

Divergent Consistencies

The Studio and Community Art of Hugh Merrill, 1969-2009

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Art of Memory: Hugh Jordan Merrill

Sanford-Kimpton Health Facility, Columbia, Missouri

It is a rare opportunity when artist and architects collaborate in a major way to bring an art form into the public eye. While artists tend to remain public as singular creative entities, collaboration has the potential to engage the public on multiple levels and broaden each field in a way that is both deliberate and participatory. Art of Memory brought together the Health Department of Columbia Missouri, artist educator Hugh Merrill and architect Kaylyn Munro of Raphael Architects in Kansas City, to complete the Sanford-Kimpton Health Facility.

—Eleanor Erskine

Interview between artist educator Hugh Merrill and Associate Professor Eleanor Erskine of Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

Hugh, what was your approach to the Percent for the Arts Health Facility Project for Columbia, Missouri and how was it different from other public art projects you have created?

My approach to public and community work is consistent in process and varied in outcome. I start with getting to know individuals in the community. I do that through an archiving process called *Portrait of Self*. It is a process in which I interview and get people to provide me with their life stories, their family histories, documentation and photos. The archive of collected information becomes the resource for the images to be created.

How did you apply that process to the health facility in Columbia, Missouri?

First, I had to understand what the health facility does--who it touches. The Health Department and Family Health Clinic are comprised of a series of scientific and medical services. These include animal control, public health, a family clinic, and environmental science, among others. The clinic serves a broad and diverse population and is staffed by a committed group of professionals. I felt that the artwork for the building should respond to the function of the department, essentially reflecting the lives of the clinic's clientele. I wanted to create a visual environment that flowed through the architecture, unifying the various services and public spaces.

Part of the investigation is focused on the community, getting photos from people, hearing their stories and part is on a formal response to the architecture. Is that right?

Yes, absolutely. It's partly a collection of imagery and stories from the community and partly a search for what will best function as an interactive part of the overall architectural design. Having seen the wonderful architectural plans of Kaylyn Monroe, I wanted to make artworks that would take advantage of the openness of the space and the beautiful natural light she designed into the building. I wanted the artwork to resonate with the richness and variety of construction materials used in the building: wood, concrete panels, translucent plastic, sheet metal and stained concrete.



What made you place the work in the building at tilted angles and at unexpected viewing levels?

The oval shapes and the decision to install the works throughout the building at raking angles and in unexpected wall positions reflected a counterpoint and complement to the beauty of the architectural grid. The building is a complex layer of grids, of visual starts and stops, of changing speeds and sounds. I wanted to create organic forms that fall at obtuse angles across and in opposition to the grids.

How did you begin? What is the first thing you do when you start a public or community art project?

Rather than coming to the project with a preconceived idea of what the final work should look like, I employed the *Portrait of Self* community archiving process. I have used this process for nine years to collect content and visual information from communities internationally. Then, I use the collected information to make images concerning the community. Each project is different with differing environmental and architectural spaces. The outcome is designed to best suit the specifics of each community and institution.

Can you take me through the process?

Let me start with a short history. In 1996, I was invited to produce a collaborative installation with Christian Boltanski for the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City. Boltanski and I came up with a citywide installation project titled *Our City/Ourselves*, which invited the residents of the Kansas City metropolitan area to bring their family photographs to the museum, copy them, and install them on the walls of the museum. Several thousand people brought their family photographs to the museum, copied them and pinned them to the walls. Soon the gallery was covered with Xerox prints from floor to ceiling.

Building on *Our City/Ourselves* I devised a workbook/process for *Portrait of Self*, to assist in the recall of lost memory and to help a community document its daily life. I used the process to work with inner city high school students. The archives the students created were exhibited at the Kemper Museum in conjunction with the Boltanski exhibition.

Since then, I have used the *Portrait of Self* process for collecting content to produce public community and percent for the arts commissions and installations. *Portrait of Self* has been used to produce large graphic murals in Hollywood/Dania Beach, Florida. It also acted as the source of the installation for the Daum Museum Goddard Gallery in Sedalia, Missouri, an installation at the Manchester Craftsman's Guild in Pittsburgh, PA, and FutureSelf in Colorado Springs Colorado.

How did you begin to collect community information and stories in Columbia?

I began the process with an artist in residency through a grant by the City of Columbia Office of Cultural Affairs with the Missouri Arts Council to work with high school students at Hickman High School, Columbia. We created large digital collages from the items the students carried in their pockets and bags. These



collages became the first layer of content for the images created for the health facility. The archiving process then shifted to the staff of the health facility. They provided family photographs. Other images were taken from health department past publications of the 1940s and 1950s. I was invited to look at archival photographs from the Boone County Historical Society and glass plate photographs from the 1890s that belonged to a staff member at the health department. From these I selected a number of images that became the base layer of the digital prints.

What was the final outcome of the project?

I designed six series of prints for the building: the large oval digital prints mentioned before, four polysilk banners, 27 silkscreened text plaques of quotes given by the health staff, vinyl decals based on DNA structures, and digitally printed canvases. The works are non-stylistic, yet I attempted achieve a thematic and formal continuity. All the various works were then installed in the building.

You said it was important for the work to flow through the building. Did the installation achieve what you expected?

Yes. I was very pleased with the outcome of the installation and the works flow well from room to room. I used small brightly colored text plaques to activate large empty wall spaces. By placing the plaques at mentation with me, as well as people whose images I borrowed whom I can never really know. Other people at the heart of the project were the wonderful staff at the health facility and the students at the high school: the architects, the individuals involved in the political work for the city and county, Marie Hunter whose gifted work brought the project to fruition, and lastly the artists that assisted on the project. These included: Adelia Ganson, Caleb Hauck, Patrick Moonasar, Miranda Young, Eleanor Erskine, Staci Pratt and Greg Thompson.

