

New UrbanArt director Weeden moves to support works in the public domain

By Fredric Koepfel

Thursday, April 17, 2008

"If the public has to ask what a work of art is," said John Weeden, "then you're not developing a good relationship with the public."

Weeden, recently designated as the executive director of the UrbanArt Commission, expressed a keen desire to forge an open understanding between the organization that oversees art enhancements to public buildings and spaces and the local communities that support them.

"You have to be more strategic in what projects are trying to accomplish," Weeden said. "You have to strike a balance between the academic intellectual practice and the 'visible feast' practice with color and shape and narrative that's easy to recognize as art."

Weeden, 33, takes the post on May 5. He succeeds Carissa Hussong, who resigned last year, after leading the commission since its inception in 1997, to become executive director of the National Ornamental Metal Museum.

Presently, Weeden is assistant director of the Center for Outreach in the Development of the Arts (CODA) at Rhodes College.

His comments come after public art and public perceptions clashed in March, when one of the temporary projects designed to

commemorate UrbanArt's 10th anniversary raised considerable controversy. "Blue Parkways," by Tad Lauritzen Wright, involved wrapping ribbons of blue vinyl around trees in the medians of North, East and South parkways, to symbolize the city's connection to its western boundary, the Mississippi River. The ribbons were marked by cartoon drawings of rows of connected houses and people holding hands as expressions of community.

The community didn't see it that way. Many of the ribbons were taken off the trees almost as fast as the artist and his assistants put them up; people assumed that the ribbons marked trees that were to be felled or felt at least that they were intrusions into the landscape of flowering trees along the parkways.

"That could have been handled differently," said Weeden. "If the neighborhoods along the parkways had been informed of what was going to happen and what was involved in the project, the reaction might not have been so extreme. A little PR work could have made a big difference."

As executive director of UrbanArt, Weeden will oversee an annual budget of \$500,000 to \$900,000 devoted to artistic enhancement of public buildings and outdoor spaces ranging from large-scale architectural projects, such as the Cannon Center for the Performing Arts and the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, to police precinct stations, community centers and trolley stops, to public memorials, parks and walkways.

UrbanArt is funded by the city of Memphis, ArtsMemphis, the Tennessee Arts Commission and the Hyde Foundation and by the "One-Percent" ordinance passed by the City Council in 2002 that allows 1 percent of the city's general construction fund, up to \$1 million each year, to be applied to art enhancements.

While most of its funding is public money, some of UrbanArt's projects are privately funded; these include the artworks for the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library and the projects, some still on display, commissioned to celebrate the organization's 10th anniversary.

After a national search for a new director, the executive committee of the UrbanArt Commission narrowed the field to four finalists. The nod went to Weeden, the local candidate.

"They were four really good candidates," said architect Charles Shipp, chairman of the UrbanArt board of trustees, "but we decided that John had both the arts background and the local connections as well as the energy and promise we were looking for. We told John that we expected him to take UrbanArt to the next level, and we think he's perfect for the position."

"I grew up around art," Weeden said, and he credits a grandfather who was both carpenter and artist for inspiring his initial interest in art.

Weeden's family moved to Memphis from Conway, Ark., in 1987. He grew up in East Memphis, attended White Station for junior high and high school -- playing trombone in the band -- and then went to Rhodes College, where his father, now retired, was the director of financial aid. His mother teaches at Presbyterian Day School.

"At White Station," said Weeden, "I became involved in theater and music, and I went to Rhodes on a fine arts/theater scholarship. There I was introduced to art history by David McCarthy and to curating by Marina Pacini's gallery management class."

Pacini, who is married to McCarthy and is now chief curator at Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, recognized Weeden's ambition when he took her class 12 years ago.

"John was fearless when other students held back," said Pacini. "He would always go up to artists and ask questions and make notes. He was always seeking to understand the art and the artists and the issues being addressed. He is relentless, and I mean that in the best sense."

Weeden has a master of arts degree in contemporary art history from the Sotheby's Institute in London and will receive a second M.A. from the Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies in May. Pacini and McCarthy kept in touch with their former student during his travels and foreign sojourns and watched his activities in Memphis, as he curated exhibitions for Delta Axis at Marshall Arts and Memphis Brooks Museum of Art and founded and served as first director of Lantana Projects, a nonprofit group that brings international artists to Memphis for residencies and exhibitions.

"I would say that John's best qualities are his enthusiasm and curiosity and catholic (universal) tastes," Pacini said. "Those were evident when he was an undergraduate. Now, though, I think he's tempered those elements with the wisdom he has gained through his education and experience. He has become an arts professional who will make a notable difference in the community."

Weeden worked at UrbanArt as an interim project coordinator "in the early days. I got a real eye-opener about how these projects work. They were doing the Cannon Center then and the Central Library, doing big things in a condensed period of time."

A profound influence on Weeden's attitudes toward public art derive from time he spent living in Scotland and the UK.

"They're doing certain things very right," he said. "There's a commitment to art not just as a social good but as a social need. There's a belief that art strengthens culture and society overall. To see those lessons lived large still influences the types of things I would like to try and how I talk about these issues, why they matter and how they can be best accomplished."

Weeden cites two motivations for applying for the job of executive director of UrbanArt.

"First," he said, "UrbanArt has a track record of completed projects, they do things in concrete practice. My current job is a great gig, but it's a teaching job for the most part, not a production job. Given my curator's background, I like to get jobs done."

Weeden's second motivation has to do with the relationship between UrbanArt and the public.

"Everyone seems to agree that UrbanArt has been able to lay foundations and create expectations, but there's a feeling of seeing what else could happen, a need to make art more visible and more accessible. Even after 10 years, the general public doesn't seem to know what UAC is. People think it's a government thing, and they have the perception that the public has no say into what goes on in their landscape."

Other ideas on Weeden's agenda include enhancing the profiles of local artists -- "this is a great town in which to make art, and I would like to help artists make their work more accessible" -- and producing "more temporary curated projects on a more regular basis."

The result of these methods may prove that "Memphis is not just about blues and barbecue. It's a dynamic art town with a dynamic art practice."

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