‘Hidden treasure’ mural is dedicated

Social justice is theme of mural by artist, students beneath JFX overpass

By Andrea F. Siegel
THE BALTIMORE SUN

Huge waves, oversized flowers and brightly colored people mark Baltimore’s newest outdoor mural, which was painted last week under the Jones Falls Expressway and dedicated in Sunday morning’s chilly wind.

The mural near Mount Royal Avenue is an unexpected, 180-foot-long splash of color and a collaboration of about 100 students, nearby residents and artists.

“It’s like a hidden treasure, under the bridge,” said Caroline Van Sicklin, a student at the Maryland Institute College of Art who worked on the project. “And it’s around the corner from MICA,” she said, noting that the permanent public art display complements the school.

The mural’s theme of social justice depicts everything from one person reading poetry and another playing violin to elements of sun and water, unified by waves that run nearly from end to end. The design is based on artwork created by pupils from the Midtown Academy and Mount Royal Elementary School. In the past week, students applied swaths of paint, MICA students pitched in and residents of the Reservoir Hill area grabbed a brush.

Gail Blackwell, a board member of the Reservoir Hill Improvement Council, said the mural has a unifying theme and had a unifying effect.

“It’s a very, very big deal because people in the neighborhood and neighborhood children will be able to take a look at this and see what they have done for years to come,” said Blackwell.

Monica Rastegar, an art teacher at the nearby Midtown Academy, said she worked much of the school year with her middle-school students on the mural. They were instructed in the artistic style to be used, learned about Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas, studied storytelling through paintings, came up with ideas for using art to visually represent the theme — and many got to paint.

“They loved painting. I had talked to them in advance and said, ‘You may pass by this for the next 15 years, and be able to say that this is the brushwork I did.’ And they were really excited about that,” she said.

When she first saw the completed mural Saturday on her way home from the National Art Education Association convention, which met in the city last week, “my eyes filled with tears,” Rastegar said. “It was so powerful.”

With more than 140 murals citywide, Baltimore’s public arts project is known nationally. More murals are planned for this spring and summer, but they will be the last additions, at least for a while. The program is filling victim to the city’s budget woes, said Shawn James, its coordinator in the Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts.

Jerry Butler, a mural artist who teaches at Central Connecticut State University, suggested at last year’s art education convention that artists could leave a mark on the coming host city, Baltimore. He approached Riselle Abrams, a Towson University art education professor and former Maryland Arts Education Association president, and offered to do a mural on social justice with the community. From that meeting, a plan emerged. Butler used the mural to formulate lesson plans and turned students’ ideas into a design that kept evolving even as people painted.

Its theme of social justice had a broad interpretation, Butler said.

“We feel like all human beings are entitled to the elements that sustain life,” said Butler.

The blue water features a chain to symbolize that access to clean water is being privatized and is denied to so many people, Butler said. The sun has a pale, creamy center that radiates out to a screaming orange, and the adjacent moon and Earth show other key elements, Butler said.

Those basic elements extend beyond physical needs. The poetry reader and musician in the mural say “we are all artistic human beings,” Butler explained.

Another area features black-eyed Susans, though the state flower is depicted in orange and blue hues. And there are two big hands filled with smaller hands, a representation of people’s connections to each other and community, said Van Sicklin, the MICA student.

andrea.siegel@baltsun.com
Riselle Abrams, a Towson University art education professor, walks the length of the newly dedicated mural as she photographs it.