Perre said he wished he'd had growing up in Germany.

"These opportunities weren't there when we were young. That's why we painted illegally," he said, adding, "I wish we had something of that scale in New York City," where they're now based. "Instead . . . we have advertisements. But nonprofits don't have the budgets those big ad agencies have."

The yearlong anniversary programming, which begins this weekend, highlights the best of Mural Arts. The public will have a chance to meet well-known artists, share cultural experiences with neighbors, and explore parts of the city that previously might have been unknown to them.

And, of course, Saturday's feast promises to be a showstopper. "The Meal" is the final event of the "What We Sow" project Mural Arts launched in June.

The project's focus on heirloom plants - grown from seeds passed from generation to generation - is meant to inspire conversations about the politics of food production and healthy eating. The menu was

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designed by Philadelphia superstar chef Marc Vetri and will be prepared by the Cescaphe Event Group.

The artists behind the project, Lucy and Jorge Orta, conceived of these communal table events in 2000 to directly engage their audiences in making art. Each features a customized table runner and an edition of Limoges porcelain plates designed specifically for the event. This is the largest dinner they've staged and is "a culmination of our dreams," Lucy Orta said.

What looks like a dinner party, she said, is actually a learning and artistic experience.

"It breaks down barriers without being in your face," Orta said. "The messages are coming through through the plates and the table runner and the food you're eating. The idea is people will go home and host dinners of their own."

That idea of paying it forward and making positive change is what Golden has wanted for the program all along.

"When people ask what the work is about, it's about impacting people and communities and the civic life in the city," she said. "Art can create a world of beauty and hope. Art can make a difference where other things have failed when it comes to big intractable problems. Art shows us the way innovation can make a difference."

Celebrate Mural Arts Month

Take a tour. Hear artists share their stories. Try your own hand at something artistic. Events are free unless otherwise noted. Find a complete list of activities: <http://muralarts.org/calendar/2013-10>
Some highlights:

Saturday/Sunday Train tour of the 50 rooftop "Love Letter" murals by Stephen Powers (aka ESPO). Leaves at 10:30 a.m. Saturday and 1 p.m. Sunday from Mural Arts at the Gallery, 901 Market St., Level 2

Friday, Oct. 11 5:30-8 p.m. Dedication of Ryan McGinness' "Black Holes" at University City Science Center, 3701 Market St.

Saturday, Oct. 12 2-5 p.m. Experiential Tour, Southeast by Southeast, 1927 S. 7th St. Celebrate South Philly's diverse immigrant populations by screen printing T-shirts, sampling Nepali cuisine, and taking a walking tour.

Sunday, Oct. 13, 1-3 p.m. Northwest Philadelphia Trolley Tour, leaving from and returning to Trolley Car Diner, 7619 Germantown Ave. Tickets: \$30.