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Painting outside the box

Boston commissions street art to adorn appearance, ward off graffiti The Boston Globe



By Geoff Edgers
Globe Staff / October 15, 2009

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The blue lights were flashing as the Boston Police car approached the traffic island in Copley Square. Christos Hamawi, standing by with his brushes and paints, didn't panic. He reached for his permit.

He didn't just have permission from the city to paint the gray electrical box outside the Westin Hotel. He had been hired for the job.

Hamawi, 36, is one of about two dozen local artists brought in by the Boston Arts Commission as part of its PaintBox program.

Modeled after similar efforts in Cambridge, Somerville, and other cities, the program started slowly last year with 13 boxes but has expanded to more than 40.

"The idea is that it would deter graffiti because these boxes wouldn't be a blank canvas," said Karin Goodfellow, staff director of the commission. "But I like it not just specifically because of graffiti. My interest is more in getting local artists to create art on the streets they're living."

The artists apply with a design. If selected, they're paid \$300 for the work. That barely covers materials, which include the paints plus a strong varnish to protect the finished box from the elements. But the artists say they're not doing the job for the money.

Clara Diaz, 27, is excited about painting a box later this month at the

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intersection of Dorchester Avenue and Adams Street. She's lived in Dorchester, off and on, since emigrating from the Dominican Republic at age 9. Diaz will be painting a design centered on a butterfly.

"I've lived in this neighborhood for 16 years," she said. "When I leave this neighborhood, which I will, I will have something here. It's like a mark of myself and a gift of my talents."

Gary Koeppel, a Roslindale artist, painted a marsh scene on an electrical box at the intersection of Centre and Corey streets in West Roxbury.

"It's an opportunity to get out there in the community and get a little bit of publicity for myself," said Koeppel, 53. "I put my website on the box and did actually get a call from somebody who was interested in getting me to do a project."

For Hamawi, the boxes represent a chance to take his art out of his South End studio and onto the streets. In that spirit, he found his inspiration for the box in the environment outside the Westin. In particular, he took his cue from a weed growing near the base of the box to create a scene with green and yellow grasses and wildflowers.

Hamawi has a connection to Shepard Fairey, the artist known for his recent arrest and guilty plea for putting up his art in public spaces without permission. They lived in different units of the same Victorian in Providence in the mid-'90s. Though he says he would never poster without permission, Hamawi declined to criticize Fairey.

"He's made his choices and been held accountable, so I'm not going to judge him," he said.

On his second day of painting, he showed up on the traffic island with other wildflowers he picked up along the way and put into cups.

Painting an electrical box isn't just about showing up with your brushes. To start, Hamawi scrapes any stickers off the surface and then washes the box with soap and water. Next, he applies a thick coat of paint to create a base.

When it's going to rain he has to cover the box with plastic. And he can't use his acrylic paint when the temperature falls below 60 degrees. That made his Copley Square box, the second he's done for the city, his last of the season.

He had wanted to paint a third box, outside 607 Boylston St. But the Back Bay Architectural Commission rejected the idea, stating in a letter that "any such decorative painting, however attractive it might be in the abstract, would have the effect of celebrating a utilitarian feature at the aesthetic expense of the architectural context."

Hamawi wasn't bothered by the rejection. He had plenty of work to do outside the Westin. The job would, in the end, take about six days. He finished up earlier this week.

"The big thing for me is to be able to paint in the presence of others and share that process," said Hamawi.

On a recent morning, that included people in suits hurrying through Copley Square, college students, and the operator of a sightseeing trolley bus, who shouted out, "Hey Christos, nice job," as he drove a group of tourists through the square.

Jason Levy, a 39-year-old attorney, stopped and took in Hamawi's first strokes of yellow and greens. He had already seen another painted box in West Roxbury and praised the program.



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